



Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche Cattedra di Comparative Politics

**U.S. FOREIGN POLICY UNDER THE OBAMA
ADMINISTRATION: CONTINUITIES AND
DISCONTINUITIES WITH THE GEORGE W. BUSH
PRESIDENCY**

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ANNO ACCADEMICO 2013-2014

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Summary

The election of Obama as 44th U.S. President, after two consecutive Bush's terms, opened a new season for American foreign policy, re-launching a new rhetorical imprinting centered on international multilateralism and deeply different from the previous ones. This was particularly evident as, already in 2008, the incumbent President had to confront with a twofold challenge requiring a reformed approach to some of the most prominent fields in the U.S. foreign agenda. First, Obama needed to deal with a widely changed world order, more concerned about the role of the new emerging actors - such as the BRICS countries – less likely to deal with the old system pivoted on the American “exceptionalism”. Secondly, the U.S. failure to stabilize the situation pertaining to the Middle East in the wake of the Afghanistan's and Iraq's commitments, forced Obama to reinvent the U.S. strategy in the region, departing sharply from the approach carried forward by Bush.

Seven years later, the rhetoric which characterized most of the Bush presidency, turned out to be ineffective to ignite the public opinion, in what could be regarded as the post-ideological phase of the 9/11 attacks, giving out the main pillars which sustained the presidential legitimacy in foreign policy. In this situation, President Obama made clear, from the moment of his election, that the blueprint of his presidency would have been constituted by a clear departure from the old-fashion American policy, reaffirming not only a more multilateralist-centered model of diplomacy, but also restoring the lost institutional dialectic between the White House and Capitol Hill.

Beginning with these considerations, this work provides a practical assessment of achievements and failures obtained by Obama throughout his first and on-going second term up to the first months of 2014, analyzing the question concerning the elements of continuity and discontinuity between the current presidency and the one of George W. Bush. In doing so, first and

foremost, it will be analyzed the institutional structure of the U.S. and how the mechanisms of checks and balances influence the action of executive and legislative within the realm of foreign policy. As it will be shown, the degree of ambiguity, characterizing the constitutional debate in this field, leaves a consistent leeway to adapt the institutional system to the historical circumstances in which phases of presidential prerogative or else congressional pre-eminence have alternated repeatedly. For this reason, foreign policy holds a particular role within the American institutional system. Its complexity and the difficulty to identify a univocal pattern of accountability have contributed to shape over time a system which represents an invitation to struggle for the privilege of directing American foreign policy (Corwin 1957).

Once developed these considerations, in order to provide a solid basis for the comparison between the two administrations, the main components of the Bush presidency will be outlined and contextualized. The analysis will thus proceed on a twofold path. First, it shall evidence the process that progressively characterized the “imperial presidency” of Bush (Fabbrini 2008) and therefore will analyze the ideological structure of the Bush Doctrine and its application within the context of the U.S. commitments in the Middle East, ranging from the Iraq War to the enforcement of the “freedom agenda” (Lindsay 2012). With regard to the former aspect, the main stress is placed over the shift from the divided government season, which characterized the most part of the Clinton presidency, to the centralization of powers within the White House offices occurred during the Bush terms, assuming that the rhetoric post-9/11 imprinting was closely linked to this institutional trend. Indeed, the perception arisen from the terrorist attacks provided a solid ideological ground which justified and triggered the centripetal-power process actuated by Bush.

Therefore, the season of President’s “new sovereignty” (Spiro 2000) put back the concept of “America first” at the core of the foreign agenda. Bush indicated the backward path toward the Westphalian state (Fabbrini 2010, 223) and dismantled the previous equilibrium reached in the multilateralist post-war

era by placing domestic security and internal interest before the retention of the system the U.S. contributed to build up since the post-war era. Still, he was able to do so only because of two factors. First, albeit the Congress always retained the tools to counterbalance the presidential pre-eminence in foreign policy, it decided not to use them, constituting an out-and-out “abdication to its war powers” (Fabbrini 2008, 167). Second, the Democratic minority was relegated to a subordinate role vis-à-vis the Republican majority, depriving in such way the former of any power of influencing the foreign agenda.

Consequently, the institutional landscape represented a first environmental difference between the Bush and Obama presidencies. Indeed, what Obama missed, in comparison to Bush, was the powerful and transcending support after the 9/11 attacks. As seen, this event gave to the Republican President the legitimacy to act as the guardian of American freedom, and to progressively expand his prerogative vis-à-vis the Congress by weakening the constitutional structure of checks and balances. Such external factor was missing in the era of Obama, rather characterized by a widespread international mistrust for the U.S., especially by the side of Europe after the Iraqi fiasco (Peterson and Pollack 2003), and by a mounting discontent among the electorate, exacerbated by the domestic impact of the financial crisis. Therefore, at least in the first part of his presidency, Bush retained a strong tool to legitimize the progressive centralization of power, especially relying on a Congress which voluntarily renounced to its power to counteract to the presidential pre-eminence, trait which was absent in the Obama’s experience. The latter had rather to confront with a strong opposition emerging only two years after his installation, represented by the more conservative strands – such as the Tea Party - within the GOP congressional component.

Moving forward to the Obama’s years, the two terms are considered separately as they posed two different challenges for the presidency. The first term, from 2008 to 2012, was centered on the idea that Obama should offer a brand new approach to foreign policy with respect to the Bush years. The

expectations in this sense were great already during the presidential campaign (Davis 2009), appealing to the widespread discontent for two extremely costly commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan and for the anachronistic role assumed by the U.S. in an increasingly globalized world. Consequently, the two main efforts carried forward by Obama were, on the one hand, the repositioning of America within the international arena, recognizing that U.S. resources, power and leeway were bounded to the actual world's interdependency whilst, on the other, the re-definition of the Middle East's agenda in the wake of the Bush's "war on terror" and of the events triggered by the Arab spring.

Although Obama played most of his political credibility in promising a decisive turnaround from the Bush's imprinting, he was only partially successful in promoting a new scheme centered on multilateralism. In doing so, the revolutionary impact of the Obama presidency was that of recognizing, for the first time, the anachronism of the doctrine of "American exceptionalism" along with the consequential necessity of moving toward a post-American strategy. The planned engagement that America chased under Obama relied then on some degree of ideological ambiguity which, at the same time, represented the framework for Obama's success. The lack of ideology, more than any concrete political proposal, embodied the offset of the deep-rooted ideological imprinting of the Bush administration, and thus constituted the key for the victory through a marked discontinuity with the previous presidency (Fabbrini 2010: 10).

However, it can be argued, throughout his first term Obama has posed a greater focus on the ideological rupture from his predecessor rather than on the definition of an out-and-out doctrine. If, on the one hand, the lack of a clear-cut ideology was the key to shape a post-ideological approach to international relations, on the other hand, this trend evidenced that the main practical goals achieved during the Obama's first term were, in many cases, only the mere continuation of the policies undertaken by Bush during the second mandate (Miller 2012).

Substantially, notwithstanding the different point of departure and a more prominent self-consciousness of the limits of US engagement, Obama continued in following the path traced by his predecessor in both the management of the ongoing warfare and in the war on terror. The switch of the focus from Iraq to Afghanistan was thus an element of evident continuity as it represented the last step of a withdrawal strategy already negotiated by Bush through the Status of Forces Agreement on his last year as President. Furthermore, the surge in Afghanistan continued, especially after the failure of the COIN strategy, to recall the features of the Bush era by the use of targeted killing and a massive recourse to drone strikes.

On the international field, notwithstanding the attempt to play with China at the same level, the refusal of the latter to be bound into multipolar rules and the consequential U.S. strengthening of the relations with emerging regional powers such as India (Miller 2012) as well as the increased naval presence in the area, led inexorably to an uncertain policy between confront and cooperation with Beijing, which recalled closely the ambiguous approach delineated in the Bush era and from which Obama just departed little.

Moreover, not only the breakthrough from Bush in the progression of the war on terror remained only a mere proposal - given failure of signaling such rupture with the shutdown of Guantanamo - but also many parallel war features were implemented rather than forsaken. At the same time, as soon as the unsuccessful soft approach toward Iran did not produce any result, once more the administration reversed back to Bush era policies and promoted from within the UN tougher sanctions whilst keeping talk of a military option alive (Miller 2012).

Therefore Obama, in his first term, albeit sharpening the ideological distance from his predecessor, was distant from his very aim when it comes to undertake in practice the concrete steps to recede from the Bush's policies. This outcome, being the result of the different facets which marked the Obama's presidency, represented a starting point for the second term in which,

re-elected as President, he has to underline a new course in those many fields which urged the United States to take a more resolute and unambiguous position.

In the wake of this, the second term initiated under the auspices of a more firm action, aimed at implementing the redefinition the U.S. external relationships. Indeed, if the first term was regarded as a chance to reverse the course of U.S. foreign policy, the second one represents the foremost chance for Obama to promote more effective policies without the pressure of a future re-election. Although the progressive centralization of the agencies reflects, to some extent, the work done by Bush, what constitutes the very environmental difference is the strong opposition exerted by the House of Representatives and, more importantly, by the more conservative strains – such as the Tea Party - within the Senate (the branch of the legislative that wields the most consistent power of influencing foreign policy-making).

Therefore, the continuous struggle between the executive and the legislative in this field represents the peculiar trait of the Obama's second term as the internal situation is weighting decisively in determining the presidential foreign agenda, as well as the priorities of the Administration. The majority of the Republican Party in the House is recalling the political approach performed during the second half of the first mandate and paves the way for a necessary search of internal consensus for Obama, before proceeding carefully in any external field that required the U.S. direct participation. For this reason, the appointment of mighty characters in the key role the administration, such as John Kerry and Samantha Power, revamped the perception of America abroad, yet at the same time, did not prevent the Administration for acting weakly in many contexts in which the first term brought about unsatisfactory or only partial achievements.

Therefore, the domestic issues are having particular repercussions on the shape of the presidential foreign agenda. The Middle East continues to represent the nerve center of the Obama's strategy, yet, the objectives and the

means of engagement are constantly changing, given the fact that the Arab spring offers a new scenario for the American presence in the Middle East, and that the engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan is simultaneously decreasing. The wide differentiation between the individual national contexts contributed to foster a time-by-time approach from the side of the U.S., yet the democratic transition is still ongoing and the role of the Obama Administration is likely to adapt further over time.

However, notwithstanding the prospect of delineating a comprehensive doctrine - or at least strategy - in the region after the definitive conclusion of the Bush's cycle, the American response to the recent uprisings is still dealing with a great degree of ambiguity triggered by a case-by case approach in line with the presidential realism toward Middle East affairs. What could be asserted is that the openness of the Obama Administration to the rules of the international game, along with the necessary and ceaseless internal negotiation in seeking for a broader consensus, has inhibited, to some extent, the presidential leeway to build momentum for its own doctrine.

The same trend is portrayed by the policy adopted by the U.S. toward China and Russia during the second mandate, representing a new and an old American competitor, but on the same level of importance for the international balances and, more specifically, for the ones internal to the Asian region. In both cases the rapprochement enacted on the second term is a continuation on the diplomatic grounds of the first. Still, a few things changed over the two terms' approaches and the lower common denominator is still represented by the lack of a precise stance of the U.S., concretized with a hedging and engaging strategy with Beijing which resembles more a twist and turn and, on the other hand, a soft line of neutrality with Moscow, consistently hampered by the recent events in Ukraine.

Overall, assessing the foreign policy of Obama in his second term is still complicate, given that most of the key areas in which the administration disclosed its policy line are still under an ongoing process. Still, by far, the first

steps made and the few results achieved symbolized only a partial degree of departure from the lack of strong effectiveness of the first term. The internal and external burden that the administration is facing at the moment are surely more consistent now than four years ago yet until a clear and pragmatic political track will be delineated, Obama will be trapped between the ideological barrier of his program and the rise of new powers on the international scene.

In the light of this, Egypt has been chosen as the case study for the last chapter as it constitutes the crucial framework for assessing the achievement of the Obama administration whilst, at the same time, comparing the two presidencies over their approach toward the Middle East. Indeed, the regime of Hosni Mubarak represented for over 30 years a crucial ally for the United States in the region as well as the only power - after the Camp David accords - capable to shoulder the role of peace and stability's guarantor between Israel and the rest of the Arab world. Moreover, Egypt represented for the Obama Administration the field in which to recover from the Bush failures and affirm an Obama doctrine in a more comprehensive manner. Indeed, during the Bush's second term, Egypt was the country in which the failures of the "freedom agenda" were more evident.

The departure from the latter in the renewed strategy of democracy promotion, constitutes undoubtedly a turnaround in the way the U.S. approaches foreign policy in the Middle East. What represents the most evident element of rupture is the decisive stance of Obama in favor of a renovation of the Egyptian establishment by pushing the institutional transition from the Mubarak's regime. Albeit one could argue that this was only the consequence of the far-sightedness of the President to envisage the weakness of Mubarak and the lack of support for the survival of his regime, Obama demonstrated in this field, differently than Bush, that the American interest and the freedom agenda in Egypt can coexist, at least for the moment.

However, the controversy over the continuation of the U.S. economic and military aid to Egypt after the overthrowing of Mubarak and, since July 3rd 2013, of Mohammed Morsi, is likely to further exacerbate the tones between the White House and Capitol Hill. Still, notwithstanding these obstacles, the chances for Obama to delineate a clear-cut strategy from the Bush Doctrine are particularly consistent in Egypt, given the political importance that the promotion of democracy and the conservation of the American interest in the region represent for the new administration.

Still, under a broader perspective, if the framework of Egypt was well-managed by Obama - in contrast with Bush - by allowing the transition in the name of democracy, at the same time other national context were handled differently producing controversial outcomes. The strategy of leading from behind in Libya did not prevent the NATO coalition to overstep the UNSC mandate and to operate an old-style regime change, whilst in Syria the mild approach and the so-far inaction of the Obama administration demonstrates how the American interest is still the main concern, if not for the President himself, for many within the White House.

Overall, the choices operated by the U.S. President during these last years evidenced that the grand design of Obama is only partially actuated in practice, presenting only a limited degree of discontinuity in comparison with the Bush administration's policies. Such last point appears evident especially if regarded in the light of the strategy of "change" outlined by Obama himself during his first presidential campaign. This can be explained by two factors characterizing both the presidential terms and still evident nowadays. First, undoubtedly Obama had a narrower leeway to operate than Bush. Notwithstanding the strong centralization of the executive apparatus in the President's hands, the fierce opposition of the Republicans, especially after the 2010 mid-term elections, forced Obama to mediate more than he probably envisaged at the beginning of his presidency. In this case, differently than in the post-9/11 era, the minority within the Congress had a determining weight in

influencing the presidential agenda. Moreover, it was missing the broad ideological support that Bush enjoyed after September 11, the same which oriented the actions of the Congress and the public opinion to smooth the way for the “imperial presidency”. Rather, Obama had to deal with the electoral dissatisfaction and international mistrust left by Bush after the proven failures deriving from the enforcement of the war on terror and the freedom agenda.

Secondly, it needs to be recalled that the approach of Obama toward the post-American international order was not an ideological one, as the one of his predecessor. Rather, he pursued what could be regarded as a Waltzian (1979) neo-realist vision aimed at maximizing the U.S. gains in the international arena. This evidenced the lack of a clear doctrine and of an ideological coherence, emphasizing – conversely- a case-by-case approach to the different challenges faced during his presidency.

Therefore, overall, the Obama’s presidency can be regarded as in marked discontinuity from the Bush years only to the extent in which it was aimed at remodelling the U.S. role internationally and to change the negative external perception triggered by the Bush approach to international relations. However, on the other hand, what is still partially absent is a practical implementation of such strategy. The policies undertaken in many frameworks are still far from being clear and the effective achievements, after six years, are, in most cases, only the result of the continuation of policies previously adopted by Bush, whilst the Obama’s new course is not yet producing positive outcomes as proclaimed in his 2008 “change” speech.

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