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

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## **Introduction**

The election of Obama as 44<sup>th</sup> U.S. President, after two consecutive Bush's terms, opened a new season for American foreign policy, re-launching a new rhetorical imprinting deeply different from the previous one. This was particularly evident as, already in 2008, the incumbent President had to confront with a twofold challenge requiring a reformed approach in some of the most prominent fields in the U.S. foreign agenda. First, Obama had 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, called Obama to reinvent the U.S. strategy in the region, departing sharply from the approach carried forward by Bush.

This necessity was particularly evident as, seven years later, the rhetoric which characterized most of the Bush presidency, turned out to be ineffective to ignite the public opinion anymore, in what could be regarded as the post-ideological phase of the 9/11 attacks, giving out the main pillar which sustained the presidential legitimacy in foreign policy. However, President Obama made clear, from the moment of his election, that the hallmark 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 shall provide a practical assessment of achievements and failures obtained by Obama throughout his first and on-going second term, 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.

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 shall be 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, as it will be shown, the perception arisen from the terrorist attacks provided a solid ideological ground which justified and triggered the centripetal-power process actuated by Bush.

Moving forward to the Obama’s years, the two terms will be considered separately as they presented two different challenges for the presidency. Indeed, 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, as seen in 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.

Conversely, regarding the second term, it will be argued that this time, the lack of perspective for re-election is giving Obama a greater leeway than before. 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 and it is likely to influence substantially the presidential plans in foreign policy. This will have particularly repercussions on the relations' reset with Russia and engaging and hedging with China strategies as well as on the ongoing projects in the Middle East – with Syria and Egypt representing the hotspots of the Obama's agenda in the region.

In the light of this, Egypt has been chosen as the case study for the last chapter, since it constitutes the crucial framework for assessing the achievement of the Obama Administration, whilst at the same time confronting the two presidencies over their approach toward the Middle East. The regime of Hosni Mubarak represented for over 30 years a crucial ally for the United States in the region and 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.

At the same time, during the Bush's second term, Egypt was the country in which the failures of the "freedom agenda" were more evident. Nowadays, Obama inherited a difficult situation to handle especially in the storm center of the Arab spring. Moreover, the controversy over the continuation of the U.S. economic and military aid to Egypt after the overthrowing of Mubarak and, since July 3<sup>rd</sup> 2013, of Mohammed Morsi, is likely to further exacerbate the tones between the White House and Capitol Hill. However, 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.

From the analysis proposed in these sections it will therefore be clear what points has Obama effectively implemented with success, besides its rhetoric, and what have been, conversely, the weaknesses of his presidency by far. The work will thus present a general assessment on the effectiveness of the policies undertaken by Obama based on the consideration drawn previously and taking into consideration institutional, ideological and practical considerations concerning the actions of the 44<sup>th</sup> U.S. President.

## **CHAPTER I – U.S. foreign policy in the post-9/11 era.**

Foreign policy holds a particular role within the American institutional system, given its complexity and the difficulty to identify a univocal pattern of accountability. Over time, both the President and the Congress have tried to affirm their prerogative, within different historical cycles. In this regard, the realm of foreign policy has always represented the foremost battleground in which the institutional competition among the executive and legislative has been fought. The reason for this continuous confrontation among the two branches of government hails from the design of the U.S. Constitution which, from 1787 up to the present, has consistently blurred the boundaries among the presidential and congressional roles.

Such institutional ambiguity, which represents an inherent feature of the U.S. Constitution itself, was already remarked by Alexis de Tocqueville in his “Democracy in America” (1840), as he stated that: *“If the existence of the Union were perpetually threatened, and if its chief interests were in daily connection with those of other powerful nations, the executive government would assume an increased importance in proportion to the measures expected of it, and those which it would carry into effect [...] [but] The practical part of a Government must not be judged by the theory of its constitution”*.

Indeed, the U.S. Constitution confers directly upon the President only a limited number of powers in the realm foreign policy, enclosed by Article II Section 2 and 3. Here the President is regarded as *“Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States”*, and, at the same time, entitled to *“make treaties”* as well as to *“appoint ambassadors with the advice and consent of the Senate”*. On the other hand, the Congress retains a great leeway to check and balance the presidential prerogative. First, through the advice and consent expressed in Article II, Section 2, Clause 2, international treaties become



effective only after the Senate's approval by a two-thirds vote (United States Senate). Second, the legislative is entitled to "*provide for the common Defence*", "*regulate Commerce with foreign Nations*", "*declare War*", "*provide and maintain a Navy*" and "*raise and support Armies*"(U.S Constitution, Article 2, Section 8).

However the abovementioned ambiguity embedded in the system of allocation of powers has contributed to shape, over time, a system which represents, in the words of Corwin, (1957) "*an invitation to struggle for the privilege of directing American foreign policy*". For this reason and for the uncertain interpretation of the powers of which the President is entitled, in affirming his own foreign agenda vis-à-vis the Congress, there has been a continuous alternation of cycles of presidential or congressional pre-eminence (Fabbrini 2010).

The American approach to the international scene has indeed changed over time, and the consolidation of the U.S. hegemony was not a process inherent to the nature of the country, yet it was the reaction to the post-World War II international order and to the different priorities posed at the top of the U.S. political agenda. Therefore, it can be noticed throughout the course of American history, a continuous alternation between isolationist and interventionist prods, albeit with different nuances.

Indeed, starting at the very beginning of the American constitutional history until the end of World War II, the U.S. isolationist trend, focused on domestic policy and on the necessity of fostering internal growth over international hegemony, carried forward an overwhelming predominance of the Congress vis-à-vis the presidency (Fabbrini 2010). In this context, notwithstanding the efforts of making a separated-powers institutional framework, the outcome could be envisioned as a "government of separated institutions *sharing* power" (Neustadt 1990: 29). Thus, this period was characterized by the emergence of a confederal prerogative (Fabbrini 2010: 61), with a great accent on the state-entities within the federal system. This trend

brought about great fragmentation and decentralization of the decision-making processes as the product of the continuous mediation among the territorial actors. Therefore, not only the presidential power was confined into a merely ceremonial role, but the Congress became, *de facto*, the first branch of government (Fabbrini 2010: 61).

The rise of the presidency is, in this regard, strongly linked to the external historical junctures. Indeed, insofar as the attention was internally-oriented, the Congress was the agency better able to deal with the political agenda of the U.S., taking into account the territorial requests. However, the post war era posed some challenges - first and foremost the confrontation with the Soviet Union - that the U.S. could not face anymore with the ambiguity of the Wilsonian foreign policy. The foremost goal was that of reinventing the structure of check and balances among the President and the Congress in favour of the former and over the latter. In such context, the role of the executive evolved toward the shape that still nowadays constitutes the main imprinting of the Obama presidency.

Therefore, the phenomenon of so-called “imperial presidency” relied on an increased centrality of the figure of the President and on a progressive institutionalization of the executive, as well as on the development of the “personal presidency”, comprehensive of agencies such as the White House Office (WHO) and the Executive Office of the President (EOP) (Fabbrini 2008: 153). The rising of this system enables the formation of an “*informal regime of crisis management*” (Gaddis 1991: 117) which retained a predominant power vis-à-vis not only the Congress, but also the departmental sectors of the executive themselves. The rise of the presidential role in foreign policy, whereas some restrains for having the same leeway in domestic affairs still persist, had coincided with the rise, from the end of the 40's, of a strong and trans-party component of internationalists, vis-à-vis a small minority of isolationists. This tendency offered to the presidency a greater freedom in

operating resolute choices in foreign policy, whilst still facing substantial domestic burdens (Fabbrini 2008: 140-1).

After decades of Presidential pre-eminence, beginning with the 70's the legislative branch took back a certain extent of influence in foreign policy, fostered, in this circumstance, by the widespread mistrust toward the presidency originated by the fiasco of the Vietnam campaign. As soon as the consensus polarized around the steadfastness of the imperial presidency had waned, the Congress regained ground in the attempt to re-orient the U.S. approach toward the international arena (Lindsay 1994: 24-5). This is the period of time in which, in rapid succession, the War Powers Resolution (1973) and of the Hughes-Ryan Amendment (1974) were approved. The former provision was aimed at checking the presidential prerogative of initiating an armed conflict without the consent of the Congress, by setting out that "*The President in every possible instance shall consult with Congress before introducing United States Armed Forces into hostilities or into situation where imminent involvement in hostilities is clearly indicated by the circumstances*" (War Powers Resolution 1973), whilst the latter, with the same approach, was meant to affirm the preponderance of the intelligence oversight committees within the Congress over the services of the CIA (Van Wagenen 2007).

However, the new push performed by the legislative did not wreak a new phase of congressional pre-eminence. Rather, it drove the following presidents to work around the Congress and to appeal directly to popular consensus, launching a new phase of personalization of the presidency (Fabbrini 2008, 141). This trend, evident particularly during the administrations of Ford and Reagan, has showed that the focus of the modern presidencies has shifted toward a more direct interrelation among the White House offices and the grass-roots, whilst, at the same time, renouncing in many cases to the direct support of the institutional establishment (Fabbrini 2008, 142). In this respect, the Bush and the Obama Administration were expression of this new tendency of linking the presidential rhetoric to popular support - particularly in

the wake of 9/11 - and to enlarge the executive leeway by enforcing a clear strategy or doctrine in foreign policy.

### **1.1 - Congress vs. President, how the legislative can restrain the executive agenda.**

However, in developing an analysis of the mechanisms which enable the institutional actors to dictate their priorities in foreign policy, it needs to be stressed the role of the Congress and more specifically of the Senate. Indeed, the latter retains consistent powers to check and balance the presidential conduct. The Senate was conceived by the Framers as the part of legislative body dealing largely with internal problems (Humphrey 1959: 525). In the Federalist Paper No. 64 (1788), Madison argued that the Senate has its distinctiveness in the fact that it operates "*with more coolness, with more system, and with more wisdom than the popular branch*". For this reason, "*the Constitution provides that our negotiations for treaties shall have every advantage which can be derived from talents, information, integrity, and deliberate investigations, on the one hand, and from secrecy and despatch on the other*" (Hamilton, Madison and Jay 1788: 493).

The evolution of the U.S. global leadership after World War II, and the need for a well-defined grand design for American foreign policy, were among the reasons for the rise of the Senate. The latter assumed a role well beyond the one envisioned by the Founding Fathers - only focused on the participation in the process of ratification of international treaties and of the presidential appointments (Humphrey 1959: 526).

However, the gradual growth of the Senate's prerogative has been constant and complementary to the one of the presidency. According to Humphrey (1959: 527), the expansion of the prerogative of the second chamber was an *absolute*, rather than *relative* phenomenon, in comparison to the role of the executive branch. Indeed, "if the Senate's responsibilities have increased

ten-fold, the international responsibilities of the Executive Branch have increased a hundred-fold” (Humphrey 1959: 527).

The importance of the second chamber in outlining the direction of U.S. foreign policy is probably, for the most part, incidental to the advice and consent power. The latter gives a significant responsibility to the Senate in the treaty-making processes, conceiving the second chamber as a check to the presidential vested power to enter into legal agreements with other sovereign nations (Humphrey 1959, 527). This role, embodied by the Senate, has delineated some consistent restraints to the presidential prerogative, but has also significantly hampered the effectiveness of U.S. diplomacy. It is not by chance that the chamber has been called the “graveyard of treaties” (Pevehouse and Kelley 2012), as demonstrated in practice by foremost examples such as the rejection to join in with the League of the Nations in 1919 or, more recently, with the Kyoto Protocol. Therefore, the constitutional process of advice and consent has high costs for both the President and the Senate, especially where the latter needs to be constantly informed by the former to ensure its support. The outcome of this structure of check and balances is such that these costs effectively slow down the processes, or even in some cases, block them completely (Pevehouse and Kelley 2012).

However, the powers expressed by the Senate, and more generally by the U.S. Congress, are essential to raise the standards and the transparency of foreign policy processes within the executive. As the then-Secretary of State Dean Archeson had observed, “[in one] *aspect of foreign affairs Congress is all-powerful. This is in the establishing and maintaining of those fundamental policies, with their supporting programs of action, which require legal authority, men and money. Without these foundations - solidly laid and kept in repair - even wise and skillful diplomacy cannot provide the power and develop the world environment indispensable to national independence and individual liberty for ourselves and others*” (Lefever and Hohenstein 1960). Therefore, the role of the Congress should not be regarded only as an obstacle

to the smooth management of diplomacy by the executive branch, yet, through the legislative power to “investigate, to criticize and to advocate, the Congress does exert a significant influence on the quality and direction of United States foreign policy” (Humphrey 1959, 529).

However, as pointed out by Humphrey (1959, 530), the very weakness in a system of check and balances, is not the slowness or the widespread use of a “government as usual” logic projected into the international realm; rather, it is mainly constituted by the governmental fragmentation. Both the Congress and the executive branch results deeply disunited. The former because it lacks the necessary degree of independent expertise able to prevent the entire legislative body, and more specific the local interests, from making hasty discriminating judgments between alternative programs and proposals (Humphrey 1959, 530). The latter because of the multiplicity of different interest expressed by the executive agencies involved in foreign affairs, in addition to already bulky role of the State Department and the Department of Defense. Therefore, it is no surprise that to prevent the risks of an excessive fragmentation and of a centrifugal tendency within the party system, capable to hamper the executive’s action in matters of foreign policy, the modern presidency, and especially the one of Obama, have posed at the core of the foreign apparatus the National Security Council and an innermost circle of loyal advisers to better rein their long-term policy design.

For these reasons, there exist a fundamental difference among the two branches, which justifies the presidential prerogative in some matters concerning foreign policy and the consequent centralization of powers in the hand of one. This is, according to Tower (1982, 232), the fact that the Congress represents, for its nature, many competing regional and parochial interests and, therefore, is the least advisable body for pursuing a unified national foreign strategy. Moreover, Capitol Hill “must of necessity take a tactical approach when enacting legislation, since the passage of laws is achieved by constantly shifting coalitions” (Tower 1982, 232). This approach, if on the one hand is

deemed necessary in domestic policy to enhance the representation of constituencies and parties within the federal states, on the other is, for its conformation, not conceived to produce the same results within the realm of foreign policy, hampering or at least slowing-down the channels of fast-track diplomacy (Tower 1982, 233).

Conversely, the President is the only governmental officer directly responsible before the whole nation, for the very nature of his election. Moreover, working closely with a team of advisers possessing the necessary expertise, the President appears to be the only institutional figure in the condition of embracing and dictating the lines of a unified foreign policy's strategy, especially whilst dealing with other national powers and carrying forward large-range policies (Tower 1982, 232). Therefore, the inherent feature of long-termness - which characterizes foreign policy processes - needs a certain degree of stability that the Congress can not ensure, given the fragmentation of interests and the short duration of the political mandate, partially renewed every two years with the mid-term elections.

This aspect, conceived as a restraint to the presidential leeway in domestic policy, offers in return a weak power for enhancing an aggregate long-term strategy. Instead, what the President can do more comprehensively is to produce an overarching strategy which would eventually fit into a grander design capable to be quickly changed and adapted as a response to the changes in the international arena (Tower 1982, 233).

The presidencies of Bush first and Obama then, embodied this necessity of a greater presidential autonomy in foreign policy as a necessity deriving from the urgency of a quick and resolute response after 9/11. Both the Bush and the Obama doctrine in this sense were aimed at transforming the role of the U.S. in the international arena and, in order to do so, the White House and the team of advisers within the presidential inner circle constituted the core actors involved within the design of centralization. Ensuring fast decision-making and the presidential capability of affirming his own line became, therefore, the

priority for the executives of the 2000's and in this regard there is not a great difference between Obama and Bush. However, also considering the different historical environment in which the two presidents operated, there can be underlined some crucial diversities among the two approaches.

## **1.2 - The Bush Administration and the presidential prerogative**

To develop an in-depth analysis of the Obama two terms, one needs first to examine the political context in which the 44<sup>th</sup> President initiated his term, being the legacy left from the previous administration very consistent in terms of commitments undertaken worldwide and for the ideological remnants persisted from the Bush doctrine. Indeed, the Bush presidency can be regarded as “the most executive oriented of the post-World War II period” (Fabbrini 2010: 167), and the great leeway the President enjoyed throughout his first term and the first part of the second, was a primarily a consequence of an institutional environment particularly favourable, mainly because of the unexpected tragedy of September 11.

However, the seeds of the Bush ascent were already present during the Bill Clinton presidency. Indeed, already in 1994 the “Republican Revolution” not only inaugurated a season of divided government (Democratic executive and GOP majority in the Congress) corroding the consensus around the presidential party, but also revealed the first hints of the new Republican foreign policy's strategy which would have constituted, shortly thereafter, the ground for the Bush Doctrine. The necessity to oppose the Clinton presidency, exploiting the juncture of divided governments, triggered the Republican promotion of a unilateralist scheme in foreign policy. This was opposed to the Clinton-Democratic multilateralism and, on a larger scale, to the whole system of U.S. relations built since the end of World War II (Fabbrini 2008: 163). With the end of the Clinton's divided government season and the election of George W. Bush as 43<sup>rd</sup> U.S. President, the Republican Party can finally



promote its foreign agenda actualized in the Bush “new unilateralism”. This consisted basically in the exaltation of American interest as the very factor to define the nature of the accords and alliances. Such view relied on “a willingness to go along with international accords, but only so far as they suit America, which is prepared to conduct policy outside their constraints” (Fabbrini 2008: 164).

Albeit foreign policy was not his foremost concern during the 1999 Bush’s presidential campaign, there were already some hints of a more unilateral approach carried forward well before the 9/11 events. In this regard, the refusal to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and the Convention on the Rights of the Child as well as the withdrawal from the ABM Treaty and the refusal to join the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the Kyoto Protocol (Fabbrini 2008, 164) demonstrated how the Bush presidency was principally focused on heightening the American interest in the international arena. However, what gave to these isolate events the shape of an out-and-out doctrine were the terrorist attacks of September 11, and the consequent “War on Terror”. Indeed these events contributed significantly to shift the focus from domestic issues to the international realm raising the fight against terrorism as very priority for the administration.

The messianic tone that surrounded the Bush’s stance was in line with the ones used during the Cold War. That was far from being only a geopolitical clash, rather, it represented a struggle between good and evil and that had a world-wide significance (Lindsay 2011: 766), as Bush presented, “*our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil*” (U.S. Department of State 2009). Another important factor was that the action of the U.S. would now go offensive to face the threat of terrorism, bearing clearly in mind that the latter was not only represented only by Al-Qaeda, but also by all global terrorists and the states supporting them, as Bush stressed “*we will make no distinction between those who committed these acts and those who harbor them*” (Rehm 2001).

As remarked by Lindsay (2011, 767), the Bush strategy of war on terror relied primarily on five pillars, which are expression of the new course of American security policy. First, the U.S. hegemony on the international scene now was deeply tied with the unprecedented capability of fighting terrorism everywhere in the globe, without any restrictions. Second, the 9/11 attacks were read as the outcome of over two decades of U.S. reluctance to engage directly in contrasting terrorism. In this respect, the then-Vice-President Cheney also argued that: *“weakness, vacillation, and the unwillingness of the United States to stand with our friends, that is provocative. It’s encouraged people like Osama bin Laden to launch repeated strikes against the United States, and our people overseas and here at home, with the view that he could, in fact, do so with impunity”* (Alterman and Green 2004). Third, the awareness that the old-schemes previously used during the Cold War - as deterrence and containment - would not work against terrorist groups, being the latter hidden entities, with no territory to defend and no specific nationality. Fourth, terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda can not operate without the support and the aid coming from some states in the Middle East. It is in this respect that, in his 2002 State of Union Address, President Bush identified the “axis of evil”, constituted by Iran that *“exports terror, while an unelected few repress the Iranian people’s hope for freedom”*, Iraq *“a regime that has something to hide from the civilized world”* and North Korea *“a regime arming with missiles and weapons of mass destruction, while starving its citizens”* (Bush 2002), (definition successively enlarged to include Libya, Syria and Cuba by the Undersecretary of State Bolton). These were considered states “arming to threaten the peace of the world” (Bush 2002). Fifth, alliances and multilateral organizations are functional for the U.S. only to the extent in which they serve its interest. They were not considered as essentials, as the Bush America was conceived as a military superpower capable to handle the war on terrorism without allied help. This conception relied on a solid basis of “American exceptionalism”. This idea can be further inferred from many statements made by the President in

different occasions “*At some point we may be the only ones left. That’s okay with me. We are America*” (Dunn 2003: 283).

### **1.3 - Pre-emption and the use of American power**

From the assumptions underlined before, the so-called Bush Doctrine – initially used as rhetoric to justify the intervention in Afghanistan – was enlarged in scope to include the use of pre-emptive actions as fundamental corollary of the war on terror. Again, also this strategy envisaged some fundamental ideological pillars. First, The U.S. can attack any country and overthrow any regime, if they constitute a threat on U.S. security, no matter if this threat is immediate or, rather, only likely to happen in the future. Moreover, not only terrorism constituted a security issue by itself, but also other factors were taken into consideration such as the detention of weapons of mass destruction (Dresner 2009: 282). Second, the messianic role surrounding pre-emption turned out to be closely tied to the promotion and the exportation of democracy after the Iraq war (Dresner 2009: 282). Third, as remarked previously, the action promoted by the U.S. for security concerns could not encounter any external constrain, fundamental trait which demonstrates “a willingness to act without the sanction of international bodies such as the United Nations Security Council or the unanimous approval of its allies” (Kagan 2007: 17).

Moreover, the strategy of pre-emption was further integrated by the 2002 National Security Strategy paper entitled: “Prevent Our Enemies From Threatening Us, Our Allies, and Our Friends with Weapons of Mass Destruction”. Here the rhetoric was partially toned down by stressing the fact that the U.S. interest should be embedded into the most comprehensive sphere of world’s peace and democracy: “*the United States will not use force in all cases to preempt emerging threats, nor should nations use preemption as a pretext for aggression. Yet in an age where the enemies of civilization openly*

*and actively seek the world's most destructive technologies, the United States cannot remain idle while dangers gather. We will always proceed deliberately, weighing the consequences of our actions"* (U.S. Department of State 2009b)

However, what allowed Bush to ingrain such a substantial turnaround in foreign policy was not only the great popular support after 9/11, but also the favourable institutional environment concerning the relations with the Congress. As Fabbrini pointed out (2008: 166) "the new international strategy of 'American national sovereignty comes first' also implied a renewed domestic strategy definable as 'the President comes first'". This feature of executive-legislative relations came after a long season of divided government which had characterized the Clinton presidency and had hampered a well-defined strategy in U.S. foreign policy for over a decade. With Bush, not only the role of the President came out considerably strengthened, but since the Republican Party increased its majority in the House of Representatives and regained the Senate in 2002 mid-term elections, the majority party *de facto* ruled uncontested the U.S. foreign agenda. This trend was evident by the strong harmony between the Congress and the President. One could only consider that, for instance, compared to the average of 9 presidential vetoes per year in the period 1960-99, under the Bush administration such power was used only once to block a congressional act, the Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act 2006 (Fabbrini 2008: 70)

The massive enlargement of the presidential prerogative in foreign policy depended mainly on two factors: the widespread sense of national unity brought about by the unheard-of attack on American soil, which seen the President embodying the role of popular leader against the external threat, and the overwhelming GOP majority in both houses, keen to pander the executive's initiatives. Therefore, if September 11 symbolized the turnaround of the Bush presidency and the breakthrough which triggered the new security strategy, the role played by the Republicans within Congress was crucial.

In this context, Bush had the chance to push forward an extensive interpretation of its powers especially as Commander-in-Chief (as set out in article II, section 2, clause 1 of the Constitution). The President extended its authority to declare war, and not only to make it, with no restriction, notwithstanding what expressly set out in the Constitution on article I, section 8 clause 11, which allocate the power of declaring war to the Congress (Fabbrini 2008: 166). Moreover, on September 14, 2001, the Congress passed legislation S.J.Res. 23, authorizing the President to use “*all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons*”(Grimmett 2007: 4).

However, the hallmark of the progressive empowerment of the President was undoubtedly represented by the USA PATRIOT Act, passed by the Congress on October 2001. It is indeed essential to understand deeply the turn of Bush foreign policy occurred since the second half of his first term. The Act, whose acronym stands for “*Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism*” was meant to enlarge enormously discretion of the executive and in order to shield the citizens from the threat of terrorism, shaping a model of intense secrecy (Mark 2004, 5). Particularly it conferred far-reaching new powers, deriving from the modification of 15 previous statutes, of the FBI and many others international intelligence agencies, eliminating, at the same time, all the structure of check and balances which previously guaranteed the courts to act against any abuse of the presidential powers (Mark 2004: 6).

Many are the provisions embedded in the Patriot Act that are worth mentioning here, among its 342 pages the document grants the Justice Department the power to: “tap telephones, e-mail messages, and personal computer hard drives without a legal probable cause”, “request private and personal business and bank records, without a court hearing”, “investigate a

person who is not suspected of a crime and/or is not the target of a terrorist investigation”, “secretly conduct “sneak-and-peek” searches without a warrant”, “hold closed hearings and monitor jailhouse conversations between attorneys and clients” (Mark 2004, 6). Moreover, the Act furnished a new definition of domestic terrorism, by giving to the government the power to designate domestic groups, including religious and political one, as “terrorist organizations,” and by empowering the President to designate individuals as “enemy combatants” (Mark 2004, 6).

Once more, it needs to be stressed the emphasis put by the Justice Department on these provision, justifying the action undertaken with the safeguard of national security, “the threat presented by terrorists who carried out the September 11 attacks required a different kind of law enforcement approach. The Department needed to disrupt such persons from carrying out further attacks by turning its focus to prevention, rather than investigation and prosecution” (U.S. Department of Justice 2003). President Bush, of course, oriented the public opinion in the same direction, emphasizing the messianic mission represented by struggle against U.S. enemies and that the issue at stake was the freedom of all the Americans. “*I know many Americans feel fear today,*” (Woodward 2002, 209) he declared in October 2001, yet “*to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil [...] we will export death and violence to the four corners of the earth in defense of this great nation*” (Woodward 2002, 49).

#### **1.4 – Conclusion**

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 multilateralism 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. Moreover, another element in favour of the Bush administration was the structure of the Senate, which overrepresented the small states such as Idaho, Wyoming and others, easily controlled by the GOP. The crucial control of many small red states gave Bush the control on the second chamber throughout almost his entire term after giving him the victory in the presidential run against Al Gore, notwithstanding the 500.000-vote difference with his opponent. Such junctures allowed the President to hold a stable control over the decision-making processes, overcoming also the rising conflict between the different branches of the government the Defense Department (responsible for undertaking the military action in Iraq) and the State Department, as a consequence of the growing militarization of the American foreign policy.

However, the Presidential power in the Bush era was not limitless. As indicated by Fabbrini (2008, 169-170) the open-ended hegemony of the Bush presidency encountered two constrains of different nature which restrained the action of President. The first was political: albeit the first phase of the war on terror seen the national security as the main priority for the public, therefore favoring the image of the Republican President, the complications deriving from Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns and the administration’s fiasco in managing the two warfare at a later stage, evidenced the first signs of rupture within the theretofore-solid majority (Fabbrini 2008, 169). The second factor was institutional, and it is represented by two institutional mechanisms. First, the tight timing of the electoral cycle, relying on mid-term elections held every two years. This gives the chance to the electorate to manifest actively their

dissatisfaction for the President's choices. Secondly, the two-term limit for the re-election of an incumbent President (22<sup>nd</sup> Amendment) limits considerably the hegemony of a powerful presidency, and makes automatically any President a lame duck during, at least, the last two years of his second term (Fabbrini 2008, 170).



## **CHAPTER II – Obama’s foreign policy in the first term: walking away from the Bush years.**

From the very beginning of his activity at the Congress, as a young 44-years-old Senator from Illinois, Obama distinguished himself for the harsh criticism toward the Bush wars and, more generally, toward the role that the United States was assuming on the international arena. Already in October 2002 Obama, in the midst of his Senate electoral campaign, expressed stark judgments particularly over the Iraq war, making statements that closely resembled the leitmotif of his first-term presidential speeches. The nucleus of his criticism lied in what he depicted as an attempt perpetuated by “*armchair, weekend warriors [...] to distract us from corporate scandals and a stock market that has just gone through the worst month since the Great Depression*” (Läidi 2012: 15-16).

Nonetheless, this did not place Obama in such a position of unconditional rejection of the idea of war as a strategic tool for American international engagement or from opposing blindly to all the wars. Only five years later, in January 2007, from the benches of the US Senate stood out his sponsorship for the *Iraq War De-Escalation Act*. The importance of such act lied in the fact that it was intended primary not to reverse the troop surge in Iraq *per se*, but to gain a sufficient leeway in order to lead their reallocation in Afghanistan. Indeed the latter was deemed - along with Pakistan and at least in the Obama’s original intention - as a more prolific battlefield to contrast terrorism.

Those two brief examples are meant to underline how Obama approached the 2008 Democratic primaries -and the subsequent Presidential elections- with a steadfast reputation of innovator in his conception of the Bush foreign policy. He represented the only candidate, not only in stark contrast

with John McCain, but also within his own party, who could bring credibly some sort of “change” and “hope” after the two terms of George W. Bush.

The game of credibility for Obama was played on a twofold level, being not only linked to the growing domestic discontent for the two extremely costly wars, but also, and particularly, to the international reputation the US has assumed during the previous eight years. The decline of the American image abroad, although begun far before the 2000's, has undergone a sharp drop during the two terms of the Bush Administration. One of the main causes of this was represented by the disclosure, among consistent shares of neoconservatives inside and outside the White House, of the pressure for reasserting the American freedom of action in foreign relations (Davis 2009: 2). This conception, as seen in chapter I, involved two basic principles. First, the United States would no longer accept the interference of either international organization or individual countries, aimed at constraining American power to intervene in sensitive areas of the world. Second, once free from any international constrain, the US would alter the status quo targeting all those countries, in the Middle East and everywhere else, which represented a threat to the US or, more broadly for “democracy” as such (Davis 2009: 3).

The call for a more consistent freedom of action claimed by the United States in the wake of the Bush's first installment had a high price though. On the one hand, the 43<sup>rd</sup> President triggered the already existing waves of anti-Americanism by, for instance, refusing to ratify the Kyoto Treaty, by opting out of the Rome Treaty on the ICC or else by announcing the intention of withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM), which, from Nixon onward, represented a solid ground for multilateral negotiations. Still, on the other, he obtained world's support to his commitment to contrast terrorism, in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attack (Davis 2009: 3). The Slogan “We are all Americans” represented chiefly an attempt to mold a US-led multipolar world system, in which the global struggle against transnational terrorism is fought by the many

international actors grasped at the US in terms of coordination and participation.

The terroristic attack of 9/11 represented, in this regard, the turning point for the definitive affirmation of the neoconservative ideology which constituted cornerstone of the Bush administration. It not only gave Bush a solid base to succeed in affirming its doctrine as a messianic task to ensure world's security, but it was the main factor which entail the shift from domestic to foreign policy as the primary focus in the Bush agenda. The existence of international actors not playing the rule of the game and acting uncontrollably - such as Al-Qaeda - triggered the US claim for inadequacy of the traditional deterrence as a mean of containment and prevention (Laidi 2012: 10).

Therefore, as seen in chapter I, the Bush doctrine relied on a twofold blueprint: it claims to be legitimate as a norm of action in the international framework, whilst it asserts that the recourse to force can result necessary in order to deal with both imminent and potential threats. All of this was designed in order to keep the primacy and exert a strong pressure to the international arena through a mix of pre-emption and its political corollary inherent to regime change and exportation of democracy (Laidi 2012: 10). All those facets of the Bush Doctrine represented a great challenge for Obama in the presidential run, since the "change" he promised as the very core of his project for America, passed through a definitive break, if not a complete reversal, of the policies undertaken during the previous years. Particularly the focus was thorough in those multiple regional contexts in which his predecessor had so crucially engraved his doctrine, such as the Middle East.

In restoring the American image abroad, President Obama acknowledged the importance of managing in the right way the bulky agenda bequeathed from the previous administration, holding out the two pillars of moral authority and leadership (Davis 2009: 1), as his own hallmarks. The fields in which to disclose this discontinuity were essentially two, the so called "war on terror" and its implication in the relations with Middle East powers,

and the role of the US in an increasingly globalized world. Both these framework were not limited to their original definition as such, but had many implications and collaterals that Obama had to (yet sometimes did not) take into account in proposing his new course.

Moreover, never as in the years of the economic and financial crisis, the domestic and the foreign policies were so deeply interconnected. Indeed, if the great crisis constituted the first and foremost concern for the Obama Administration just as it was installed, at the same time, internationally the legacy of the Bush years was still an ongoing process under the new administration. In 2008 Obama inherited a global scenario in which two warfare that can not be win or lost completely such as Iraq and Afghanistan, two countries such as Iran and North Korea towards which the resolution of the nuclear issue seemed hardly fixable in the short term, the slow process of rearrangement in many regional conflicts, above all the Israeli-Palestinian one, and, more generally, a widespread global hostility toward the US leadership - which had at his epicenter the Muslim world and was likely to be a powerful trigger for fundamentalism and terrorism - undermined US image abroad and had a massive impact on the US leeway in the international arena (Laidi 2012: 4).

Moreover, American supremacy in the world was sharply declining for several factors that undermined the role assumed in the wake of World War II and, at later stage, after the unipolar world of the post-Cold War era. This trend was chiefly linked to the role that the US has played as an economic model for the rest of the world. The subprime bubble and the consequential economic crisis that struck the US from 2008, called into question, for the first time since 1945, the legitimacy of US capitalism. Thus, it not only affected the already decreasing confidence on the United States abroad, but it also undermined the very basis on which entire sectors of foreign policy have relied on previously. Indeed, not only the Congress was and still is deeply interconnected with American finance, but the “easy money” of Wall Street constituted a fast track

for financing the increasing aggressive and costly foreign policy of the Bush administration (Laidi 2012: 2). Thus, the challenge Obama has to address in the pathway toward such “change” was only in part involved in detaching himself and his policies from the ones of his predecessor, yet, at the same time, he had to acknowledge the necessity of dealing differently in an altered global order, in order to redefine the role of the American leadership internationally.

## **2.1 – The “team of rivals”, how the domestic framework influenced the Obama’s foreign policy.**

The first notable event with which the Obama presidency began was a clear, great-margin victory over his opponent, which seemed to support the expectation that the electorate have on his capability to redefine the American agenda. Barack Obama, already in his early months of campaign, never encountered consistent hindrance to affirm his own view on foreign policy against McCain, depicted as a Bush-clone for that which concerns the continuation of the policies of the previous administration. However, the path toward the affirmation of “change” and “hope” encountered many external burdens to deal with.

If, as it will be shown, Obama retained, to some extent, a favorable political and institutional environment during the first half of its term, the limited achievement he accomplished during the first two years of presidency were in many fields a mere continuation of the Bush’s policies. The latter trend hampered further the prospects for the President to completely fulfill his foreign policy design in the short term and paved the way for both external and internal pressures in contraposition to his governmental action. The most evident consequence of this was represented by the midterm elections held in November 2010 and the surge of the GOP, which constituted the radical switch of the Obama’s policy toward a more mediate policy of compromise. The 2010

represented in such a way the advent of a second phase of presidential foreign policy, with a radical switch from its original imprinting.

However at the beginning of 2008, possessing wide majorities in both the Congressional houses, the potential for exercising a powerful leadership in foreign policy was great for Obama. In the same way Bush imposed his agenda as easily after 9/11, thanks to the outstanding majority in both the chambers, Obama had the chance in such scenario to both dominate the Congress and impose new policies in clear discontinuity with those of his predecessor. As President, he embodied himself his own foreign policy design. His very strategy aim to reverse the course in many key areas was pursued primarily through a decisive centralization of power and the implementation of an influential Presidential leadership.

In this, what constituted the main reference for the presidential action was the National Security Council (NSC). Originally created with its 20 members to advise the President on national security matters as well as to strengthen the cooperation among the different governmental agencies, the NSC has indeed progressively gained a favored role from Bush Sr. onwards. The original purpose of the National Security Council at his creation, in 1947 by the *National Security Act*, was that of ensuring coordination among the Navy, the Army, the Air Force, the CIA and various other agencies, concerning security matters. Yet, its responsibilities progressively expanded, especially after 9/11, becoming a powerful tool in the hands of the White House to struggle against other branches, especially the State Department, in controlling the counterterrorism strategy and implementing the degree of centralization of decision-making within the White House (Laidi 2012: 19). What characterized the Council under the Obama Administration was that it was used as a mean to take advantage of the latent contrasts amongst the different institution outside the presidency, in order to retain a broader leeway in imposing his foreign policy agenda (Laidi 2012: 20). Particularly, to prevent the development of parallel influences outside of his control which already undermined Bush

action in some fields, the whole apparatus of the NSC was further centralized by Obama and the Council was used as a direct and powerful emanation of the White House establishment. In this way the National Security Council became “the sole process through which policy could be developed” (Singh 2012: 49). As soon as terrorism became more concerning for the Obama Administration, the NSC and the Homeland Security Council (the latter strongly backed by Bush during his presidency) were merged together on May 26, 2009. Although both the bodies continue to exist nowadays by statute and to support the President, the signal Obama wanted to give was that of eliminating the barrier between domestic and foreign security, albeit, it could be argued, still relying on the institutional scaffolding adopted by Bush (Laidi 2012: 20).

Overall, all the conduct of the Obama presidency in matters of international security was notably highly centralized, given the conception that the President should have a prominent role over the other department as well as the powerful and influential lobbies, in determining the orientation of foreign policy. The aim in doing so was that of leading meticulously from the above the transition from the approach shown by the Bush administration in security policies and the disclosure of the new course promised by Obama. In this direction can be explained the initial choice of James Logan Jones - a former Commandant of Marine Corps - as National Security Advisor, albeit replaced in less than one year by Thomas Donilon. Appointing a figure with just a small experience in the bureaucratic apparatus just as Jones was, especially for a role which over time resulted always crucial in defining US foreign agenda and given, in particular, the close strategic relationships established between many Presidents and their NSC advisors (the most notable between Kissinger and Nixon), represented once more the will of Obama of make his foreign policy options prevailing over all without a mastermind who can oppose them (Laidi 2012: 21). The same trend was ensured by Tom Donilon, Jones’ successor as NSC adviser. Although Donilon had previous experiences being already Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs under Clinton from 1993 to 1996,

he does not represent a turnaround of the trend previously underlined. His role continued to be subdued by the presidential prerogative, and it crystallized in ensure that Obama's decision in foreign policy not encounter any significant constrain at home and did not hamper his re-election for the second term (Laidi 2012: 21).

In his design of centralization and of univocal direction of foreign policy, Obama built up, a cohesive "team of rivals" being particularly concerned in the appointment of his principals and advisors in foreign policy in the key offices of the administration (Singh 2012: 49). As previously recalled, the choice toward this solution was aimed at tightening together some of most prominent figures of the Democratic establishment, already distinguished during the Clinton administration, such as Hillary Clinton or Joe Biden, with those whom James Mann called "the Obamians": the President's "inner circle, representing the relatively youthful, politically attuned side of Barack Obama's foreign policy" (Mann 2013: 68) such as Susan Rice and, at later stage, Samantha Power. The strategic cleverness of Obama was that of mounting these two generations of Democrats together with some old glories from the Bush legacy, such as Robert Gates at the Defense Department, in the varied patchwork of his foreign policy. Although this move prevented to some extent the creation of a handful of rival teams contrasting each other, as occurred in the previous eight year of Bush administration, the outcome was often that of a lack of steadfastness in the Obama's foreign agenda. The mediation among different ideological barriers in order to prevent conflicts within the White House, too often limited the presidential leeway in dealing with the most urgent contingencies in the international arena. The most prominent example of this was represented by Obama's Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton.

After being Obama's fierce rival during the presidential primary in 2008, Clinton rapidly transformed herself into one of the most loyal supporters of the Obama's foreign agenda. Therefore, it resulted clear from the very first moment the prominence of the role of Obama, and the compliance of his



Secretary of State of her respective tasks. In many decisions, such as the appointment of John Ross as ambassador in Japan instead of the Clinton's proposal Joseph Nye (Mann 2013: 242), the leadership of Obama was never questioned and the Secretary of State adhere completely to the Obama's strategic decisions. However, what really represented the difference among the two most prominent characters of the Democratic formation was the emphasis they put and the perspective they have on American foreign policy. For Hillary Clinton, the role that the US would eventually play during those years of economic emergency and of repositioning on the international arena was indeed a matter of great concern.

The Obama's speech on August 2010, regarding the formal end of the military operations in Iraq underlined this contrasting view between the two sides of the administration. *"And so at this moment, as we wind down the war in Iraq, we must tackle those challenges at home with as much energy, and grit, and sense of common purpose as our men and women in uniform who have served abroad. They have met every test that they faced. Now, it is our turn. Now, it is our responsibility to honor them by coming together, all of us, and working to secure the dream that so many generations have fought for the dream that a better life awaits anyone who is willing to work for it and reach for it"*(CNN International 2010). Obama seemed to delineate the beginning of a phase in which the United States would have turned page and moved back to address the domestic issues (Mann 2013: 248). On the other hand, Hillary Clinton pursued a different approach toward American engagement in the world, and had, at the same time, a different conception of the role of the US within the international system. A few days after the Obama's speech on Iraq, Clinton reassured that the world needs to *"to bring people together as only America can"* and she specified that *"the United States can, must, and will lead in this new century"*(Clinton 2010). The greater remark of her speech, however, and the most explanatory feature of her distance from Obama in this field, lied in the assertion that *"the complexities and connections of today's world have*

*yielded a new American Moment, a moment when our global leadership is essential, even if we must often lead in new ways. A moment when those things that make us who we are as a nation – our openness and innovation, our determination and devotion to core values – have never been more needed”*(Clinton 2010).

The claim for an “American Moment” evoked the themes of the US as the “indispensable nation”, used in an old, and to some extent outdated, conception which accompanied the presidencies of many, from Roosevelt to Bill Clinton and, of course, George W. Bush (Mann 2013: 251). The actual contingency resulted to be crucial in the Clintonian perspective, as “*a moment that must be seized through hard work and bold decisions to lay the foundations for lasting American leadership for decades to come*” (Mann 2013: 251). By contrast, Obama realized, given the economic decline of the US and the necessity to face some domestic challenges prior to establish a global leadership, that America can not keep anymore its predominance unaltered (Mann 2013: 251). For this very reason he reckoned on a reappraised and more modest role of the United States in the international arena, recognizing the relevance of the obstacles posed by the economic crisis on the path to reaffirm American primacy.

However, the difference in the approach between Obama and his Secretary of State was significant. If the President carried forward the “engagement” as the central point of his design of foreign policy, which included the recourse to diplomacy and dialogue with the other countries, conversely Hillary Clinton insisted on the view that the world “*do look to America not just to engage, but to lead*”(Clinton 2010) restoring such conception which do not admit to call into question either American exceptionalism or its primacy. Hillary Clinton, although being one of the closer collaborator of Obama in contriving his policies, still relied on the concept of America as the indispensable nation and the world’s only leader, demonstrating to be still rooted to some extent to the Clinton administration in the 90’s (Mann

2013: 252) and recalling some of the constitutive features which distinguished the Bush's conception of "America first". This reflected the lack of unitary direction within the Obama Administration, which constrained the President, albeit a system highly centralized, not to have a clear and unquestionable approach toward foreign policy.

## **2.2 - The 2010 mid-term elections and the change of the Obama's strategy**

The midterm elections held in November 2010 represented, to some extent, a referendum to assess the credibility of the progresses brought about after two years of Obama. The persistent problems connected to the economic crisis such as the high rate of unemployment, as well as the few accomplishments on the promised "change" in foreign policy, weighted considerably on the Obama's image after two years of administration. If on the one hand Obama insisted on the assertion that the pathway toward change was long and intricate and required time, on the other the swing back of many independents toward the GOP was symptomatic of the high level of dissatisfaction polarized around the Obama's policies on the first half of his term (Mendell 2013). The acquisition of 60 seats from 2008 in the House of Representatives by the Republican Party thus represented not only the biggest swing since 1948, but the nightmare of return to the divided government which so deeply undermined the foreign agenda of the Clinton administration. Still, whilst the latter responded to this contingency by adopting a "schizophrenic" agenda (Fabbrini 2008) in foreign policy, Obama attempt to prevent such outcome passed trough the call for bipartisanship (Mendell 2013).

Such drift took the form of more insisted promotion of American power as a presuppose to affirm democracy and freedom worldwide in such a way that recalled, albeit with softened tones, the agenda Bush has embraced during his terms. It was particularly evident in his speech at the United Nation General Assembly in September 23<sup>rd</sup> 2010 how this changed perspective accompanied

Obama during the second half of his term. Despite the great dose of realism displayed in international relations, Obama asserted *“that freedom, justice and peace for the world must begin with freedom, justice, and peace in the lives of individual human beings. And for the United States, this is a matter of moral and pragmatic necessity.* “Moreover he claimed that *“we stand up for universal values because it’s the right thing to do. But we also know from experience that those who defend these values for their people have been our closest friends and allies, while those who have denied those rights -- whether terrorist groups or tyrannical governments -- have chosen to be our adversaries.”* (Obama 2010a).

This speech outlined how the agenda of Obama underwent a drastic change of course on the wake of the events of 2010, but also after the end of his first phase of engagement. As Ben Rhodes explained *“The most important thing we needed to do, particularly in that first year, was to repair the damage”* (Mann 2013: 254) with a clear reference to the Iraq dismissal. Moreover, he said: *“We had a long way to come back, to restore American’s luster in the world. If we had just come in, guns blazing on democracy, without having taken steps to restore America’s appeal and America’s example, we’d have been less able to advocate for democracy. So I do think this moment is a natural pivot point”* (Mann 2013: 254).

To what extent the pivot point outlined by Obama’s adviser for strategic communication was therefore influenced by the polls’ result, is not easy to assess. What is certain though is that, notwithstanding the limited achievements of the Obama’s electoral promises - some of them incontrovertible such as the shutdown of Guantanamo - Obama decided to move toward a second stage which thinned sharply the ideological gap between him and his predecessor.

### **2.3 - The shift toward a multipolar partnership: the limits of the Obama's engagement.**

The very burden as well as responsibility for the future, which Obama inherited from the Bush administration, was an American image harshly discredited and which represented, to some extent, a concern even bigger than the war on terror itself, given the wide extension of the former and the incisive role it played in defining the strategy to address the U.S. commitment in the Middle East. Barack Obama, already in 2007, made as centerpiece of his campaign and of his political image, the issue of altering the perception that the world had had of the US after the two terms of George W. Bush. In a speech delivered to the Chicago Council on Global Affairs on April 23<sup>rd</sup> 2007, Obama remarked that: *“There is no doubt that the mistakes of the past six years have made our current task more difficult. World opinion has turned against us. And after all the lives lost and the billions of dollars spent, many Americans may find it tempting to turn inward, and cede our claim of leadership in world affairs. [...] This election offers us the chance to turn the page and open a new chapter in American leadership”* (Davis 2009: 6). As seen, the American leadership continued to constitute for Obama a non-negotiable principle in the shift toward a new multipolar and globalized world order. Nonetheless, this does not represented, as it could appear, an analogy with the “American exceptionalism” so hardly carried forward during the Bush years. Rather, repositioning the US in the international scenario symbolized the hot topic of the Obama presidential campaign. It was indeed a powerful instrument to distinguish himself from Bush as well as from his Democratic competitor Hillary Clinton during the primary elections, showing Obama's receptivity to the world blasts of American-centrism in foreign policy (Laidi 2012: 17) *“I see no contradiction between believing that America has a continued extraordinary role in leading the world towards peace and prosperity and recognizing that that leadership is incumbent, depends on, our ability to create*

*partnerships. We create partnerships because we can't solve these problems alone*” stated Obama in Strasbourg on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2009 (Shear and Wilson 2009). The matter concerning the leadership was thus not only connected to the need of redefining the internal and external priorities of the US after the economic crisis and two fruitless wars, but also was that of accepting the globalization of international relations and all the implication this produced. The Bush administration had marginalized globalization and underestimated its power as a driver for emerging counties, whilst it emphasized the struggle against any threats to national security as priority; consequently, it brought about the militarization of American diplomacy (Laidi 2012: 45).

In his endeavor to reverse what previously done, Obama demonstrated in his first term a marked discontinuity from his predecessor. The very core of this caesura lied in the acknowledgement that the sole way to preserve the American primacy in the global chessboard was through a renewed kind of participation from within the international system, albeit with some limits and imposing itself some self-restraints. Under this light it can be interpreted the establishment and the enforcement of cooperative relation with great powers playing a mounting weight in the global scene such as China, Russia and India, yet without displacing those rising powers such as Brazil, Turkey and Indonesia (Laidi 2012: 46).

Therefore, it appears clear that, at least in its outer formulation, the foreign policy of the Obama's years acknowledged the delineation of a “post-American” world, as President Obama adhere principally to this conception in dealing with this enlarged system. In such framework, the awareness of an inevitable decline of the US led him to drive the United States toward the acceptance of such trend instead of attempting to reverse it. Still, this does not made Obama an anti-American, as he was sometimes depicted by some consistent neoconservative opposition, or a globalist. Instead, he accepted - differently from what Bush had made previously - that US resources, power and leeway were limited and bounded to an increasingly interdependent world.

In such system America can not anymore disregard the role of emerging actors as well as the one of the international organizations (Laidi 2012: 4). The Obama's design thus outlined, differently than Bush, how the United States should address its challenges from within the international system. Indeed, the twin pillars of global cooperation and US leadership, as expressed by Laidi (2012: 46) were likely to match only to the extent in which these both were directed toward the same direction and intentioned to perform the same goals.

Hillary Clinton itself, as Secretary of State, was one of the first political figures in the Obama's team to stand up in asserting that redefining the role and the approach of the US in the international arena was not a matter of American leadership – it was never called into question- rather, it depended on how to delineate the “change” from the Bush years that Obama promised. In her address to the Council of Foreign Relation in 2009 she stated that: *“The question is not whether our nation can or should lead, but how it will lead in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Rigid ideologies and old formulas don't apply. We need a new mindset about how America will use its power to safeguard our nation, expand shared prosperity, and help more people in more places live up to their God-given potential”* (Clinton 2009). At the same time, although with the consciousness that the modern challenges can not be faced by the US alone anymore, she always struggled to assert that, in any case, nothing in the world could still happen without an American active role in it.

If one could notice in this trend a clear cleavage from the unilateralist perspective of the Bush years, at the same time Hillary Clinton rejected vehemently multilateralism as an order which the US should be willing to move on. Indeed, albeit both she and Obama recognized the US has to move into a multipolar globalized world in which all the actors and the states are configured as interdependent, the idea of multipolarity was firmly rejected in favor of a “partnership”. The major difference among this two concepts lays on the fact that whereas in a multipolar system all the states act as equal forces in the international process, dealing with the United States as peers, in the

Obamian partnership the former are bonded to address, jointly to the US, all the major concerns that America can not solve by itself, in exchange for the US recognition and support for its partners (Laidi 2012: 35). Accordingly, as Clinton (2009) stated in the same address at the CFR in Washington D.C.: *“we believe this approach will advance our interests by uniting diverse partners around common concerns. It will make it more difficult for others to abdicate their responsibilities or abuse their power, but will offer a place at the table to any nation, group, or citizen willing to shoulder a fair share of the burden. In short, we will lead by inducing greater cooperation among a greater number of actors and reducing competition, tilting the balance away from a multi-polar world and toward a multi-partner world.”*

In a world in which all the main actors are deeply interconnected and in which emerging countries benefit greatly of the systemic stability, the United States put pressure on the international system for shared responsibilities in order to have every state contributing to the global goods in accordance with their means and the benefits they got from such system (Laidi 2012: 36). Still, these partnerships are lead by the realism that pervades most of the action of Obama in foreign affairs. There is not an open table to anyone, but only one open to those state that can concrete help or can used by the US to achieve their goals in a variety of different fields such as counterterrorism or nuclear proliferation. In this regard, while in negotiating with North Korea in the Six-Party Talks the EU was excluded in favor of a more prominent role for Japan, conversely for that which concern Iran, the role of the Europeans was considered crucial differently from the Nipponese one, underlining how selectiveness and realism constituted the very core of Obama’s partnerships (Laidi 2012: 36).

In this respect, the Iranian framework represented for Obama a particular ground on which emphasize the departure from the Bush policies and affirm his project of engagement through multilateralism and diplomacy. A “rogue state” such as Iran, constituted a twofold dimension in which Obama



could use diplomacy to find a way toward negotiates for the nuclear impasse, as well as revitalizing the multilateral perspective in insisting on opposing to nuclear proliferation from within the UN (Singh 2012: 90). Yet, Obama encounter the greater obstacle in achieve his goal in the Iranian intransigence on openly negotiate with the US and responded to this contingency by uncertainly delaying any resolute stance. Yet, the very burden to set down an incontrovertible decision was represented by the internal constrains Obama has to face once more in such field.

In declaring that *“Iran and North Korea could trigger regional arms race creating dangerous nuclear flashpoints in the Middle East and East Asia”* and that: *“In confronting these threats, I will not take the military option off the table”* (Singh 2012: 92) it was clear that, as his predecessor did, Obama was not willing to decline a resolute action, notwithstanding his opening to multilateralism and diplomacy. In this regard the Israeli concern and the influence of the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) played an essential role in contrasting an approach that risked being too soft in front of such a clear nuclear menace. On the other hand, the internal differences among the member of Obama Administration moved in the opposite direction, given the perplexity expressed by figures such as Clinton, Gates and Mullen on a direct use of military force toward Iran (Singh 2012: 93). Divided between such conflicting interests and with the need to deal with the Bush’s legacy as well as begin its new course, the Obama Administration proved to be unable to drive toward a major change from those policies which were already pursued during the previous presidency.

The 2010 symbolized also in this framework the turning point for the Obama’s foreign policy and the definitive abandonment of strategic engagement in favor of a mixed approach between the pressure for sanctions toward Iran in the United Nations, and the calling for regime change. In following the path already undertaken by Bush on the advise of Saudi King Abdullah to “cut off the head of the snake” in 2010 there was a sharp increase

of target assassination of nuclear scientists and covert attacks on nuclear processing plants (Singh 2012: 100-101). Although the presupposes of Obama's mild rapprochement with Teheran seemed to have a different perspective if compared with the previous US administration, it could be acknowledged how the things abruptly changed as soon as the foreseeable intransigence of Iran came out. From the original realist approach that constituted the basic imprinting of the Obama's foreign policy the shift toward a harder-line for that which concerns Iran, resembled in many aspects the feature of the post-2004 Bush policies and the link between the internal regime and the external behavior of Teheran (Singh 2012: 108).

Another example of multilateral dialectical which constituted one of the major economical concerns for the United States was the relation with Beijing. The effort performed by Obama in order to establish a tight connection with China on the wake of the Bush attempt to make it a "responsible stakeholder" of the international system only revealed the absence of strategic trust (Singh 2012: 141) and the lack of a clear position within the administration. The Obama's principal aim was that of framing China into a G2 relation with the US with an increasing responsibility of Beijing in defining global concerns into international organization such as the UN and, at the same time, connecting its economy with the US through the WTO or the Strategic and Economic Dialogue.

However, what emerged clearly from US-China relation was nothing but a resistance of Beijing to any attempt played out by the Obama Administration to hamper its economic growth through binding it into a multilateral net, which would be likely to force China to accept broadly the rule of the international game. Such over resistance in addition to the perception inside conspicuous parts of the US government which view China as a growing threat to the US security, mainly in economical terms, represented the driving force toward an ambiguous compromise between cooperation and competition put in place by Obama. He realized that the effective chances to convince China to play on a multilateral level at the same table of the US was minimal, but that a policy of

open competition against Beijing could affect negatively the American economy as well. Thus, abandoning the premise that China has the same interests as the US, Barack Obama continued on the path pointed out by the Bush administration. On the one hand he consolidated US strategic commitment in the Asia-Pacific in order to hedge the overflowing Chinese power in the region, whilst on the other, he sought to establish a greater collaboration for that which concerns global economic cooperation (Singh 2012: 161)

#### **2.4 - The new “war on terror” and the drift toward the Middle East.**

As seen, the first term of President Bush did not begin with any specific intention of strengthening the American engagement in the world, therefore focusing primarily on the continuation of the unilateralist agenda, so hardly carried forward by the Congress since the Clinton years (Fabbrini 2008: 159). Still, the occurrence of the 9/11 attack and the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq shaped the basic imprinting of his foreign policy, radicalizing the already existing shift toward a more conspicuous unilateralism.

The engagement on two frontlines under the label of “war on terror”, albeit with so different aims and legitimacy between the two, was firmly called into question by Obama since the early years of his political career. As analyzed before, with the new presidency came to the surface a great gap between the commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq. President Obama, far from being an anti-war activist, always insisted on the importance of defeating Al-Qaeda directly in those places in which US effort could be deemed prolific. On this assertion lies one of the pillars in the effort against terrorism: the differentiation between the Afghanistan war, depicted as a “war of necessity”, and the war in Iraq, challenged repeatedly by Obama as a “war of choice” (Laidi 2012: 43). All of this implies a concentration of the efforts on the former field to the detriment of the latter.

However, the legacy of the Bush years that Obama has inherited in the war on terror relied on three constitutive pillars. First of all, under the Bush presidency the war used to be depicted not as a political struggle, but as an ideological crusade. Second, it was denied any political rationale to terrorism. Terrorists were portrayed as a group whose only aim was to wreck those values the US is bearer in the world. Moreover Bush always refused any opening toward dialogue or negotiation with this kind of actors, given their atypical nature (Laidi 2012: 62-63). Third, inside the complex framework of the Middle East, the American effort to export democracy was often seen as an imposition from the outside, no matter to what extent the rule of leaders such as Saddam Hussein was oppressive for the population. This widespread sentiment, resilient to any attempt of “regime change”, continued to jeopardize any attempt to carry forward the American project under Obama, even in Muslim societies which broadly rejected terrorism (Laidi 2012: 65).

The first decision undertaken by the Obama Administration involved the most tangible aspect of the two wars: the allocation of the contingents. By deciding to redeploy many of the troops from Iraq to Afghanistan, Obama in the first place sought to highline the break from the approach used by the Bush administration toward the Middle East. Yet, the definitive withdrawal of troops from Iraq by 2011 followed the path already undertaken by his predecessor at the very end of his second term, when, after putting in place the US–Iraq Status of Forces Agreement, Bush signed the security pact with Iraq on 14<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

The element of change Obama disclosed was therefore a really conceptual one directed to address the ideological problem which lies at the ground of Bush messianic crusade. Not only his first effort was in the direction of declaring finished the previous approach of Bush toward the war on terror, but President Obama stressed how the new course would have been follow a political track rather than the ideological one of the past (Laidi 2012: 66). Instead of focusing on a fierce battle against an undefined enemy ascribable to

the broader category of “terrorists”, Obama focused on a more specific actor such as Al-Qaeda and all the terroristic organization linked to it. The very premise in this effort against the “war on terror” was to detach the scope of contrasting terrorism from the Muslim world as a whole. In his remark at CISI, the adviser for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism, John Brennan (2010), underlined how: *“The President’s strategy is absolutely clear about the threat we face. Our enemy is not “terrorism” because terrorism is but a tactic. Our enemy is not “terror” because terror is a state of mind and as Americans we refuse to live in fear”*. Moreover, he insisted on the core point of Obama’s strategy: *“Describing our enemy in religious terms would lend credence to the lie—propagated by al Qaeda and its affiliates to justify terrorism—that the United States is somehow at war against Islam. The reality, of course, is that we never have been and will never be at war with Islam. After all, Islam, like so many faiths, is part of America.”* (Brennan 2010) So for the first time, instead of blurring the separation line between Muslim world and terrorism, Obama specify that the *“enemy is al Qaeda and its terrorist affiliates”* (Brennan 2010), exculpating and clarifying the role of the Muslim world as Bush never did before in his “war on terror”.

The strategy in this action was clear: dissociate the war against terror from any reference to a hypothetical war against Islam, dampening the basis of religious legitimacy terrorist groups benefitted under the Bush administration (Laidi 2012: 66) In this framework, the Obama’s speech, held in Cairo on June 4<sup>th</sup> 2009, gave the perspective for the “new beginning” he wanted to represent. *“I’ve come here to Cairo to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based on mutual interest and mutual respect, and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles -- principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings”* (Obama 2009). The very scope of these words was that of tighten the link with the Arab world, always concerned with the American

intervention in the Middle east - from the oil control to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict - and that of showing a significant ideological reversal of the policies undertaken under the Bush presidency (Laidi 2012: 67).

The Obama's approach vis-à-vis the Bush one, symbolized how a marked discontinuity, at least in the leading principles, was the key factor in corroding the consensus of Al-Qaeda in the Middle East. The latter benefitted during Bush years of a great net of solidarity from worldwide Muslims, given the global dimension Bush conferred to the struggle against terror. The change from the National Security Strategy of 2006 in which the Bush Doctrine can be summed up in the phrase: "*The struggle against militant Islamic radicalism is the great ideological conflict of the early years of the 21st century*" (Family Security Matters 2013), is evident. Obama, independently from the concrete results achieved in the Middle East region, reversed the conception and the role of the US within the Islamic world and laid the foundations for a long-lasting cooperation with the countries of the region.

However, the practice revealed to be nothing but an unclear continuation (and sometimes implementation) of the very core strategies of Bush, along with the tentative attempt to mediate with the oppositions in the Congress in defining a clear path of action in the counterterrorism strategy. The massive recourse to targeted killing through drone attacks passed from 4 in 2007, under the Bush administration, to, respectively, 36 in 2008, 54 in 2009, 122 in 2010, 73 in 2011 and 48 in 2012 (New America Foundation 2013), still what represented the most unsuccessful attempt to delineate the change was the failure of the closure of the Guantanamo detention facility. What had represented one of the heaviest promises of the Obama's campaign ended up in a fiasco given the impossibility for the President to bypass the Congressional refusal to vote for closing the prison in 2009 and conduct the trials of detainees in civil rather than military courts. In this regard, along with the still missing closure of an handful of the "Black Sites", the legal framework of the Bush

years remained in many ways only superficially eroded during the Obama's first term.

Regarding the two warfares Obama inherited from Bush the first move was to decide of abandon the “war of choice”, and drop significantly the number of ground troops in Iraq, and at the same time to parallel increase the American engagement on the twin battleground of Afghanistan (Laidi 2012: 43). However, such decision did not have any effect on the planned reduction of the military overall expenses. Paradoxically, after harshly criticizing the military spending of the Bush administration, and condemning the militarization of its foreign policy, the cost of war under the Obama Administration –decreased in the first two years of mandate - increased since 2010, as the perspectives for continuing the war in Afghanistan became dimmer, until reaching \$165 billion overall three years later (Laidi 2012: 44). However, despite many changes of course and the shift from a counter-terrorism to a counter-insurgency strategy (COIN), the war remained unsolved and still presented many analogies with the Bush years. If the killing of Osama Bin Laden symbolized how Obama can effectively deal with the new war strategies without taking away from contrasting terrorism, underlying his ability as Commander-in-Chief, at the same time, it served only to deteriorate the state of relations between the US and Pakistan, deepening the gap between the two countries in the war against Al-Qaeda and the other terrorist groups (Singh 2012: 67)

The peculiarity of Obama's position toward Pakistan was indeed already evident at the time of his 2008 campaign and drawn criticism from many notable figures even inside the same Democratic Party. Indeed, the statement that the US would eventually attack Pakistan if actionable intelligence existed and if the Pakistani government failed to contrast Al Qaeda within its territory, raised harsh objections from Hillary Clinton. “*Last summer, he basically threatened to bomb Pakistan, which I don't think was a particularly wise position to take*” (Davis 2009: ix) was her reaction in an

MSNBC debate. Anyhow, the strategy pursued in Afghanistan by Obama during the first half of his term relied on strengthening the cooperation with Pakistan, continuing on the pathway already embraced by Bush with a \$10 billion dollar aid in military assistance in 2001 (Singh 2012: 79). The Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan Act approved in 2009 kicked off a \$7.5 billion in aid over 5 years (Singh 2012: 79). However, the attempt to rebuild a net of strategic collaboration with Islamabad failed mainly for the reasons moved by the latter to be confined in a too coercive dimension of counterterrorism back-up. This aspect, along with the country's fragile economy, widespread corruption and shaky political scenario, provided to jeopardize any attempt moved by Obama to stabilize the relations with Pakistan as a long lasting bulwark in the struggle against terrorism in Afghanistan.

However, by 2012 it resulted clear the evolution of the Obama's policy toward the Middle East and the engagement in South Asia. First, given the premise that American engagement was aimed at reshuffle the policies promoted during the Bush administration, Obama was somewhat bound to shift the focus of his policy toward the United States itself as recalled in his speech at West Point in 2009. At the same time, the deep internal divisions within the same administration on the Afghanistan war, were likely to jeopardize the pursuance of Obama design in many other fields. In this regard the action of President Obama was focused primarily on reaffirming his authority over all the other offices as attested by the replacement of General McChrystal with David Petraeus notwithstanding his closeness to the GOP. Even the late appointment of the latter as CIA Director in September 2011, in place of Leon Panetta, just changed a little in the final assessment on how to manage and finally depart from the Afghanistan warfare (Singh 2012: 82-83)

Notwithstanding the harsh situation Obama inherited from the Bush administration and the consequent impossibility to disengage the US as quickly as he planned because of the deep-rooted divisions among his own team,



Obama proved to be no more successful than Bush in the conduct of the Afghanistan-Pakistan issue (Singh 2012: 86). With the escalation of US military resources along with the “Americanization” of the conflict, staving off any chance to share the responsibilities of the war at the international level, “Obama’s substantive policies contradicted his stated downsizing of the global war on terror” (Singh 2012: 86). Even the killing of Osama Bin Laden, albeit its strong impact on the public opinion – representing a victory of Obama’s strategy at the expenses of the previous Bush’s policy – let unaltered the major concerns regarding the prosecution of the engagement in the region.

## **2.5 - Conclusion**

Overall, in a general assessment of Obama’s foreign policy, what results clear is the great gap between the promise of “change” and the effective policies aimed at reaching this goal. This word, which constituted the blueprint of Obama’s first term along with “hope” and “we can”, represented more a signal of closure with the past, rather than a concrete proposal for an alternative future. The strategic 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).

The American international engagement during Obama’s first term constituted a rupture from the Bush years in recognizing the very existence of a shifted world balance toward multilateralism and in striving to act from within the international system with the open involvement of other world actors. This trend, accompanied by the acknowledgement of the decline of the US as the hegemonic power and the necessity to renew its position within this system,

signed the decline of the American exceptionalism as it was intended during the Bush years and the beginning of a the Obama's post-American strategy.

However, the great successes of Obama in this field came prevalently in the domains where he continued or expanded all those policies which characterized the mandate of George W. Bush (Miller 2012). If on the one hand Obama abandoned the vehement tone used by his predecessor on the "war on terror", he still proceeded on the same pathway underlined by Bush for that which concerns the extensive vision of the presidential prerogative, and the consequent centralization of power, as well as in fighting terrorism with, in many cases, the very same means Bush had adopted. 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 warfare and 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 US 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.

At the same time, the areas in which Obama dethatched itself more firmly from his predecessor, revealed to be the very same in which only limited steps forward have been achieved. The unsatisfactory results in this extent and the 2010 drubbing led in many cases to a reverse back toward the Bush

position (Miller 2012). 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 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.

### **CHAPTER III – Obama’s foreign policy in the second term**

As already seen, the first term of Obama was centered on the necessity of redeploying the resources at home and defining a new approach in both foreign and defence policies. The ongoing economic crisis continues to represent a great burden on the Obama’s leeway in many fields of his foreign agenda also during the second term. The United States is currently facing, in this regard, a cut on the defence spending from 4.6% of GDP to 2.7% in 2017 (Dormandy 2007). Such progressive contraction of the budget influences also the pillars of the presidential strategy for the second term, and it is revitalizing international diplomacy as a mean to delineate a clear “Obama doctrine” after the re-election. Among the goals fixed by the administration, the balance in the Asian region, played by prosecuting a policy of engaging and hedging with China on the wake of the first term’s strategy, is representing the priority for all the economic as well political implication it holds. At the same time, the new challenges posed by the Middle East region require a new strategy, detaching the American image from the commitment in Iraq and Afghanistan and starting a new season of democracy promotion within the Arab spring. If the former issue will involve a shift from defence policy to a new focus on trade and diplomatic channels, the latter is likely to underline the lack of strategic coherence of the first term, given the multiple challenges generated by the uprising of the Middle East, which will require a different approach time by time depending on the circumstances coming to the surface in each national context (Dormandy 2007). In this regard, the reset of the relation with Russia and the strengthening of the ties with the international community operated by Obama (with the recent opening to the cooperation with the International Criminal Court), are intended to shape the ground for an international support of the Obama’s actions in such fields, considered crucial by the administration.

However, if the policy toward China is currently continuing on the same track of “hedging and engaging” as the first term, the Arab spring represents a new challenge, especially with regard to Syria. The diminished prominence of the Afghanistan warfare after more than a decade of direct engagement, and the progressive deployment until the elections in May 2014, is shifting the focus of the administration toward a new set of key actors, useful to understand the future of the region. At the same time, the turmoil in Syria and in the other countries involved in the Arab spring uprisings, such as Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, request a resolute stance by Obama in defending the new democratic affirmations, freeing him from the specter of the Bush administration and giving to the U.S. President an incontrovertible degree of responsibility for the actions undertaken. Albeit the wide room for a renewed approach, however, Obama is still facing the same internal constrains which hampered the implementation of his agenda in the second half of the first term. Although the willingness of delineating a net approach to the international challenges restarting from the drawbacks of the first term, the internal challenges posed by the Congress, but also by the White House itself, are likely to exert a consistent weight on the administration by dictating the course of the Presidential agenda.

### **3.1 - Internal structure and pressures in the Obama second term.**

After his re-election for the second term, Obama faced a widely changed political and international environment which defined a set of presidential challenges broadly different from the ones of his first term. Yet, at the same time, many of the internal constrains the President encountered after the mid-term elections of November 2010 recurred in the same manner. First of all, albeit the Democratic Party gained 332 Electoral Colleges, Obama failed to regain the control of the House of Representatives, and thus is still facing a stark conservative opposition likely to hamper most of the Presidential initiative - as demonstrated by the recent shutdown of federal financing

operated by the GOP majority (The Washington Post 2013). The pressure put by the Republican Party inside the House, particularly on the Democratic speaker John Boehner, as well as the robust presence of a consistent share of the Tea Party in the Senate, constituted a consistent brake on the Obama's policy-making in the international arena (Dormandy 2007: 2) This is one of the reasons why Obama followed a different pathway in the relations with the Congress in respect to the first half of his first term. If the two years between his election in 2008 and the midterm defeat of 2010 have seen the progressive centralization of Obama's apparatus and the partial emptying of any effective power in foreign policy for the Congress, the second term resembles many of the features of the previous two years, in which every decision from the presidential side was considered carefully in the light of the Congressional opposition.

It is true, though, that from an institutional standpoint the analogies between the two terms are not so obvious. First, differently than in the 2008-2012 period Obama has not the perspective of re-election anymore, his action is less concerned with any gain of consensus polarized around his figure for a future electoral ride, and he is more focused with the aim of defining an "Obama's legacy" by the end of this term. Both he and his Vice President Joe Biden do not have any defined political perspective after 2016 and they can play the game which is likely to be less risky than four years before. However, Obama can not depart too widely from his previous standpoints, having contributed to shape a clear ideological path aimed at departing from the George W. Bush unilateralism, notwithstanding the many drawbacks and fallouts. This, of course, does not fade the still prominent role played by the GOP within the Congress, particularly when it comes to the implementation of the assistance toward countries such as Pakistan and Egypt, perceived to act contrary to the U.S. interest, or else limiting the space for Obama to confirm his Cabinet, as demonstrated by the controversy over the rejected appointment of Susan Rice as Secretary of State (Dormandy 2007: 2).

Similarly to the first term, the structure of the Obama's Cabinet remained centered on his influential figure, along with the outstanding role retained by the President's inner circle, partially renewed after the first term. Most of the decision-making in the inside of the White House continues to be enforced into a dualist logic of president-closer-advisers confrontation with a marked prominence of characters such as Susan Rice and Joe Biden, and lately in particular Samantha Power. These figures, regardless of their position in the chessboard of the White House, continue to hold a degree of proximity to the President such that they still maintain the features of extreme centralization of the first term. Moreover, the second term offers less constraints and more leeway to Obama in his design of personalization of foreign policy. Having no perspectives for presidency after the current term Obama now benefits of a greater freedom to carry forward such radical policies likely to antagonize part of the Democratic grass-roots, albeit being aware that the internal support of the party will be less marked insofar as the next election will come close (Dormandy 2007: 3).

Recently, the choice of President Obama to seek for Congressional support on an eventual military intervention in the Syrian civil war showed off the renewed path followed by the relations among the executive and the Legislature. Although it might appear as a backward step in respect to the centripetal trend of first term, the difference lays in the very nature of the international frameworks the U.S. President has to confront with. As a matter of fact, the two largest warfare of the first term were, as explained in the previous chapter, more of a legacy from the Bush terms than an issue put in place by Obama itself. The greater concern of the administration was indeed to sweep away some of the resilient features of the Bush administration and pave the way for a new changed course (Cfr. chapter II). The overall situation was yet different during the last years of the Obama's first term and the beginning of his second, especially regarding the Arab Spring and in particular the Syrian events. These frameworks represented a new ground in which Obama was the

first U.S. President to deal with, and in which no blames can be imputed to any previous mismanagement. Moreover, without any perspective toward the polls' response, Obama has definitely less concerns to adopt a clear-cut strategy.

This trend is distinctly evident in the role the Congress is playing in delineating the approach toward the Syrian issue. As seen, the presidency, and particularly Obama himself, enjoys an extraordinary power on the ground of foreign policy. In this regard, the President has in many circumstances advanced his own agenda unilaterally facing a Congress sharply limited by partisan polarization as well as pervasive gridlocks which put a limit to any attempt by the latter to address many of the most prominent foreign policy challenges (Howell 2013). What changed in the second term with Syria, in respect to the first presidential term, was the recourse of Obama to the approval of the Congress for the undertaking of a military action in retaliation for the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons (Howell 2013). This move symbolized the different conception of the presidential prerogative vis-à-vis the Congress in the Obama's second term and it suggested, especially in the actual Syrian framework, the misgiving of a negative consequence in case of a military action, which requires a broad support at home. Over the U.S. recent history, in military matters, the Congress always acted more as a restraint to counterbalance Presidential power. Still, what really matters on the second term of Obama, in dealing with the intervention in Syria, is that it represents a framework rife with risks which the President by himself can not tackle without being fist backed up by some sort of legitimacy. At every presidential misstep there would be a Congress (with a GOP 33-seats-majority in the House of Representatives) ready to point out all of his deficiencies publicly (Howell 2013). That is why, as William Howell (2013) underlined: *"the President wants Congress to sign off on his plans now to ensure some modicum of support later, when anti-U.S. protests flare, jihadists are emboldened, more lives are lost, and foreign leaders condemn what they perceive as further*



*evidence of American imperialism. It is a calculated political decision. But it has nearly nothing to do with constitutional obeisance”.*

### **3.2 - John Kerry and Samantha Power: the two faces of change.**

The transition from the first to the second term of the Obama Administration led to a new scenario in many of the key roles within the White House’s departments and offices. One of the most radical shifts was represented by the appointment of John Forbes Kerry at the Department of State at the post of Hillary Clinton, who has always constituted one of the most loyal Obama’s partners in the management of his foreign policy during the first term. Kerry represented a figure strongly different than the one of his predecessor in terms of leadership but also for the leeway he has, to operate in many critical fields of U.S. foreign policy. The image and the work of Hillary Clinton during the first term, as seen in the previous chapter, were centered on the departure from the Bush policies and the renewal of the American image abroad. As Heather Hurlburt, the executive director of the liberal National Security Network, pointed out “[the Clinton] *signal achievement was to restore a sense of U.S. leadership and engagement on the diplomatic side as opposed to the military side.*” (Lawrence 2013). However, her action was always taken under control by Obama in his attempt to centralize the direction of foreign policy in the hand of the presidency (Cfr. Chapter II).

Kerry, conversely, benefits of a greater margin to manage his own foreign agenda during the Obama second term, by holding a position now aimed at ensuring a clear stance in international businesses instead of being bond to the legacy of Bush unilateralism. Kerry aspires to a more central policymaking role in the Obama Administration than Clinton and her “odometer diplomacy”, projected at strengthening America’s relations abroad in as many countries as possible (Thrush 2013). If previously the Presidential

determination to avoid new foreign entanglements dictated a limited leeway for Hillary Clinton in foreign affairs, Kerry is likely to have a more relevant role representing less of a threat to the Obama's team (Thrush 2013). As former State Department official Aaron David Miller said in February 2013: "*Hillary had to travel, she made a virtue out of necessity. The president was not going to let her dominate on foreign policy. In a way history is going to be crueler to Kerry, if he can't figure out a way to be a more conventional secretary of state. He doesn't have Clinton's ascendant arc. The bar for Kerry in the job is much higher because this is his last act, and he knows it. He's going to want to have a more meaningful role*" (Thrush 2013). In respect to Clinton, Kerry is more oriented in treating the Middle East as the very area of major interest for the State Department rather than focusing primarily on reorienting the balance toward China as his predecessor did. Moreover he nudged Israeli and Palestinian officials back to the negotiating table for the first time since three years ago. He is also more concerned in interceding directly on Syria and simultaneously in Iran and in setting out a new trade pact with Europe in compliance with the Obama's address at the State of the Union in the spring of 2013 (Thrush 2013). Overall, the position of John Kerry in the Obama's inner circle is deeply different than the one that his predecessor covered during her mandate. If Hillary Clinton was often overshadowed by the loyal "Obamians" (Mann 2013) such as Tom Donilon and Susan Rice, Kerry intends to be a player who engage the actions from the very inside of the team. As demonstrated by the creation of a top departmental staff with David Wade, Bill Danvers and the former Boston Globe reporter Glen Johnson(Thrush 2013), Kerry turned up to be less fussy about what are his prerogatives and more concerned to contribute with his hallmark in actively shaping U.S. relations (Thrush 2013).

On the side of tightening of the relations between the administration and the international organizations at large, the continuity with the first term is embodied by the appointment of the 28th United States Ambassador to the

United Nations Samantha Power. Already as National Security Council's Senior Director for Multilateral Affairs and Human Rights, Power is continuing on most of the work already done by her predecessor in the office, Susan Rice. Already in the first term, the new Ambassador distinguished herself in pushing resolutely for the approval of the UN Security Council resolution to protect civilians from the attacks of Muammar al-Qaddafi in Libya (Nossel 2013). Samantha Powell is thus a crucial figure in the Obama's team. Not only because to some extent she is, according to Suzanne Nossel, the continuator of Richard Holbrooke's "pragmatic approach by using the UN as a problem-solving agent" (Nossel 2013); but also because she's part of the post-9/11 political generation and "her only first-hand experience of the United States' role in the world is one framed by American dependence on the genuine partnership of others, and by the need for the United States to behave in ways that can elicit such cooperation" (Nossel 2013). This aspect, which represents both a renewal of the U.S. engagement strategy in the international system and, at the same time, a continuation on the line already drawn by Obama during the first term, is a key indicator of an increasing awareness of the presidential administration of the role of the U.S. in the international order. In an era of diffused centers of power and widespread globalization, the functioning of the UN and more a definite role of the United States in it, constitutes the crucial move to protect the American interest without relying on the previous Bush's dogma of "exceptionalism".

### **3.3 - Multilateralism and the weight of the Senate**

The shift toward a more multilateralist engagement of the Obama Administration was also confirmed in April 2013, when, at the Brookings Institution, was held a summit between officials from the U.S. government and the International Criminal Court (ICC). This event fulfils a four-years-rapprochement between the U.S. and the ICC, one of the last symbols of

Bush's opposition to a broader multilateralist view. The previous burden on any kind of cooperation with the Court was the peak of his unilateralist agenda through the article 98 – stating that U.S. citizens would have never been sent to the ICC – and the American Service-Members' Protection Act, which prohibits any extent of cooperation between the U.S. and the ICC. Conversely, Obama has raised the cooperation with the ICC to unexpected levels which open to the possibility of a future U.S. direct participation. The million-dollar rewards for information leading to the arrest of ICC fugitives and the unanimous vote of Washington to make the UN Security Council refer the worsening situation in Libya to the ICC (Kaye 2013a) paved the way for a new approach of the U.S. to this crucial international organization under the Obama Administration, and Washington seems to be supportive to the court insofar as its interest goes in the same direction.

Conversely, what really had a great impact on the leeway of Obama's multilateralism in the second term was the role played by the two chambers of the Congress, and especially by the 45 GOP Senators who, albeit with two seats less than November 2010, still represent a great burden in the definition of the presidential foreign agenda. The Senate retains a broad power to act as a counterbalance to the President in foreign policy, and this trend became glaring as soon as some conspicuous shares of the minority party (with a consistent quota of the Tea Party movement) followed a converse proclivity in respect to Obama. Many Republicans indeed saw the most significant threat of this new dimension of multilateralism as something that is likely to affect permanently American sovereignty and democracy, bounding them to a system that "*creates rules that interfere with the democratic process by allowing foreigners to make law that binds the United States*" (Kaye 2013b). As buttressed already as a salient mantra of 2012 Republican platform, the opposition to the Obama's design would actualize to the extent in which the treaties are liable of "*weaken or encroach upon American sovereignty*" (Kaye 2013b). In the second term of the Obama Administration this trend is likely to jeopardize above all the

international role that the President is reserving for the U.S. in the renewed multilateral equilibrium. Indeed, if China is grasping an increasing important role in many of the actual global concerns, at the same time the U.S. is also challenged in its world leadership by rising powers such as India and Brazil as well as Europe. The American disengagement on the framework of international diplomacy through the ratification of many treaties is allowing a decisive hastening of all these trends aforementioned, endangering the Obama's design and the role of the U.S. in the international scene (Kaye 2013b). The presidential response to the challenge posed by the Republican strong minority in the Senate is embedded by the massive recourse to non-binding commitments, used to override the policies undertaken by his predecessor as well as to advance upon the line of centralization of power in contrast with the Congressional prerogative. In this regard is important to underline the steps forward made by the Obama Administration in many fields that have a great influence in bracing the path of his policy guidelines. The Nuclear Security Summit held in Washington in 2010 and the follow-up meeting of Seoul in 2012 shows the ability of Obama in circumnavigate the deadlock of Congressional approval on a sizable issue such as nuclear disarmament, which constituted the core of the U.S. strategy toward Iran in the second term. On the same wake the bilateral cuts of U.S. and Russia's nuclear arsenals were negotiated on the basis of a bilateral setting rather than a legally binding treaty, as it would have been habitual for this kind of agreements (Kaye 2013b). The effort of bringing together world's leader to discuss over themes of such importance thus clashes with the massive recourse to sole executive agreements - effective on the President's signature and limited to areas that fall under the presidential constitutional authority- which pushes out of the negotiation table the Congressional weight. Therefore, the centralization trend underlined in the Obama's first term can be distinguished also in the second term, as a prosecution of the post-2010 increased presence of the GOP inside the two branches of the legislature and the subsequent need for Obama

to address many issues resolutely. This feature of “Stealth multilateralism” – using the words of David Kaye (2013b) – is thus consolidating a dualism within the U.S. institutional settlement of the Obama era in which the most conservative shares of the Senate can retain their anti internationalist traits, whilst the President can still give his personal hallmark on many fields of the U.S. foreign policy. However, the problem in this continue struggle is that stealth multilateralism does not constitute a long-term answer and that still many scenarios in which America is engaged required the binding force and the wide consensus that only the international treaties can guarantee.

### **3.4 - The new course of the Arab spring**

Two years after the Cairo speech, which symbolized the renewed ideal and approach of the Obama Administration toward the Muslim world (Cfr. chapter II), the events of the Arab spring occurred since 2011 established a new step toward the alteration of the relations between the U.S. and the Middle East region countries. This was already evident at the very beginning of Obama’s first term in which the abandonment of the previous Bush’s “freedom agenda” relegated the issue of democracy promotion to the background of the presidential strategy (Singh 2012: 123). This trend is particularly evident in the extent in which most of the foreign aid budget was cut (by more than a half for instance toward Egypt) in favor of a greater focus on diplomatic channels. The use of diplomacy in such a framework as the one of the Arab spring was however significantly distant from the traditional approach the U.S. has pursued toward the region from the years of George W. Bush administration and thus after the terroristic attack of 9/11. The realism that pervades most of the action undertaken by President Obama indeed, lead to a case-by-case approach to the democratic claims of the countries in the Middle East region (Singh 2012: 123), underlying different patterns of action in Egypt than in Syria or in Libya. Moreover, for the first time in the recent years, the uprisings

in many countries of the region were not about America (Singh 2012: 125). Therefore, overall the problem of defining an “American interest” in the Middle East resulted to be tricky to the extent in which, using the words of Ryan Lizza “*Obama’s instinct was to try to have it both ways, to talk like an idealist while acting like a realist*” (Singh 2012: 125). These circumstances foster some kind of ambiguity in the conduct of Obama toward the countries involved in the Arab spring, particularly for the lack of a unique set of strategies and goals to pursue in order to address unequivocally the situations evolved in the different national contexts. This degree of incertitude depends undoubtedly on the different necessities each country has, taking into consideration its previous history and political background, but also and in particular by the hazard of paving the way for the affirmation of Islamist groups of various hues in the vacuum left by the dismissal of the previous Arab leaders (Singh 2012: 124). In this regard it resulted clear the implicit move toward rapprochement put in place by Obama with many Sunni countries, first and foremost with Saudi Arabia, in order to contain the extremism of Iran in the region.

### **3.5 - The Libya intervention**

The Libyan framework represented surely the most important example of regime change and of partnership collaboration within the NATO of the two Obama terms. The popular revolt against the dictatorship of Colonel Gaddafi offered Obama the chance to put into effect the scheme of U.S. involvement in multilateralism that he had drawn during his presidential campaign over and over again. The indirect approach carried forward by the United States relied therefore primarily on the support offered by the United Nations and the NATO countries. In this respect, the action of the U.S. was conditional to the joint initiative of these two bodies. From the side of the United Nations the approval of the UN Security Council Resolution 1973 - with which for the first

time in 68 years the United Nations authorized a military action to prevent what was perceived as an “imminent massacre”- the U.S. gain the degree of legitimacy that always lacked in the Bush actions. On the other hand, in the context of a renewed transatlantic relation with Europe, which –according to the U.S.- would now need to assume a greater responsibility in for its backyard, Obama stated that the role of the United States would have been only a supporting one once the NATO would have taken command over the operations (Singh 2012: 127). These two steps united depicted the Obama’s vision of a post-Bush America in which the U.S. will avoid any rush toward a unilateral action, rather involving the international community and strengthening the ties with the transatlantic alliance in a broad design of promotion of multilateralism as the very force of U.S. diplomacy. Therefore, the Libyan engagement resulted to be, for the Obama’s team, a victory in the affirmation of the new pathway of discontinuity with his predecessor. The overturning of the Gaddafi’s regime was obtained without a single loss on the U.S. side, and democracy was achieved following the rules of the game: involvement of international organization, deeper connections with European powers, support of the Arab region (such as Qatar and the UAE) and no direct or unilateral engagement, which contributed to shape the image of an Obama’s victory by “leading from behind” (Singh 2012: 128).

However, in the evolution of the Arab spring many points suggest an extent of continuity with the Bush administration rather than a net break from the years of the unilateralist agenda. Unquestionably, at least in its original purpose the progress toward the Obama’s multilateralism presents many odds if compared with the foreign policy of his predecessor, yet in this field as in many others analyzed in the previous chapter, the trait of continuity discloses itself in the outcomes of the various presidential initiative. Although led from behind the intervention in Libya was the third direct involvement in a Muslim country in less than ten years (Singh 2012: 128), following on the heels of Bush. Notwithstanding the humanitarian impulse and the UN mandate, the



features of regime change and of U.S. commitment in Middle East were nothing but still alive at the time of Obama's intervention in Libya. Moreover, the still central role played by the U.S. in supporting the NATO countries (to which the US aid has increased by 25% in the last decade) outlined how the cooperation in Libya resembles the Bush's "coalition of the willing", given the lack of strategic coordination among the European countries and the still central and indispensable role played by the United States (Singh 2012: 129). Furthermore, the American commitment in Libya occurred, differently than during the overwhelming congressional majority era under the Bush presidency, without the authorization of the Congress. This occurrence resulted symptomatic of the great division within the two Houses, but also the White House staff itself, around the engagement in Libya. In this regard is explanatory enough the strong opposition of Robert Gates in stating that: "*You could have a situation where you achieve the military goal and not achieve the political goal [of regime change]*" (Cassata and Baldor 2011), while at the opposite end both Susan Rice and Samantha Power from within the UN pushed for a solution given the humanitarian emergency.

The approach of the Obama Administration toward the Libyan uprising therefore demonstrated all the main features that shaped the transition from the Bush's engagement in Middle East, the new course established by the new President and the strategies adopted in the first term aimed to consolidate the Obama's design throughout the second term. However, albeit the presupposes of multilateral engagement and the shift toward a backing role of the U.S. in support of the international initiative along with a more active role of the European allies constituted the ground for the Obama's policy toward the Arab spring's events, it is still visible the absence of a clear strategic pathway, feature which represented one of the strong ideological pillar of the Bush administration, and that nowadays seems to undermine the shift toward the so evoked "change". *De facto* just a few changed from the Bush years are occurred in terms of outcomes in the approach toward the reality of the

widespread uprising in the Middle East. The U.S. disengagement from the Iraqi front, in the light of the Libya intervention and, at later stage, of Syria potential commitment, seems to represent only an ideological distancing from the “exportation of democracy” and “regime change” of George W. Bush, but still presents many analogies in the actions performed in the new challenge that the Middle East presents.

### **3.6 - The challenges of Syria**

Syria represents one of the most controversial fields that Obama is dealing with throughout his first and now second term. The presidential approach toward that country has evolved over time in a spiral of different policies aimed at keeping the lid on the powder keg of Middle East, given in particular the close ties between the evolution of the situation in Syria and the backlashes in Iran. Starting in May 19, 2011 Obama stated clearly that fostering the democratic reforms in the Middle East region would have represented one of the overriding goals of U.S. policy, given the unfolding of the Arab spring’s events. In asserting that “*Strategies of repression and diversion won’t work any more ... Change cannot be denied*” and that “*After decades of accepting the world as it is in the region, we have the chance to pursue the world as it should be*” Obama implicitly indicated, amongst others, Syria as still failing to ensure the democratic call coming from the Arab peoples (Singh 2012: 131). Simultaneously, the American approach toward Syria proceeded on a pathway that not always stood out for its internal coherence. Indeed, if on the one hand Hillary Clinton paved the way for the possibility of a future intervention of the U.S. in Syria, on the other Obama firmly ruled out any possibility of a direct American intervention by stating that “*The United States cannot and will not impose this transition on Syria. We have heard their strong desire that there not be foreign intervention*” (Singh 2012: 132). This conflicting attitude within the White House represented the

outcome of a twofold concern over the approach on the Syrian internal situation. If some of the members of Obama's cabinet found essential for the U.S. to show up a clear signal of rejection of the still existing dictatorships in the Middle East, in such a way to ensure that the United States could be universally recognized as a promoter of the new waves of democracy, conversely Obama preferred to step aside and disengage the U.S. as long as possible to foster a European stance, given the tight connection between Syria and the latter concerning oil exports (Singh 2012: 132).

From the beginning of the presidential second term, Obama has to face the worsening of the situation in Syria, begun with the use of chemical weapons ascribed to the Assad's regime. Such action has a particular significance to the extent in which it crossed the "red line" of what is internationally admissible during the warfare (Kessler 2013). On August 20<sup>th</sup>, 2013 the President underlined that: *"We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus. That would change my equation."* (White House 2012) and again, one month later in Stockholm, that: *"I didn't set a red line. The world set a red line"* (White House 2013). It resulted clear therefore that the situation delineated in Syria paved the way for a new approach from the side of the U.S., more frontal than it was planned only a few years before. However, two things outlined a degree of prudence in the presidential approach to such issue: the room for negotiation left to the United Nation and foremost to Russia, and the recourse to the Congressional approval before authorizing any U.S. military commitment against the Assad's regime.

The role played by Russia in this extent symbolizes only partially the successful strategy of Obama to reset the relation with Moscow over the long term. Notwithstanding the openness of the country to come on board in the UN Security Council, Russia continued to play an disruptive role in the Middle East region especially regarding its relations with Iran and Syria and the

attempt to preserve the status quo against any further Israeli enforcement (Blank 2012: 62) Yet, given the actual status of the U.S.-Russia relations, the intermediation of Putin as well as the Geneva talks of September between the Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov played in favor of the Obama's strategy and signified a positive step forward a better achievement of the U.S. goals for Middle East. The Syrian admission on the possession of chemical weapons, and the future signature of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) - which seems likely to happen - by the Assad's regime (Joseph 2013) as well as the stress put by Lavrov "*that the UN Security Council - in which Russia retain the veto power - will be the sole authority for deciding any measures to take in the event of allegations about Syrian non-compliance*" (Joseph 2013) outlined how the U.S. game must be played from within the international system with no room for unilateral manoeuvre.

In the wake of this, it resulted clear the choice of Obama to rely on the congressional approval for any further decision concerning U.S. intervention. The broad perspective through which Obama posed the problem of the U.S. intervention on his September 10<sup>th</sup> speech stressed indeed the necessity of addressing the problem not with the U.S. standing alone as it used to be 5 years before. "*When dictators commit atrocities, they depend upon the world to look the other way until those horrifying pictures fade from memory. But these things happened. The facts cannot be denied. The question now is what the United States of America, and the international community, is prepared to do about it. Because what happened to those people - to those children - is not only a violation of international law, it's also a danger to our security*" (Obama 2013). What resulted clear is that Obama needs support and legitimacy for any further enhancement of his policies, and that internally the political struggle will play its decisive role. In passing the buck to the Congress the latter must now share responsibility in any position the U.S. would made (Betts 2013) This is, to some extent, what lead so far to the indecisive use of military power as a compromise between the risk of being involved in another long-

term engagement, which is likely to jeopardize all the multilateral result accomplished during five years of presidency, and the risk of doing too little which can overshadow the American international role in favor of the affirmation of the other great powers (Obama 2013).

The Obama's strategy in Syria, albeit being still an ongoing process, has demonstrated so far most of the drawbacks of the American international engagement already outlined in the first term. If the call for a broader cooperation, operated prevalently from within the U.N. Security Council or on the basis of bilateral rapprochement, paved the way for some progression in the shift away from the Bush international legacy, at the same time the call for a broad consensus, externally but also internal to the Congress, hampered the delineation of a clear political line of the Obama Administration. To the net stance against the Assad's regime, has not corresponded yet a likewise determined concrete action, and the outcome resulted to be a back and forth between threats of direct intervention and renegotiation of the terms of such commitment with the internal and external opposition. Although the Bush inheritance is progressively clearing away, the ineffectiveness of delineate an incontrovertible line of the first term is still present in the second term, and the chance of an abrupt turnaround seem to be blocked by the numerous constrains that Obama still has at home, from the White House itself, to the "consistent minority" within the Senate.

### **3.7 - From China to Russia: the Obama internationalism in the second term**

The second term is likely to continue on the pathway already outlined for the first one regarding the relation between Washington and Beijing. One of the main features, which continues to stoke the ambiguous approach conducted by Obama, is the lack of clarity over the balance of power among the various institution of the Chinese ruling class. The civilian government, the Communist

Party and the military power exercise centrifugal pressures in trying to preserve their own class' prerogatives, leading consequently to a wide variety of interest and objectives (Dormandy 2007: 36). As a consequence of this, as already seen in the first term, the policy pursued by the U.S. alternated engagement and hedging, often with no clear aims. Also from the economic point of view the rapprochement with Beijing played an important role on the U.S. political advancement given the fact that China represents the largest holder of U.S. securities and it is therefore economically tied to any fluctuation of the dollar in the market. Notwithstanding this, the undervaluation of the renminbi has been strongly criticized by both sides during the 2012 Presidential campaign and it still represents one of the main field of struggle between the Obama Administration and the Chinese establishment (Dormandy 2007: 36). Moreover the territorial disputes involving Beijing and the main U.S. allies in the south-east Pacific area, along with the massive Chinese investment in offensive weapons –which suggests the intent of extend China's reach in the next oncoming years- represent a brake to a total openness of Obama toward peaceful negotiation with Beijing (Dormandy 2007: 37-38). Indeed in many cases, the administration maintained a line of neutrality in the territorial disputes between China and its allies albeit continuing in indirectly supporting the latter, in particular Japan, giving often rise to a policy of standby rather than taking a resolute position, resembling in such a way many of the features of the first term.

All these factors contributed in the last few years to deepen the interrelation between the two countries, but also to amplify the likelihood of a dangerous open confrontation amongst the two superpowers. In his second term Obama is facing a new Beijing strategy beefed-up by its ascending economic and military power. Albeit it will not represent a direct challenge to the U.S. for at least one more decade, as Avery Goldstein (2013) remarked in October: “there is a real danger that Beijing and Washington will find themselves in a crisis that could quickly escalate to military conflict”. The

greater risk comes from the fact that no one of the two parties has provided a bold definition of what is their vital interest across many areas in the western Pacific region (Goldstein 2013). The U.S. still has not indicated clearly whether Taiwan falls under its security umbrella and at the same time the position taken by Obama in the marine disputes between Beijing and the adjacent countries is still vague. If on the one hand Washington has clearly pointed out its commitment to stand on the side of its allies in case of an open conflict, on the other it has remained neutral for most of the course of the disputes giving little weight to the rival sovereignty claims and insisting on the peaceful resolution of the disputes (Goldstein 2013).

In regards to the readjustment of the balance in the Far East, but also more generally to the rebalancing of the U.S. international ties, Russia weights consistently in the Obama's second term foreign policy. After almost three years spent on the re-opening of a more constant collaborative front, the reset of the relation between the two countries is continuing during the second term on the tracks of the pre-existing agenda. Arms control, human rights, trade and regional security issues in defence policy are still the priority as perceived on the western shore of the Atlantic (Blank 2012: 59). On the other side, the latent anti-Americanism continues to be the leitmotiv of domestic and foreign policy on the Putin's agenda. If the reset policy succeed, to some extent, to induce Russia closer to the U.S. position in regards to Middle East, and especially to Iran and Syria, at the same time, differently than the Bush administration, Obama never used an hard line in negotiating with Moscow, failing to push decisively in the direction of a Russian compliance with the international standard, foremost concerning human rights (Blank 2012: 60). However, the soft-line carried forward by Obama achieved success in the opening of Putin toward the World Trade organization and the Northern Distribution Network (NDN). Therefore, the second term disclosed with a flexible approach toward Russia, with the aim of simultaneously tie Moscow to the American interests in the core context which required cooperation between the two countries. The

drawback, or at least the limit of such policy is represented by the stark opposition manifested internally by the Republican Party, especially now that it retains a greater leeway in influencing the presidential decisions, which is progressively narrowing the range of application of the reset policy (Blank 2012: 63). Moreover, now that Afghanistan does not represent the foremost concern for the Obama Administration anymore, and that Putin has clearly marked its opposition to any further UN measure against Teheran, Russian support for American initiatives will proceed under a dimmer perspective than before. As demonstrated in Syria, the only convergence of intents between the two superpowers can, at the moment, by only happen if Russia has its own interest to ward, and to the extent in which such move requires the necessity of a closer cooperation with the U.S.

Thus, not only the disengagement from the Middle East region, and particularly Afghanistan, is reshaping the relation between the two countries, relegating the NDN in the backward in the bilateral relations (Blank 2012: 61), but also the rising of China and the restart of the talks concerning arms control is diverging the paths of Russia and the U.S. Both these countries are emphasizing the East Asian security as a matter of primary concern, yet so far, if Obama is considering the role of Moscow as secondary in the region, compared with the current strategy of direct ties with Beijing, Russia is trying to exert a more significant weight in the region by dethatching itself from the burden posed by the international system and by the bilateral rapprochement with America.

### **3.8 - Conclusion**

As seen, after his re-election, Obama has to confront with a wide set of challenges across the international scene. Most of the policy undertaken during the first term in order to move away from the Bush legacy, are, in the second term, overshadowed by the attempt made to delineate a clearer position toward



the changing of the international system. Moreover, the internal situation is weighting decisively in determining the Obama's 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 term 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. In this extent the presidential centralization which characterized the first term and represented the core mean to ensure a stark breakthrough from the past, albeit still present in its essential features, is anesthetized by the internal burden of the second term. 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. In this regard, the Middle East continues to represent the nerve center of the Obama's foreign agenda. 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 the two countries –Iraq and Afghanistan- which shaped a great share of the Obama foreign policy in the first term 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 term, 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, so 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, and 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.

## **CHAPTER IV – A case study: Obama’s foreign policy and the Egyptian crisis.**

Egypt represents undoubtedly, along with Israel, the most significant American strategic ally in the Middle East. For this reason, from Bush to Obama, the relation between the U.S. and the country have proceeded on a path of economic and military cooperation as the Mubarak regime, until its breakdown on February 11<sup>th</sup> 2011, was always regarded as the guarantor of the stability in the region and in the relationship between Jerusalem and the rest of the Arab world. Therefore, the recent transition occurred in the country since 2011, with the government assigned first to the lead of Mohamed Morsi and then of Adli Mansur in 2013, constitutes one of the central pillars in the analysis of the Obama presidency. Indeed, Egypt represented for the President the foremost chance, even more than Libya, to redefine the goals of his doctrine, applying concretely the principles set out in his 2009 Cairo speech, while, at the same time, departing from the long-lasting U.S. implementation of the Bush agenda within the boundaries of the country. However, the evolution of foreign policy in the era of Obama can not be analyzed without prior recalling the features of the Bush agenda in the Middle East. Indeed, the relation between the 43<sup>rd</sup> U.S. President and Hosni Mubarak were a fundamental pillar in the implementation of his doctrine and of its corollary, the “freedom agenda”.

### **4.1 - “Freedom agenda” and democracy promotion in Egypt under the Bush presidency**

The Bush Doctrine (as seen in chapter I) was applied first in Afghanistan, after the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1368 authorized the NATO “*to take all necessary steps to respond to the attacks of*

*11 September and to combat all forms of terrorism”* (United Nations 2001), recurring for the first time to the principles outlined in article 5 of its charter. Two weeks later, also an almost-unanimous Congress, authorized the President *“to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons, in order to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States by such nations, organizations or persons”* (Weed 2001). Therefore, at the beginning of its crusade against terrorism, Bush benefitted of a large consensus expanded well beyond the domestic boundaries. This wide international backing for the American commitment gave Bush the necessary leeway to bring his design of “war on terror” to another, more demanding, level. In this regard, as Lindsay pointed out (2011: 769), Bush did not pursue an “Afghanistan-only” strategy, yet his project envisaged only “Afghanistan-first” scheme. Indeed, as soon as the Taliban were toppled, the attention shifted to Iraq, with the consideration that the Hussein regime embodied the three main points that the U.S. was directed at fighting: terrorism, tyranny and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) (Lindsay 2011: 769). Moreover, once initiated its global “mission” with the Afghanistan campaign, the U.S. could not wait anymore, especially because, as Condoleezza Rice pointed out: *“the problem here is that there will always be some uncertainty about how quickly he can acquire nuclear weapons. But we don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud”* (CNN 2002).

In this context, differently than in the Afghanistan case, Bush did not get the authorization of the UN Security Council after receiving the green light from the Congress. Once again, in line with its doctrine (Cfr. Chapter I), the President did not consider the UN’s blessing as a necessary step to undertake a direct action against Iraq. This assumption was based on the belief that the U.S. was the only frontline in the war on terror, and therefore it does not need any

international legitimacy to act, embodying itself the only guarantor for global security. This line of thought was further strengthened in practice by the participation in Iraq of many other countries outflanking the lack of UN mandate, the so-called “coalition of the willing”. Indeed, the values of the war on terror were assimilated and recognized by a wide spectrum of actors within the international community, legitimating the choice of Bush to enlarge the field of the war. However, after less than one year, the perspective of a failure to keep Iraq safe after the war became more and more realistic. The break out of multiple hotbeds of insurgency throughout the entire country, and the *de facto* impossibility of establishing a transitional regime in a short lapse of time, handing the power over the Iraqi population, indicated that nation-building was not present among the priorities of the Bush’s agenda in the Middle East (Lindsay 2011: 769). Moreover, the absence of proof of effective detention of WMD in the country, after the fact-finding mission Iraq Survey Group (ISG), tangled up the situation for the U.S., *de facto* discarding the war’s primary rationale (Lindsay 2011: 769).

In the wake of these events, to regain the credibility lost with the fiasco in Iraq, it was necessary for Bush to reshape the ideological background of the intervention, shifting the focus for the justification of the war in the promotion of democracy. The pragmatic rationale for this shift was that of providing a solid ideological basis to oppose critics at home and abroad, putting the challengers in the uneasy situation to explain why to oppose the spreading of democracy (Lindsay 2011: 770). Therefore, the so-called “freedom agenda” constituted the hallmark of the presidential second term, stressing the importance of an issue which had had no room, at least not to this extent, during the first term. Indeed, already from his second inaugural address Bush regarded the “freedom agenda” as the essential pillar – not set out until then – of its doctrine: *“it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world. [...] Our goal instead is*

*to help others find their own voice, attain their own freedom, and make their own way” (Bush 2005).*

This evolution of the Bush Doctrine was functional to introduce the discourse regarding Egypt giving its particular position, of fundamental U.S. ally in the region, while being at the same time a non-democratic regime. Therefore, the promotion of the freedom agenda and the Bush’s second term saw Egypt occupying a central role in the administration’s goals. What especially did matter from 2004 onwards were the repeated signals of internal deterioration of the Mubarak regime. The response to this situation from the Bush’s part was initially that of pushing the Egyptian ally to partially open to a certain degree of political renewal, whilst albeit always keeping steady ties with President Mubarak and his establishment. However, the effort to pursue both these goals put Egypt in the difficult condition of representing, for the U.S., one of the thorniest problems in the Middle East while still being fundamental the preserve the equilibrium in the region. However, the goal of advancing a strong regime of cooperation with the country of President Mubarak was evident with the massive recourse to economic assistance. Egypt received more U.S. annual aid than anyone else, except Israel, with more than \$ 73.1 billions given between 1975 and 2012 (Sharp 2014). The partnership relied primarily on military and economic assistance and was actualized by an outlay of about 2 billion per year in U.S. aid (Kelly 2006).

This economic support, at least until 2006, and the strict cooperation among the two countries was aimed at nudging Mubarak to produce the necessary political reforms, albeit without openly challenge the undemocratic nature of the regime. Such action was intended to preserve the President’s status in the country, considering that simultaneously he was aging and that the political structure carried forward since the 80’s was beginning to collapse as many groups – Islamists, liberals and many others –started to contest openly his leadership (Dunne 2009: 132). This internal discontent, claiming to remove Mubarak from his office, was partly held back by Bush fostering hole-and-

corner diplomacy and aid programs aimed at driving the country in a gradual transition preserving stability (Dunne 2009: 132). The concessions made in this sense from 2004, involving the direct election of the president and a greater freedom of expression, were symptomatic of the new trend strongly desired by Bush. The presidential design took shape without ever challenging Mubarak openly, yet seeking to promote the necessary degree of democracy in the country, to avoid the election of a hostile regime.

However, if the first part of U.S.-Egypt relation under the Bush presidency can be regarded as successful, to the extent in which the institutional transition followed the path envisaged by Bush, the end of the first term turned out to be more and more complicated. What represented the beginning of the diplomatic rupture was the speech of the former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice at the American University in Cairo, in June 2005. She asserted that: *“for 60 years, my country, the United States, pursued stability at the expense of democracy in this region here in the Middle East, and we achieved neither”*(Cooper 2011). It resulted clear that, for the first time, the Egyptian regime was openly contested by a member of the U.S. establishment. Since that moment, the relationship between Egypt and the U.S. dampened consistently to the point in which Mubarak never visited Washington again under the Bush presidency (Sanger 2013: 288). Moreover, since 2006, the sharp changing of the political scenario in Palestine, and then in Egypt, dampened the initial American enthusiasm for the enforcement of the freedom agenda. The triumph of Hamas in Palestine’s election, along with the unexpected extraordinary result of the Muslim Brotherhood during the 2005 ballot, worried many in the U.S. and raised the question if the freedom agenda had the effect of advancing extremist groups (Dunne 2009: 133). To exacerbate the tones also concurred the decision of the Bush administration to cancel the planned free trade talks with Egypt after an opponent of Mubarak, Ayman Nou, who run against the president in 2005, was imprisoned. Moreover, the tightening up of the occupation in Iraq, especially after the 2006 bombing of

the Samarra mosque, shifted the focus of the administration from other areas of the region (Dunne 2009: 133).

For a combination of these reasons, from 2006, in coincidence with the two-year lame-duck period of the Bush presidency and the resulting softening of unilateralist rhetoric, the President stepped back significantly in the promotion of the freedom agenda in Egypt. The administration ceased to push forward reforms and democratization in the country, and the Mubarak regime reverted to the earlier constriction of civil liberties (Dunne 2009: 133). Indeed, if on the one hand, the members of the Muslim Brotherhood were largely arrested, whilst attacking the party's forms of financing and banning the Brotherhood from forming a political party, on the other, in the U.S., the Congress nudged persistently the presidency to cut aid to Egypt and almost withheld from the investment of \$100 million in military assistance in 2008, as a response to the ineffectiveness of firmly promoting democracy in the country (Dunne 2009: 133)

Notwithstanding the strong emphasis of the Bush Administration during the second term on democracy promotion, it can be still evidenced a consistent gap between its rhetoric and the effective path of action undertaken (Carothers 2007: 4). There is no doubt that the focus of the Bush Doctrine was on the Middle East's region, highlighting the close ties existing between the war against terrorism and the spread of democracy. To this extent, the administration had taken considerable steps to push the allied autocracies in the region (first and foremost Egypt) to enhance political reforms, while at the same time preserving stability in the region. Concrete initiatives in this regard were the establishment of new aid programs, such as the State Department's Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), intended to provide support for political, economic and social reforms, as well as the revision of already existing initiatives such as the Egyptian bilateral aid program or the Foundation for the Future (Carothers 2007: 5). However, by the beginning of 2007 it became clear that the design of democracy promotion in the Middle East was



definitely over. The focus on Iraq and the difficulties represented by the U.S. commitment to an instable post-war reality relegated the freedom agenda in the background. Albeit some previous initiatives remained in place, such as the MEPI, and despite both Bush and Condoleezza Rice insisted on “a new Middle East” and on pro-democratic statements, the American foreign policy signed a decisive shift toward a more “Obamian” realist venture (Carothers 2007: 7), evidencing all the limits of the ideological commitment of the Bush Doctrine.

All of this was further exacerbated by the fact that the conceptions of democracy promotion within the administration’s offices presented a picture more divided and fragmented than it might actually be perceived externally, if we consider the strong backing for his program both within the Congress and the public opinion, at least at the early stage. Many of the key members of the administration, such as former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney, who pushed resolutely for the Iraq intervention, had little or no interest in pursuing democracy in the Middle East after the Saddam was ousted (Carothers 2007: 5). Rather, the foremost concern of many among the frontlines of the administration was that of ensuring the maintenance of the status quo establishing or preserving U.S.-friendly governments. This, after having led many to propose of hurrying Ahmed Chalabi into Iraq after the regime breakdown (Carothers 2007: 6), drove the same internal factions to push for non-interfering into the Egyptian domestic sphere, considering any change as likely to jeopardize the regional status quo.

Others within the presidency’s inner circle, such as former Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, believed that the progressive democratization of the main regimes in the Middle East, from Iraq to Egypt, was likely to transform the countries involved into pro-Western democracies, constituting, at the same time, a point of reference for the Arab world, and pushing forward a wave of democratization in the region (Carothers 2007: 6). This conception, following the principles of “democratic peace” discussed by Russett (1993), will, at a later stage, characterize the thinking of many

Obama's advisers in their stand toward the Arab spring events. However, as seen, the Bush's approach to Egypt followed both the aforementioned advices, depending primarily on the evolution of the Iraqi warfare. Therefore, the "freedom agenda" demonstrated to be a weak ideology if not accompanied by a concrete American interest to serve in the region. Egypt is, in this sense, a proof that the principles of democracy promotion and of war on terror were only partially linked in the mind of Bush and of his advisers. Moreover, the shift of the administration's focus on more urgent matters, such as indeed Iraq, distracted attention from Mubarak and the destiny of his country.

#### **4.2 – The Obama Doctrine and the Egyptian transition**

The failure of the Bush's years to address the crumbling of the Egyptian regime had strong repercussions on the Obama presidency, and, paradoxically, the maintenance of an unchallenged political status quo carried forward exactly what the U.S. wanted to avoid: a strong degree of instability within the country. However, the Obama's approach was substantially divergent from the Bush's one, inasmuch as the strategy of conservation at any cost of a friendly-regime was not considered overriding anymore. Rather, the ability of the new President was that of reading correctly the historical context in which the Egyptian events were framed, realizing that the only way to deal with the waves of the Arab spring was by ensuring the political transition from the old regimes. However, as soon as the uprisings interesting Tunisia had extended to Egypt, the first thought within the administration was that Mubarak would have been able to lead the transition at the end and to keep intact the administrative structure of the state (Sanger 2013: 287). None at the early stage of the protest was considering the option of an institutional transition outside the boundaries of the strongly-rooted National Democratic Party (NDP).

For this reason the way Obama challenged the Egyptian President and backed the protesters at a later stage, supervened unexpected and constituted a

first signal of rupture with the Bush presidency, but also with the vision of many liberal hawks within the administration itself. Hereafter, the foremost concern became to ensure the transition within a country which has dealt with an oppressive regime for too long. In Egypt, for the first time, the U.S. President decided not to push for the old-fashion “America first” strategy, going along with the most visible national interest. This, of course does not mean that Obama did not pursue a strategy that put the “American interest” as the top priority to achieve, however, differently than Bush, he chose to push for the most diplomatic alternative. Indeed, Obama already envisaged that the Mubarak regime was initiating its decline and the stance adopted by the U.S. needs to be read in this light. He decided not to perpetuate what was perceived as a failed approach in foreign policy, by refusing to back a dying dictator to obtain a few more years of stability (Sanger 2013: 302). Therefore, during the latest phases of the uprising, the role played by the U.S. President was determining in preparing the ground to the subsequent overthrow of Mubarak. Once more, it can be noticed in this context, how the Obama administration chose the diplomatic channel as alternative to a direct-influence action which constitutes the hallmark of the Bush Doctrine

However, besides the determination behind the tactic used in Egypt, also in this context it is important to stress that, prior to acting, the President needed to conciliate the divisions internal to his team, especially among the the young advisers and the old establishment. Indeed, right after the protests broke out in Tahrir Square, both Hillary Clinton and the Vice President Joe Biden, following the traditional U.S. scheme, hastened to confirm their unconditional trust toward the Mubarak regime. The Secretary of State shortly after the beginning of the protests declared that “*our assessment is that the Egyptian government is stable and is looking for ways to respond to the legitimate needs and interests of the Egyptian people*” (Sanger 2013: 291). In the same manner, Joe Biden said that he would never call Mubarak a dictator, he was, rather, an ally (Travers 2011). The main concern for this side of the Obama’s team was

that of preventing the rise of the most fundamentalist Islamic fringes in the vacuum left by Mubarak, so that “if Egypt collapses, Islamists take over” (Sanger 2013: 292). On the other hand, the side of the young advisers within the President’s inner circle pushed hard for the rupture of the traditional script aimed at preserving of the status quo whatsoever. At the head of this coalition were Samantha Power, the deputy national security adviser Denis McDonough, and the writer of the 2009 Cairo speech Ben Rhodes (Sanger 2013). The foremost concern for this group was that the absence of a well-timed presidential stance would have hampered the international credibility of Obama and of the U.S. as a whole, at the same time making any further action a diplomatic failure because ill-timed (Sanger 2013: 291).

However, most importantly, what has had the potential of making Obama reluctant to openly condemn the conduct of Mubarak was not only the pressure coming from some part of his inner circle. Rather it was the fact that, differently than Tunisia, Egypt has a great role in the U.S. interests in the Middle East. In this context, the aforementioned position expressed by the Secretary of State Clinton was exemplifying the twofold approach carried forward inside and outside the administration (Laidi 2012: 114). Indeed, the State Department had only to lose from the overturn of allied regime after three decades of cooperation. Moreover, also the interest of the other two big U.S. partners in the region, Israel and Saudi Arabia, pushed for unconditioned support to Egyptian President (Laidi 2012: 114). On the one hand, Israel was concerned by the rise of the military in Egypt and the subsequent rejection of the Camp David accord jeopardizing the Israeli *de facto* safety net in the Middle East. Interestingly, this was the same line adopted by the Palestinian Authority fearing that the empowerment of the Islamist groups could coincide with the strengthening of Hamas (Laidi 2012: 114). Moreover, also Saudi Arabia was oriented to preserve the stability in Middle East in order to prevent the waves of the Arab spring from reaching Riyadh, as evidenced by the tone

used by Saudi King Abdullah, who slammed the Egyptians protesters as "infiltrators"(Theodorou 2011).

However, the Egyptian uprisings and the subsequent expansion of the waves of the Arab spring throughout the boundaries of many others states in the Middle East, offered to Obama the chance to apply in practice what anticipated with the Cairo speech two years before. This could be identified as part of a more comprehensive Obama doctrine, although the president himself, in an interview with the American NBC, firmly rejected this suggestion. *"I think it's important not to take this particular situation and then try to project some sort of Obama Doctrine that we're going to apply in a cookie-cutter fashion across the board"* (Negrin 2011) he said. The main stress was therefore on the multiplicity of actors and identities involved in the Arab spring along with the fact that the administration recognized Egypt, because of its strategic relevance, as a totally different framework compared not only to Ben Ali's Tunisia but also, to Gaddafi's Libya. Nonetheless it is important to stress that Obama in many occasions refused the "realist" label applied to his path of action, remarking that, although *"each country in this region is different, our principles remain the same"* (Negrin 2011).

In this regard, the U.S. backing for regime change in Egypt was in line with what reported by State Department Jen Psaki *"We think that all sides need to engage with each other and need to listen to the voices of the Egyptian people and what they are calling for and peacefully protesting about"*, the administration therefore was monitoring *"an extremely tense and fast-moving situation"*, she said, and will not "take sides" in the dispute" (Jackson 2013). Such approach can be explained in the light of the three principles outlined by Laidi (2012: 117) constituting the basic pillars of Obama's doctrine. First, support of any peaceful demonstration and condemnation of the use of force for repressing protesters. Second, the absence of an overarching principle of action as response to the events of the Arab spring. In this respect it was strongly evident the realist approach of the Obama presidency: depending on

the political change and on the U.S. interest in a given framework, the action is modelled differently in each country. And finally, third, the recourse to U.S. Direct commitment only in presence of a credible political alternative after the regime's overthrow and only to the extent in which the transition does not affect materially the U.S. interest in the region.

#### **4.3 - Arab spring in Egypt and the responses of the Obama Administration**

President Morsi symbolized, from the moment of his election in June 2012, the turnaround of Egyptian politics, defeating with the 51,7% of favorable votes the old regime's party and initiating, at least in his rhetoric, the process of democratization that Egypt was seeking for over three decades. For this reason, the international community and the administration of President Obama saw favourably the installation of the new Brotherhood's party, notwithstanding the many failures occurred as a consequence of the effort of effectively dealing with the disastrous economic situation left by the previous administration whilst redistributing power among wide segments of Egyptian society (albeit the latter was retained for the most part by affiliates of the Islamist party).

However, although a consistent responsibility can be attributed to the previous misleading of the Mubarak regime, the increasing of fuel and food's prices from July 2013, triggered the quick spread of the anti-Morsi sentiment (Sharp 2014: 3). Moreover, to exacerbate the tones contributed both the promulgation of the 2012 Constitution - which empowered consistently the Islamist majority at the expense of secular minorities – as well as the presidential declaration in November 2012, to claim unilaterally his own immunity to judicial oversight (Sharp 2014: 3). This progressive corrosion of the consensus polarized around the figure of President Morsi worried further the White House as another reason of apprehension was about which faction

among the Brothers would prevail at the end of the struggle for power. The perspective that the most fundamentalist strain would have eventually taken control represented a consistent risk for the U.S. administration, especially since many among the State Department were concerned by the replacement of the old regime's officials – well-known in executive offices after decades of joined cooperation – with the new ruling class expression of the Brotherhood, likely to be reluctant in collaborating with the U.S. to ensure its national goals in the region (Sanger 2013: 307).

In this regard, the role played by Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State in her trip to Cairo on March 2011 was crucial as well as emblematic of the challenges faced by the U.S. in the post-Mubarak Egypt. What constituted the first obstacle was the *de facto* the lack of political interlocutors and after the regime transition. Moreover, the commitments undertaken by Obama at the beginning of his term - especially the rejection of the old scheme of interference in other countries' internal affairs - represented a thorny problem throughout all the Clinton's trip. The diplomatic masterpiece she had to do, far away from the traditional approach of the Bush's years, was that of supporting the new rising democracy, upholding at the same time the administration's interests aimed at establishing a US-friendly democracy, albeit without tangling up with the country domestic power struggles (Sanger 2013: 310).

The issue concerning U.S. interference within the domestic sphere of the new Egyptian regime thus constituted the one of the main challenges in the application of the Obama doctrine in the Middle East. The initial hesitation and the subsequent siding with the revolution, once the perspective of a Mubarak political survival became dimmer, were perceived by the Egyptians as a fair-weather attitude by the U.S. President (Sanger 2013: 303). This represented a paradox if we consider that, for over 30 years, the greatest complaint raised by the opponents Mubarak was that America interfered too much in their politics. Conversely, during the protests, Obama was blamed of not enough meddling in the Egyptian situation (Sanger 2013: 303). However, the President knew that,

to ensure a resolute drift apart from the Bush's foreign policy, he had to consider two things about Egypt. First, the riots were centered on purely domestic concerns, they did not involve the U.S. Leadership as, for instance, the students in Tahrir Square were neither yelling anti-America or anti-Israel slogans, nor supporting al-Qaeda or other U.S. enemies (Sanger 2103: 295). Secondly, after so much effort to reduce the commitment in Iraq and Afghanistan, there was no point for the Obama Administration to get stuck with another far-from-home and hardly manageable conflict in Middle East.

In this regard, the speech delivered by Obama in May 2011 was aimed not only at defusing the tensions spread across the region, but also at reaffirming what was the central goal for its administration in the Middle East region. Two passages were particularly important, as , it can be argued, they were the same two constituting the centerpiece of the Obama's strategy toward the Arab world as well as the very elements of rupture with the rhetoric of Bush. The first point was the emphasis on the legitimacy of the protest and on the right of the citizens to overthrow those regimes that they perceived unjust: *“There are times in the course of history when the actions of ordinary citizens spark movements for change because they speak to a longing for freedom that has been building up for years”*(White House 2011). For the first time it was recognized the undemocratic nature of many regimes - even those which were long-lasting American allies, such as Mubarak’s Egypt – and the right of their people to call for democracy: *“The nations of the Middle East and North Africa won their independence long ago, but in too many places their people did not. In too many countries, power has been concentrated in the hands of a few. In too many countries, a citizen like that young vendor had nowhere to turn - no honest judiciary to hear his case; no independent media to give him voice; no credible political party to represent his views; no free and fair election where he could choose his leader”* (White House 2011).

The second point which make the speech delivered by Obama one of the most meaningful after the 2009 Cairo’s address, was the open



acknowledgement of the drawbacks of the previous conduct of American foreign policy (implicitly the Bush's "war on terror"). After listing the main point which represented the pillars of the Bush Doctrine, Obama stressed that *"the question before us is what role America will play as this story unfolds. For decades, the United States has pursued a set of core interests in the region: countering terrorism and stopping the spread of nuclear weapons; securing the free flow of commerce and safe-guarding the security of the region; standing up for Israel's security and pursuing Arab-Israeli peace"*(White House 2011). Obama moved on drawing the lines of the new American strategy, departing consistently from any "exceptionalist" consideration. *"Yet we must acknowledge that a strategy based solely upon the narrow pursuit of these interests will not fill an empty stomach or allow someone to speak their mind. Moreover, failure to speak to the broader aspirations of ordinary people will only feed the suspicion that has festered for years that the United States pursues our interests at their expense. Given that this mistrust runs both ways - as Americans have been seared by hostage-taking and violent rhetoric and terrorist attacks that have killed thousands of our citizens - a failure to change our approach threatens a deepening spiral of division between the United States and the Arab world"* (White House 2011). Moreover, the tone used by President Obama, whereas backing the democratic claim carried forward by the people in the region, was far from presenting any perspective of a direct involvement of the U.S. or any role in influencing the outcome. It was missing, as Sanger (2013: 313) reported "the missionary zeal of George W. Bush's second inaugural address".

Therefore, the Obama's approach appeared significantly far from the one of his predecessor. The favourable domestic environment constituted a trigger for the presidential action inasmuch as the fear of another direct U.S. involvement abroad was overwhelmingly superior to the one of losing a long-lasting regional ally. In this regard Obama did nothing more than beginning from the point in which Bush had left in 2005, and become expression of a soft

line in foreign policy aimed at controlling the spreading of democracy, yet without the direct U.S. involvement or any internal pressure.

However, for Obama was unfeasible to diverge completely from the path underlined by his predecessor, especially to the extent in which Egypt represented the Middle East's bulwark against any worsening of the Israeli-Arab conflict (Laidi 2012, 111). Therefore the most visible initiative, even after the fall of Mubarak, was represented by the continuation of aid policies toward Egypt, especially in military terms, aimed at pampering the Egyptian army whilst, at the same time, dissuading it from the use of force against Israel. Such aid, as seen, represented the hallmark of 30 years of U.S.- Egypt relations, and constituted the basis for the so-called "pact of silence" (Laidi 2012: 111) between the U.S. and the main Arab states, actively continued and implemented by Bush.

The situation changed a little after, on July 3<sup>rd</sup> 2013, the Egyptian military unilaterally ousted the Brotherhood government and suspended the 2012 constitution. Two key characters emerged in this context, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Constitutional Court, Adli Mansour, who was appointed interim-President until a new election, and Defense Minister General Abdul Fatah al Sisi, who *de facto* ruled the country from July onwards. The latter gave to the provisional president the power "to issue constitutional declarations, establish a government of "technocrats," and form a commission to propose amendments to the constitution" (Sharp 2014: 4) and exerted pressure to declare once more the Muslim Brotherhood an illegal organization (event promptly occurred in September 2013). This last passage opens a completely new perspective for U.S. foreign policy and poses the hardest challenge for the Obama Administration since the beginning of the political transition within the country. Indeed, the regime of Sisi was harshly contested by many within the administration. Moreover, several lawmakers recalled the provisions set out in Section 7008 of the most recent Foreign Operation Appropriations Act (P.L. 112-74, division I, 125 Stat. 195) which forbids the continuation of foreign aid

to those countries which are subject to a military coup d'état. However, the very problem in this respect is the fact that no laws define exactly what constitutes a "coup d'état or decree in which the military plays a decisive role". Moreover the provisions set out in Section 7008 do not apply to all foreign assistance issued being, for instance, the International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) and Nonproliferation, Antiterrorism, Demining, and Related Programs (NADR), available "notwithstanding any other provision of law" (Sharp 2014: 33).

Therefore, nowadays the question concerning what should be the right U.S. stance toward the recent events involving Egypt is still open. The fundamental task for Obama is to evaluate what kind of response is more effective in relation to the latest rise of the military, not being issued, at the moment, any formal declaration concerning the legitimacy of the July's coup. Moreover, among the administration and the Congress the cleavage among those who argue that the aid should continue, in order to guarantee regional security, and those who push for its suspension, claiming that the U.S. can not support an authoritarian state, leaves still open the debate about what should be the appropriate degree of external interference in Egyptian domestic affairs in the Obama's foreign strategy (Sharp 2014: 34-35).

#### **4.4 - Conclusion**

As seen, Egypt represents for the administration the field in which to recover from the Bush failures and affirm an Obama doctrine in a more decisive manner. However, the long-lasting problem of Israel's security, it can be argued, hampered Obama to completely detach his strategy from the one of his predecessor. The relevance of Egypt in the U.S. Design, aimed at ensuring stability in the region, led Obama to adopt a soft-power stance in many regards, first and foremost, the ones concerning economic and military aid. The transition from Mubarak to Morsi and from the latter to Mansur evidenced that,

even if the official position toward the Egyptian regimes changes, the component regarding assistance is never called into question by the U.S. establishment. This is even more evident in the light of the recent July's overthrow and on the U.S. prudence before calling the military action a "coup" in order to suspend the aid projects. Therefore, it appears evident how the initial action undertaken by Obama - choosing not to back Mubarak after the Tahrir Square's uprisings - was, at a later stage, toned down by the U.S. interest in regional stability and by the resistance of many within the Congress.

However, the departure from the Bush's "freedom agenda" in the Obama 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 renewing 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. Therefore, Egypt, far from constituting a diplomatic success for the U.S., can be still regarded as the first substantial step in the Obama's strategy within the region, by enforcing the democratic nudges and re-launching the role of a multilateral America internationally.

## Conclusion

As seen, the Obama presidency presented, over the past six years, many elements of rupture as well as of continuity with the traditional imprinting which characterized the Bush's two terms. Nevertheless, for the analysis presented in this text, what constituted the point of major interest was to compare the political-institutional environment in which the two administrations operated and to assess the practical efficacy of the Obama's plan of government aimed at presenting a new America, seven year after the 9/11 attacks. In this respect, it is essential to remark that many processes are still ongoing at the moment, as for instance the still haggard presence of U.S. contingents in Afghanistan or else the never-ending issue of Iraq as well as the debate concerning American security which is yet to be run out, progressing on a broken ground more complex than expected. However, what Obama proposed from his first presidential campaign in 2008, was something that overtakes the simple adoption of a Democratic line in foreign policy vis-à-vis the program proposed by his Republican counterpart. Rather, the President had the pressure and the responsibility to re-collocate the United States within the international arena and to re-shape the priorities of its foreign agenda, particularly in the wake of the failures attained by the Bush administration.

As reported in chapter I, the main difference to be noticed between Bush and Obama regards the institutional landscape, as it constitutes the point of departure for the two presidencies. Indeed, what Obama missed, in comparison to Bush, was the powerful and trans-cutting 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.

Considering the role of such feature in influencing the leeway that the two presidents had in order to affirm their own agenda, Obama played most of his political credibility in promising a decisive turnaround from the Bush's imprinting. He was partially successful in promoting a new scheme centered on multilateralism and, in doing so, the U.S. President recognized the anachronism of the doctrine of "American exceptionalism" and the necessity of move toward a post-American overall strategy. However, it can be argued, throughout his first term Obama has posed the greater focus on the ideological rupture from his predecessor rather than on the definition of an out-an-out doctrine. This, on the one hand, gave the President the chance to show the lack of ideology as a feature of discontinuity with the deep-rooted rhetorical hard core of Bush (Fabbrini 2010) and, at the same time, to shape a post-ideological approach to international relations. However, 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 term (Miller 2012). An example of this was the strategy of withdrawal from Afghanistan, which was already negotiated by Bush through the Status of Forces Agreement, or else the killing of Osama Bin Laden, the epilogue of almost ten years of war on terror.

Conversely, 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. However, as analyzed in chapter III, in many fields the situation is far from being well-defined. The strategy of engaging and hedging with China is not producing any results and its only evidencing the lack of a clear stance from the side of the administration. In the same manner, the project of resetting the relations with Russia is at the moment hampered by the recent progression of the situation in Ukraine and exacerbated by the Russian annexing of Crimea after the winter 2014's uprisings. At the same time, the management of the Arab spring in the Middle East still presents many unresolved issues. As seen in chapter IV, if the framework of Egypt was well-managed by Obama - in contrast with Bush - by allowing the transition from the Mubarak regime to the presidency of Morsi in the name of democracy, at the same time other national contexts 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, 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 mandate. In this case, differently than in the post-9/11 era, the minority within the Congress had a determinant 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 of 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 it 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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