

## CHANGES IN THE AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY: FROM OBAMA TO TRUMP

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**Abstract:** *A change in administration is bound to produce changes in the drawing and conducting of foreign policy. However, the transition from the Obama administration to that of Donald Trump is taking its toll on the manner of making American foreign policy. The calm and relaxed view of Barack Obama was replaced with the ill-tempered view of President Trump, who seemed eager to impress a more rigorous perspective of foreign policy, aiming to turn the United States into an isolationist country. Far from being an appeaser, Obama managed to pursue a pro-active foreign policy, establishing a working relation even with rogue states. On the other hand, Trump is attempting to bolster the state's foreign policy, by reasserting sovereignty and entering competition with rogue leaders, rather than focusing on dialogue. The aim of the present article is to analyse the foreign policy of both administrations, on a compare and contrast basis, focusing on several aspects, such as the perspective on the role to be played within NATO, the relations to rogue states, the need to further engage in conflicts worldwide in order to bring along peace and security, and the reassertion of state sovereignty.*

**Keywords:** foreign policy, interventionism, exceptionalism, isolation, conflict engagement.

## 1. Introduction

Despite its holder, the position of US president entails within the inevitable impact it will have on other country's perception of the US [1]. This is preeminent particularly in the conduct of US foreign policy.

Donald Trump's accession to presidency and his more than controversial views of the foreign policy caused a rift within the US establishment as well as between the US and its closest allies/the world

The former NATO SG Anders Fogh Rasmussen reminded everyone how much the world needs the American leadership these days: "The world needs a policeman. The only capable, reliable and desirable candidate for that position is the United States. We need determined American global leadership"[2]. Therefore, the aim

of the present research is to investigate the manner in which this leadership has been and shall be provided through the framework of foreign policy, both under former president Barack Obama and the current president Donald Trump.

## 2. President Obama's commitment to leadership

The very name of the Obama doctrine – "Leading from behind", which has been the core of the former president's foreign policy, is eloquent to the manner in which Obama's foreign policy has been led: by keeping oneself in the background, looking prospectively to what is occurring on the main stage of international politics. President Obama himself campaigned as a moderate and such a view was eagerly perceived both by the American public, as

well as by the international community, especially after the interventionism displayed by the previous administration. Obama attempted to turn attention from the usual military interventionism of the United States to more soft-power involvement, such as trade and commerce. His attempts were to restore global confidence in the United States, both with partners as well as with adversaries. His main lines of action were “military reticence and improved burden sharing with allies”, on the one hand, as well as “opening the dialogue with enemies”[3], such as Cuba and Iran. This translates into a shift in focus, which was also documented in the two National Security Strategies (NSS) issued under his administration, from Europe to the Middle East and then over to Asia. This was also present on the NSS of 2015, which reaffirmed the priority status of Asia, even after Russia’s annexation of Crimea. The restoration of diplomatic relations with Cuba and the active engagement in nuclear talks with Iran, transformed the American foreign policy into a more flexible one[4]. However, Obama showed restraint in foreign affairs, which led to power vacuums which have been entirely exploited by regimes such as Russia, China and the Islamic State[5].

The loss of Congressional support in 2014 translated in the moderation on the international arena and the military withdrawal speech he espoused. Obama was focused on “retrenchment”. His policy was one of “strategic deliberation”, as he was aware of the fact that the country had less resources, so he narrowed down his policy to strategic interests and foreign policy issues. In the same line of “retrenchment”, the war in Afghanistan was perceived as necessary, while the one in Iraq was a mere distraction from Afghanistan.

The key to Obama’s policy was to withdraw the nation from the possibility of performing counterinsurgency wars like those of Iraq and Afghanistan and focus

the defense policy on special operation forces and drones[6], which would be thus more cost-effective.

This proved to be a failure on the long run, especially in Libya, as it left the country in the middle of a devastating civil war and occupied by ISIS. This was due to the fact that it failed in planning the country reconstruction, also doubled by no direct national security interest for the US[7]. Such an intervention turned into bad example of US interventionism. He failed in transforming the national mindset of the US being considered a permanent warfare state. The stake for President Trump is whether he can do it. He did begin such an endeavour, by claiming the need to have the Europeans contributing more to their security than relying on NATO simply.

There are several aspects which need to be perceived as successes of the Obama administration: the negotiation of global nuclear arms control deals, the re-opening of relations with Cuba and the softening of US stance on military interventionism worldwide. However, after the nuclear arms negotiations with Russia in 2010, all negotiations stalled. He did reduce the number of American soldiers deployed on the ground, as well as expenditure in that regard. However, it is difficult to establish how much economy was made, since Washington has been also using private contractors in the Middle East and after the withdrawal it enhanced the use of drones.

### **3. The reinvention of American leadership in the international arena under President Trump**

Donald Trump won due to a speech stating that the United States have dispersed their strength by involving in so many areas across the globe, that it was time it focused more on the inner aspects of the country. His approach was an isolationist one, but not one that would harm the exceptionalism view of the country. On the contrary, the country remained an exceptionalist one, but it was high time others started taking matters into their own

hands and no longer rely on US interventionism. This was the most visible in the discourse towards NATO. “Trump did not offer a conventional “Come Home, America”-style program of isolationism. Instead, he promised kick-ass confrontation”[8]. He thus challenged the very essence of US foreign policy, “its external purposes, its internal cohesion and its chances of success”[9].

Days before his inauguration, Donald Trump described NATO as “obsolete”[10], generating debates on the future position of the US within the Alliance, as well as concern among the European allies as to what future American help lies ahead for them in the event of such a need. His claim that NATO is obsolete fails to take notice of the manner in which NATO has been adapting its instruments and policies to respond to the most varied of threats, from terrorism (in the post 9/11 framework) to cyber defense and social media[11].

Trump’s view of NATO had also been previously expressed before accepting his nomination for the presidential run, when he claimed that American help within NATO might be conditioned by NATO allies complying with their commitments to the US. Despite the strength of article V and the fact that there is no financial leverage on participation and support receiving within NATO, Trump went further and stated that future NATO support depended on the willingness of member countries to pay more for American protection[12]. He was thus redefining what it would mean, from then onwards, to be a partner of the US. It was no longer the super-hero speech of Obama, claiming that the US “was ready to lead once more”, but a more responsibility-and-pressure imbued one, claiming that US partnership brought benefits, but also huge responsibilities that no one could any longer ignore.

The “NATO debt” theme was featured also in Trump’s first meetings with European allies -namely the United Kingdom and Germany; while the first was among the

few countries that had already met the 2014 goal of spending 2% of GDP on defense, Germany was a “free rider” and that was visible in the reiteration of the US President immediately after his meeting with Chancellor Angela Merkel: “Many nations owe vast sums of money from past years, and it is very unfair to the United States. These nations must pay what they owe”[13]. He fails to see the heart of the alliance, Article V – the mutual defense commitment, which transcends financial aspects. Trump’s perspective is that the US allies should help the latter by acting towards solving conflicts in their own region and thus ensure that the US is relieved of the burden of intervening.

“America first” policy was featured by Trump in his inaugural speech -“Trump rode to victory as the candidate who promised to do both more and less than Obama. He offered the voters a resolute call to arms and relief from the burdens of global leadership (...) the problem with American foreign policy, he suggested, was not a simple case of too-costly over commitment. It was the result of something more ominous: the ill will of friends and foes, and the moral culpability of our own leaders”[14]. While Obama was in search of the perfect recipe to reconstruct the country’s image within the international arena (badly damaged by the Bush administration rhetoric and stance on Iraq), Trump’s discourse seems to be undermining international confidence in the country’s ability to be a beacon of strength and power in uncertain times[15] as “he sensed that the public wanted relief from the burdens of global leadership without losing the thrill of nationalist self-assertion. America could cut back its investment in world order with no whiff of retreat”[16]. Trumps proffers a different type of US leadership, one in which all allies “pitch in”.

President Trump tends to transfer the practices and means of the business world to that of foreign policy – “His admiration for ‘strong’ leaders, irrespective of their

policy or human rights records history, apparently is a product of his experience in the business world—uninformed by standard diplomatic procedure or ‘presidential’ norms”[17].

The particular foreign policy that President Trump is currently engaged in includes the peculiar attitudes towards Russian Federation and North Korea. He is committed to engaging in a working relation with Russia, ignoring the danger posed by Russia to Eastern Europe and not only, through its involvement in Ukraine and Crimea (an involvement which Trump chose not to refer to).

Trump’s perspective on national interests and sovereignty resembles that in Moscow, and it is likely to ensure his acceptance with the Moscow leader[18]. Speaking the same language of politics might soften the channel of future discussions. Furthermore, Trump seems eager not to enrage Russia through its involvement in Syria, as the American president seems to be contemplating a Syria with Assad in it and this would be a pro-Russian regime contended. As far as North Korea is concerned, the exchange of communications between President Trump and Kim Jong-un are likely to lead to an arms race from leading positions on both sides, which will hardly end in direct confrontations.

#### **4. Changes in perspectives or how to build effective institutional leadership**

Changes in perspective, as far as foreign policy are concerned, are the most visible in the National Security Strategies issued under the mandates of the two presidents. These documents contain both the ideological approach to foreign policy, as well as instruments and policies to be followed by each administration in its quest to maintain or restore the United States to the position of a great power able to provide the example-to-be-followed by the rest of the international community.

Obama’s inaugural speech of January 2009 was an example of the role of global

protector the US has to maintain through its foreign policy agenda: “Know that America is a friend of each nation and every man, woman and child who seeks a future of peace and dignity, and that we are ready to lead once more”[19]. The National Security Strategy of 2010 is such an example of this rhetoric. The Strategy highlights the fact that the American military forces are the basis of American security, but they are not enough – they need to be combined with diplomacy and intelligence and law enforcement.

NSS 2010 emphasizes the need to cooperate with friends and allies, especially with influential nations, such as Brazil, South Africa and Indonesia, as well as with strong nations such as Russia, China and India, on challenges such as terrorism, extremism and insurgency, the spread of nuclear weapons and materials, climate change, global growth, developing sustainability, conflict prevention. “Our relationship with our European allies remains the cornerstone for US engagement with the world, and a catalyst for international action”[20].

The key feature of the Strategy is the need to lead and thus provide an example to be replicated by the other nations, while maintaining the leadership to the maiden ship - “Our national security strategy is, therefore, focused on renewing American leadership so that we can more effectively advance our interests in the 21<sup>st</sup> century”[21]. In addition to this, “Our moral leadership is grounded principally in the power of our example”[22].

Strengthening homeland security needs to be done in conjunction with national security, and should focus on key elements, such as: defense, diplomacy, economy, development (especially civilian development capability), homeland security (to be able to confront new threats as well as evolving ones), intelligence, strategic communication and the private sector[23].

The same line is upgraded in the next National Security Strategy of 2015. The

backbone of this strategy are the economic strength and security. Economic strength is the fundament of national security. Strategic patience is the concept featured in the introduction, a concept made necessary by the example of the US intervention in Iraq. However, the country's capacity to lead is featured clearly in the introduction, stating that "America must lead"[24] and that despite the many challenges it has been confronted with, it still has "a unique capability to lead the international community"[25]. And it concludes by stating that "American global leadership remains indispensable" [26] in the face of challenges and threats, such as terrorism, nuclear weapons, climate change, as well as air, land, naval and cybersecurity. The mantra of NSS 2015 is for the United States to lead by example, which is a sample of the American exceptionalism and missionary spirit.

On the other hand, the first National Security Strategy issued under President Trump, in December 2017, states as its aim the need to "make America great again" [27] implying thus a certain fall in strength and exceptionalism. The means is to rally the world against rogue regimes and threats, not by assuming the leadership position, but rather by determining allies and partner countries to step up their security policy and engage more actively in their protection against threats.

Paradoxically, the NSS 2017 promotes the need to ensure protection for the homeland and its people, by addressing numerous threats such as WMD, biothreats and pandemics, border control and immigration policy, Jihadist terrorism, and transnational criminal organizations [28] to name but a few, at the same time as renewing strategic confidence by

advertising a stronger inward orientation of the nation. What is more, NSS 2017 proclaims itself to be an expression of principled realism[29], focusing on the penchant of national interests. The essence is the same as in the previous two strategies, carefully summed-up in the phrase "America's values and influence underwritten by American power, make the world more free, secure and prosperous"[30].

## 5. Conclusions

The major question for any administration is whether there are enough economic resources that could be employed in such an endeavour, on the one hand, and whether there is necessity for the well-being of the US for such involvement. "A president trying to change policy can also hurt himself if he misunderstands America's power position—and is misled by his own rhetoric"[31]. This might be the case of both, as both Obama and Trump promised to deliver on foreign policy and failed to do so. Yet, President Trump has still time to correct such an approach, given the fact that he has the example established by the previous administration.

Taking everything into consideration, American foreign policy under both presidents has not been significantly different, as both employed a specific type of retrenchment that could preserve at the same time, both American forces and their stand as an exceptional power in the eyes of the international community. The major challenge right now is to build leadership without an acute resort to militarization policies and without exploiting again the "permanent warfare" state that has been characterizing the United States in the past decades since President Clinton.

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