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# U.S. Foreign Policy in Theory and Practice: From Soviet-Era Containment to the Era of the Arab Uprising(s)

Marianna Charountaki

**ABSTRACT** This article aims to pursue a brief but enlightening comparative study of U.S. discourse and practice of various U.S. presidential administrations toward the Middle East from World War II to the present day. The goal is to evaluate the current status of U.S. foreign policy on the occasion of the Arab uprisings and to disclose the centrality of the “national interest” in the formulation of U.S. foreign policy. The “Arab Spring” and the transformation of the Middle East as a region crucial to U.S. interests have presented a golden opportunity for U.S. policymakers to reassess strategies and reconsider both policies and tactics. The analysis argues that a gradual intensification characterizes both discourse and policies. I present arguments about the five phases U.S. policy has undergone and also discuss the “Individual Realism” and “Opportunistic Humanitarianism” that U.S. foreign policy has been founded on and shaped by. Barack Obama’s presidency has not altered U.S. foreign policy discourse or practice much; even more significant, during his time in office, Obama does not seem to have left his own mark.

**KEYWORDS** Arab uprisings; foreign policy; Middle Eastern politics; national interest; U.S. administrations; U.S. discourse; War on Terror

The days when Churchill and Roosevelt could sit down over a bottle of brandy and settle the world’s problems were long gone. Obama often found himself dealing with a host of emerging powers, configured in a variety of ways on a variety of issues. The Cold War doctrine may have been . . . more disastrous than this New World Order but it was a lot simpler.<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

The “Arab Spring,” initiated by societal revolts starting on December 17, 2010, in Tunisia, is a term used to designate “regime change” on the road to regional democratization. This has either taken the form of an absolute civilian uprising as was the case in Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen or militarized uprisings as was eventually the case with Libya and Syria. Surprisingly, the dimensions of the first incident, which spread throughout the MENA

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(Middle East & North Africa) region, are striking. Whether fabricated or the result of the people's will to seek rights, justice, and freedom, the Arab uprisings are not a recent phenomenon, but date back to the Iraqi War (2003) and the U.S. policy of "regime change" dictating the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime as a result of domestic turbulence incited by Saddam's absolute rule and a Kurdish revolt encouraged and supported by external forces. The new reality that makes the difference is not the lack of any regional or international interference, but rather the outbreak of a series of revolts in different regions simultaneously. Additionally, these revolts from Egypt and Libya to Syria represent different cases in which demands for a fair and just order, an end to authoritarianism, some plans to ameliorate poverty, and the guarantee of civil rights suffered from the insurgents' lack of a clear strategic vision—especially with the fragmentation between Islamic and fundamentalist groups and the more nationalistically oriented segments of each society. Remarkably, the Arab uprisings fit within the context of the U.S. discourse on the "support for democracy"<sup>2</sup> and "respect for human rights"<sup>3</sup> as was set out in President George W. Bush's Plan for the Greater Middle East Initiative (GMEI, November 2003), which posited a transformation of the Arab and Muslim world that was in need of change—in order to promote U.S. interests in the region.

This research builds on my previous extensive study of U.S. foreign policy in general and of the Middle East in particular.<sup>4</sup> The literature on U.S. foreign policy is extensive, but extensive scholarly work and analysis of the Arab uprisings are scant—especially in their interplay with the U.S. foreign policy discourse and practice. This is an emergent phenomenon and still in progress.<sup>5</sup> Most of the writings so far stem from media outlets as scholarly accounts are confined either to the happenings in each country of interest or future prospects that favor specific regions or actors.<sup>6</sup>

This analysis aims to reflect on U.S. foreign policy practice and the theory that informs its discourse since World War II through a comparative study of the U.S. presidencies that have shaped each period. The scope of this study encompasses questioning the continuity or change in U.S. foreign policy discourse and practice since the Truman administration during the cold war up to the post-cold war era

and attempts to ascertain the consistency between the U.S. foreign policy practice and its discourse prior to and after the 9/11 attacks up to the outbreak of the 2010 events in the Middle East. Looking at U.S. foreign policy discourse, the analysis singles out the role of U.S. "national interest," which appears entangled with U.S. strategy. An analysis of how these different phases of U.S. presidencies have affected U.S. interests and how U.S. priorities affect the current situation in the Middle East vis-à-vis the Arab uprisings will be offered. Finally, bear in mind that the Arab uprisings have, to date, occurred under a single administration and therefore occupy less analytical space—yet their significance seems already to be shaping the future of the Middle East's landscape.

Given the limited literature available and because of the contemporary nature of the subject matter, my evidence is drawn from reports and U.S. official documents and statements, including presidential remarks in major speeches, as well as books written by U.S. policymakers—members of the current administration.

## THE COLD WAR PERIOD: THE SUPREMACY OF THE "NATIONAL INTEREST"

From the Democrat Harry S. Truman's Doctrine (1945–1953) to the Democrat Barack Obama's foreign policy orientation, little seems to have altered the scope of U.S. foreign policy discourse and practice. What has changed, though, is the gradual intensity that characterizes U.S. foreign policy practice. President Truman shifted the United States from a policy of *détente* to the containment of the Soviet communism as outlined in the "X" article of George Kennan's Long Telegram (February 1946)—further institutionalized through the Middle East Defense Organization and Middle East Command, as well as later in the Baghdad Pact in 1955—and the National Security Council Report 68 (NSC-68, 30/09/1950).

Similarly, President Dwight D. Eisenhower (R.—1953–1961) would intensify U.S. involvement in world affairs and in the Middle East in particular by encouraging the overthrow of Middle Eastern regimes via covert operations carried out by U.S. intelligence services. The 1953 coup d'état in Iran

is a case in point. President Lyndon B. Johnson (D.—1963–1969) also intensified U.S. overseas involvement with his escalation during the Vietnam War. Johnson seems to have suffered the same fate as President George W. Bush (R.—2001–2009) whose reputation was damaged badly by his 2003 decision to begin an enduring and costly war against Iraq.

Eisenhower also initiated a nuclear deterrence policy to end the Korean War. Similar to the Truman Doctrine, Eisenhower's Doctrine, articulated in January 1957, also advanced the same U.S. foreign policy imperatives of promoting U.S. liberal and democratic values worldwide and containment of the Soviet Union.<sup>7</sup> President John F. Kennedy (D.—1961–1963) continued Eisenhower's containment policy, expanding it to Latin America and elsewhere. The 1961 invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs is illustrative of this approach; Kennedy also tried to implement a nonproliferation policy during his short time in office.

Clearly, then, U.S. foreign policy discourse and practice as pursued by the different presidents during the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries trod the same path, with very minor variations. They were all preoccupied with international stability under U.S. leadership; preservation of the status quo, and maintaining the balance of power, especially in the oil-rich Gulf region; strong confrontation of revisionist powers such as the Soviets and the ideology of communism; protection of the flow of petroleum to the West; and expansion of world trade. Other concerns included emphasizing the importance of democracy, armaments control, and recognition and support of the state of Israel. Alliances with other nation-states as counterbalances were crucial to U.S. foreign policy strategy. According to Truman, "one of the primary objectives of the foreign policy of the U.S. is the creation of conditions in which we and other nations will be able to work out a life free from coercion . . . to help free people through their own efforts to maintain their free institutions and national integrity against aggressive movements that seek to impose totalitarian regimes on them."<sup>8</sup> As "preeminent among nations," the United States would work for the "limitation and control of all armaments" and "the expansion of world trade on a sound and fair basis."<sup>9</sup> Eisenhower, likewise, declared that "the U.S. was called to take the status of a world power . . . as our destiny,"<sup>10</sup> while President Johnson stated

on May 23, 1967, that "the U.S. was committed to supporting the political independence and territorial integrity of all nations of the [Middle Eastern] area."<sup>11</sup>

Based on the Wilsonian concept—the "belief that the U.S. is exercising power legitimately only when it is doing so on behalf of someone or something else"<sup>12</sup>—coupled with *realpolitik*, the policies of President Richard Nixon (R.—1969–1974) are identified by the same commitment to "support growth in Africa, Asia and Latin America, freeing the world, transforming the Soviet system and strengthening democracies through cooperation."<sup>13</sup> This statement demonstrates that U.S. foreign policy was pivoting toward Asia and regions other than the Middle East long before the present decade. Every single corner of this planet has been the focus of U.S. foreign policy and this interest is articulated in the analysis contained in U.S. National Security Strategy reports done during the administration of Barack Obama. Obama's opening to China can clearly be traced back to Nixon's first visit to the People's Republic of China in 1972. Nixon's policy of *détente* in his relations with the Soviet Union and China—sealed with SALT I and leading to the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty—demonstrates the employment of the "soft power" policy that Obama seeks to pursue today. Commitment to the Israeli–Palestinian peace process and Israel's security;<sup>14</sup> the understanding that the United States could not act alone if it claimed global leadership<sup>15</sup> (which resulted in the rapprochement with both China and the Soviet Union as well as Nixon's achievement in ending U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War [1973] as Obama did with the War in Iraq [December 2011]), and, finally, Nixon's "Twin Pillars" doctrine (1972) all imply continuing commitment to the U.S. objectives of maintaining an unaltered U.S. foreign policy strategy as it was during Nixon's presidency and the tenure of Henry Kissinger as secretary of state.<sup>16</sup>

Nixon's presidency was a second turning point for U.S. foreign policy following World War II. U.S. foreign policy shifted dramatically from a prolonged political distancing from world affairs toward indirect political involvement. Not only was U.S. foreign policy practice escalated under Nixon's proxy policies, but U.S. interest in non-state actors, either religious or ethnic, is also probably rooted in this period.

Not until the 1960s and 1970s, following various acts by religious and nationalist movements on an international level, did U.S. foreign policy begin to engage with issues involving non-state entities. The reorientation of U.S. foreign policy toward specific state and non-state players in an effort to preserve the international and regional status quo was achieved through Nixon's security strategy.

Following the foreign policy practices of his predecessors, Nixon's commitment to the U.S. national interest was communicated within the same framework of U.S. discourse of "practicing a balance of power, combining idealism...that is...American values of consistency, conviction and public support...and pragmatism" since "in the formation of foreign policy, both 'security and morality' should be combined."<sup>17</sup> Nixon's rational policy, based more on the balance of power against the use of force vis-à-vis his policies of the reduction in the arms arsenals of both United States and the U.S.S.R. and the use of regional powers as bases to facilitate U.S. objectives in the wider region, reminds one of President Bill Clinton's or President Barack Obama's favoring of "low politics" policies; both, however, ultimately succumbed to assertive policies. The policy of counterterrorism was not developed under the most recent U.S. presidents, but emerged in response to a need to institutionalize the combat against terrorism, especially after incidents such as the 1972 hijacking of a U.S. aircraft to Algeria. In this context, the creation of the Cabinet Committee to Combat Terrorism and the Working Group on Terrorism (1972), under the auspices of the State Department, was aimed at confronting religious radicalism and terrorist acts.<sup>18</sup>

The Watergate scandal (1974) brought the Republican Gerald Ford to the presidency (1974–1977); he was succeeded by the Democrat Jimmy Carter (1977–1981). This period had the same U.S. foreign policy discourse and practice of promoting democratization and human rights and counterinsurgency policies—similar to President Obama's foreign policy. Thus, the policy of non-proliferation, the reduction in military expenditure as was delineated in SALT II, the multilateralism of the Camp David Accords (1978), and the establishment of The Carter Center (1982), go hand in hand with the arming of the *mujabideen* in Afghanistan—covertly begun by Present Carter and continued openly by President

Ronald Reagan. Other forays include aid to the Contras in Nicaragua as well as the armament of the anticommunists in Ethiopia and Angola and the establishment of strategic bases worldwide, and the creation of the Rapid Deployment Force in the Gulf. All these demonstrate a similarity among the tactical strategies of all these presidents.

The rise of Ruhollah Khomeini's Shiism (another expansionist ideology) in Iran (1979), the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December of the same year, and the Iran hostage crisis (1979–1981) intensified the militarization of U.S. foreign policy, which reached its peak during Gulf War I (1990–1991). The United States continued to pursue the same policies of containing both Soviet communism and radical religious ideologies—along with supporting the sovereignty of Israel.

During Reagan's presidency (1981–1989), the same speeches extolling America as "the greatest force for peace anywhere favoring the spread of democracy throughout the world and recognizably consistent with the national interests of the U.S.,"<sup>19</sup> were to be heard. Reagan used the same rhetoric of democracy and human rights based on realistic U.S. objectives.

Indicative of the continuation of U.S. foreign policy practice is the White House's traditional two-track policy toward Libya and Iran. That is, "the administration's elimination of one Middle East source of terrorism while it was trading arms with another."<sup>20</sup> Both the Carter and the Obama administrations launched a two-track strategy of pressure and incentives to negotiate with Iran.<sup>21</sup> In addition, Obama's Libyan policy does not seem to differ much from the Reagan administration's policy of trying to eliminate Qaddafi—in place since the 1986 bombing of Libya and justified by U.S. accusations that Qaddafi supported terrorist groups that had struck against American diplomats. President Reagan is said to have gone so far as to describe Qaddafi as the "mad dog of the Middle East" and a "cancer to be cut out." According to Reagan, Americans "seek peaceful avenues before resorting to the use of force...[but] none succeeded"—an assertion central to the U.S. rhetoric before the declaration of the second Iraqi War (2003).<sup>22</sup> In 1986, George Shultz would state that "the United States had a legal right to use military force against states that support terrorism" in the same vein as George W. Bush

after the 9/11 attacks and Obama.<sup>23</sup> However, the repetition of this wording is not surprising given that Reagan's vice president was George H. W. Bush (president, 1989–1993). The attack on Libya was said to have been linked to the U.S. determination for “a chance to begin a new phase in the American counterterrorism struggle—the direct use of military force.”<sup>24</sup>

Similarities between the discourses of both presidencies, those of Reagan and of Obama, can be also discerned in the former's National Security Strategy objectives (January 1988): to “restore America's economic strength,” to “restore America's military strength,” to “restore the nation's international prestige as a world leader,” and, finally, to “restore pride among all Americans.”<sup>25</sup> This kind of “reset policy” was what Obama tried to pursue directly once he succeeded George W. Bush. What makes the difference is Obama's extensive use of the international community for the implementation of his strategy.

Indeed, Reagan admitted that “the fundamentals of the U.S. strategy change little from year to year [as] our interests and objectives are derived from enduring values.”<sup>26</sup> In this sense, he pursued the “elimination of intermediate-range nuclear forces and cut U.S. and Soviet strategic offensive arms by 50 percent,” which can be viewed within the same context as Obama's “reset” toward Russia and his non-proliferation policies. Bush, as did all his predecessors, also supported the position that “approaching the 21st century, the fundamental values that have guided the U.S. for over two centuries have not changed. Our basic national interests and objectives and the requirement for American leadership are still the same. But our strategy has changed to position us better to lead in a world which has changed as well.”<sup>27</sup>

The post-cold war era, marked by an explicit U.S. political interventionism with the direct use of force, ushered in a third change for U.S. foreign policy practice. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a unipolar international system, coinciding with the rise of a series of ethnic and radical politico-religious-oriented non-state actors, were taken seriously into consideration even by national foreign policymakers. Foreign policymaking was thus no longer entirely monopolized by state entities since newly emergent state and non-state entities

arose, which also shifted the attention of international relations away from its exclusive dominance by interstate relations.<sup>28</sup>

## THE POST-COLD WAR ERA: DEMOCRACY VERSUS WAR

The beginning of George H. W. Bush's presidency (1989–1993) was characterized by the same U.S. rhetoric about U.S. responsibility “to make kinder the face of the nation and gentler the face of the world.” The Republican president would state in his inaugural address that “America is never wholly herself unless she is engaged in high moral principle.” It seems, then, that U.S. foreign policy continues to reside in a realist agenda for the pursuit of its interests founded on moral principles. The difference with Bush, though, was that he launched a “new engagement... a new activism... that gets the job done.”<sup>29</sup> In this context, national defense strategy fundamentals comprised deterrence and defense, a turn toward which Obama has also recently made, as well as forward presence, crisis response, and, again, reconstitution. Deterring nuclear attacks as the U.S. foreign policy's top priority can be traced throughout this period (1989–1993).<sup>30</sup>

Bush's National Security Directive 26 (NSD, October 2, 1989) as well as NSD45 (August 20, 1990) merely repeated the American traditional security interests.<sup>31</sup> The importance of the Middle East, the containment of states holding nuclear weapons and supportive of terrorism as well as the use of direct force were central to his strategy. National Security Directive 54 (January 15, 1991) confirmed that the United States would use military force against any power with interests inimical to vital U.S. security interests, including access to Persian Gulf oil or the security of key friendly states in the region in the same way the Carter Doctrine (January 23, 1980)<sup>32</sup> had a decade earlier.<sup>33</sup>

### The “Indispensable Nation”<sup>34</sup>

The arrival of Bill Clinton in the Oval Office (1993–2001) ushered in the fourth major change in U.S. foreign policy. Even though George Shultz, secretary of state at the time, had stated in the 1980s that the United States had a legal right to use military force against states that supported terrorism, Clinton

expanded the concept of containment of global terrorism against both state, such as a nuclear Iran, and non-state actors, associating them with terrorist groups. According to Clinton, “U.S. strategy is founded on continued U.S. principled engagement and leadership abroad.”<sup>35</sup> Obama also incorporated the same ideas in his foreign policy discourse, but his policies were more targeted—in contrast to Clinton’s limitless “engagement and enlargement.”<sup>36</sup> Hitherto, Clinton’s “spread of democracy, human rights and respect for the rule of law not only reflect American values, but advance the [U.S.] security and prosperity as core objectives of the U.S. strategy [since] U.S. international leadership [lies in] the power of [these] democratic ideals and values” is found unaltered.<sup>37</sup>

Even though Clinton’s foreign policy agenda appeared more pacifistic, focused on the balance of power and the spread of democratic values and economic development, his administration’s long-term practical objectives remained the dual containment of Iraq and Iran. Martin Indyk, assistant secretary of state for Near East affairs in the Clinton administration, considered Iran’s containment the *sine qua non*, given U.S. perceptions of Iran’s willingness to acquire (and use) nuclear and conventional weapons, to undermine the Arab–Israeli peace process, and to promote worldwide terrorism. U.S. foreign policy discourse was thus radicalized further, with Clinton stating that “when our vital interests are challenged, or the will and conscience of the international community is defied, we will act—with peaceful diplomacy whenever possible, with force when necessary.”<sup>38</sup> It is striking how the two Democrats’ policies resemble each other, considering that President Obama also started with a pacific discourse in Cairo (2009) until the Libyan war (2011) and the extensive use of drones. Indeed, in his 2010 National Security Strategy, Obama also argued in favor of “diplomacy but if necessary the use of force” as tools for the achievement of his strategic goals.<sup>39</sup>

Clinton signed the Iraq Liberation Act in 1998; it was the platform for George W. Bush’s doctrine (September 9, 2002) of preemption against state and non-state actors in the context of the U.S. War on Terror. It gave different dimensions to the U.S. policies of multilateralism, the promotion of democracy through regime change, and the intensification of militarization through an all-out use of force—the fifth and last

change in U.S. foreign policy practice. This does not mean, though, that Bush was not also committed to the same discourse as his predecessors, that is, “America’s vital interests and our deepest beliefs are one.”<sup>40</sup> Events such as the 9/11 attacks expanded foreign policy analysis, marking and shaping U.S. foreign policy discourse and practice for years.

The post–cold war era advanced the study of foreign policy, disregarded until the 1950s, while the rise of a series of ethnic and politico-religious radically oriented groups and the influential role of non-state actors in foreign policymaking changed the concept of foreign policy. As has already been explored, the U.S. policy of counterterrorism is not a new phenomenon that rose after the events of 9/11 but had already emerged during the 1970s. Starting with the Cabinet Committee to Combat Terrorism and the Working Group on Terror under the auspices of the U.S. State Department in 1972, the gradual militarization of the U.S. discourse and policies following Nixon was confirmed with Carter’s arming of the *mujahideen* in Afghanistan and the Iran Gate (1986) scandal during the Reagan administration. Thus, the very U.S. policy of direct use of force during the 1980s and 1990s can be said to have contributed to the 9/11 attacks. The main component of Osama bin Laden’s rhetoric—U.S. occupation troops on the ground of the holy lands of Muhammad—had not been an accidental choice. The post–cold war period saw the institutionalization of the direct use of force under George H. W. Bush’s NSD26, and NSD45 directives, under the presidency of Bill Clinton, as well as under George W. Bush’s doctrine of “preemption” against state and non-state actors in the context of the U.S. War on Terror.

The cold war had the Carter Doctrine, which dictated the use of direct military force against any power with interests inimical to vital U.S. security concerns; the following two presidents, George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton, continued such practice. During their presidencies, the Middle East rose in importance, while, the containment of both state and non-state possessors of nuclear weapons and supporters of terrorism was prioritized, and the use of direct force legitimized—these defined the frame in which U.S. foreign policy and discourse was developed after the cold war—and then came the seismic impact of 9/11.

## The 9/11 Attacks and the New World Order

The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., on September 11, 2001, shaped U.S. foreign policy practice during the Bush and Obama administrations. However Bush had sought “to create a balance of power” initially,<sup>41</sup> he failed to do so; no matter how willing Obama was to deviate greatly from his predecessor’s policies, his policies to date have demonstrated the linear nature of U.S. foreign policy—which remains unchanged. This rectilinear movement (with the occasional circling back) has identified U.S. foreign policy practice and discourse since World War II, albeit slight divergences were seen in Obama’s decision to undertake a military operation in Libya (March 29, 2011), in the use of drones, and in the capture and death of Osama bin Laden—as well as in his inability to close the Guantanamo Bay detention camp after objections from Congress.<sup>42</sup> Ultimately, both administrations were consumed by the same squandering of resources in two wars, Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the overthrow and hanging of Saddam Hussein and the killing of Osama bin Laden. Despite the different rhetoric (as will be explored later), the same policies have been continued—thus, we can argue about changes in tactics but not in foreign policy strategy overall.

Likewise, Obama’s shift to Asia does not signal a new strategy—President Clinton’s Integrated Strategy—a New Pacific Community was established in the 1990s—apart from his policy in Southwest Asia that was focused on deterring threats to regional stability from Iraq and Iran.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, China—as the largest source of U.S. imports—was placed at the center of George W. Bush’s strategy to promote a stable, peaceful, and prosperous Asia-Pacific region. According to Condoleezza Rice when she served as secretary of state, “the last eight years have also challenged us to deal with rising Chinese influence; [therefore] it is incumbent on the U.S. to find areas of cooperation and strategic agreement with Russia and China.”<sup>44</sup> Bush’s aim to “refocus [the U.S. relationship with Russia] on emerging and potential common interests and challenges” is illuminating.<sup>45</sup>

The War on Terror as a continuation of the U.S. enmity to radicalism in its religious forms is an

extension of the U.S. antipathy toward Soviet communism and, formerly, to Arab nationalism. As bad as the U.S.S.R. had been were now Iran and Iraq during George W. Bush’s presidency with the addition of North Korea as members of an “axis of evil” threatening international stability. The U.S. Manichean rhetoric of the “good” American against “rogue” actors molded the New World Order, which was primarily constructed on an all-out use of force in the name of humanitarian interventionism.

Following in the steps of Truman who got the United States involved and fought a war in Korea without prior congressional approval (August 1950), George W. Bush overrode the UN Security Council and declared war against Saddam’s Iraq on March 20, 2003. The containment of global terrorism and the destruction of weapons of mass destruction (WMD)—which the previous administration had already pointed to as a major threat to U.S. security—were not new policies but an intensification of George H. W. Bush’s (father to George W. Bush) practices. The War on Terror, which Obama shrunk to target only “al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and their associated forces” has monopolized the U.S. foreign policy agenda in the twenty-first century.<sup>46</sup>

### The Arab Uprisings and Barack Obama’s Foreign Policy: Shifting from an Old to a New Paradigm?

For 60 years, the United States pursued stability at the expense of democracy in the Middle East—and we achieved neither. Now, we are taking a different course. We are supporting the democratic aspirations of all people.<sup>47</sup>

As much as Obama started his campaign as an antiwar candidate, the president’s taking office coincided with a war in Iraq, a sweeping financial crisis (2008), and a war against Al Qaeda and its affiliated networks as a result of the previous administration’s response to 9/11.<sup>48</sup> These global events that framed the years to come not only made difficult the rebalancing of foreign policy along with domestic politics, but also did not allow Obama’s foreign policy outlook to diverge much from that of his predecessor.

What has probably changed is the scale and intensity of the pursuit of the U.S. core “national interest.”



Even though Obama has succeeded in ending U.S. involvement in the war in Iraq, he has increased U.S. forces in Afghanistan. Even though he signed a New Start arms control treaty with Russia (2009), he still continued a zealous strategy of counterterrorism (shifting from counterinsurgency as practiced in Iraq) and the extensive use of drones. Even though Obama called for a new beginning between the Muslims and the United States (Cairo speech, June 4, 2009), he intervened in Libya, sanctioned Iran (2011), and opposed the Palestinian Authority's bid for statehood through the National Security Council (NSC, September 2011). While Obama succeeded in having Al Qaeda's founder killed, acts of terror still occur on American soil—the most recent being the bombing of the Boston Marathon (April 15, 2013). The president has stated that “the unrest in the Arab world has allowed extremists to gain a foothold in countries like Libya and Syria,” but decades earlier the Reagan administration was preoccupied with Libya and U.S. fears about Libya's associations with extremist forces like Hezbollah and in Syria and Iran.<sup>49</sup>

The Arab uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and Syria constitute another surprising event that once more altered the Middle Eastern political climate. Regardless of the Obama administration's discourse on America's pivot to Asia, Obama's Presidential Study Directive 11 “Political Reform in the Middle East and North Africa” (August 12, 2010) indicates the importance of the region for U.S. foreign policy.<sup>50</sup> Likewise, Obama's focus in his UN speech (September 25, 2012) on the containment of a nuclear-armed Iran, the importance of Israel's and the Gulf's security in tandem with the stability of the global economy reveal the perpetuation of the same U.S. foreign policy goals in the region.

Following George W. Bush's Greater Middle East Initiative (November 2003) aimed at regional democratization,<sup>51</sup> Obama issued the Presidential Study Directive 11 (PSD-11) in 2010 ordering officials “to study ways of promoting change in the Middle Eastern countries [since] the Obamians saw the events...as the beginning of transformational changes...and a new era [where] authoritarian leaders like Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak were no longer forces for regional stability. Their regimes were shaky [therefore] the U.S. could serve its own

long-term interests by identifying itself with the forces for change (that is the Muslim Brotherhood).”<sup>52</sup> After Tunisia, Obama argued “this old paradigm was broken.”<sup>53</sup> For the first time, Obama intervened to put pressure on Egyptian president Mubarak's regime to resign, claiming that a policy serving both “idealism through the pursuit of democratic change and realism would win popular support in a country of strategic importance.”<sup>54</sup> “Obama went before TV cameras to announce that he had told Mubarak that an orderly transition to a representative government ‘must begin now’...when reporters asked Robert Gibbs—the White House press secretary—what the president meant by ‘now’...he replied, ‘now means yesterday.’”<sup>55</sup>

## **EPILOGUE: THE U.S. “NATIONAL INTEREST” THROUGH THE LENS OF THE “ARAB SPRING”**

In previous findings, I have argued about the superiority of the U.S. “national interest” within a series of domestic or external structures that formulate U.S. foreign policy. I perceive the U.S. “national interest” as America's broad interests—other than its objectives, which are interconnected with the ideology and practice of U.S. foreign policy—the survival, military dominance, and the spread of democracy, economic prosperity, and peace as the driving forces behind U.S. foreign policy actions.<sup>56</sup> Bill Clinton distinguished three different categories: the “vital interests, those of broad, overriding importance to the survival...the national interests...and the humanitarian...[where] our nation may act because our values demand it” but ultimately they all appear to merge.<sup>57</sup> According to Rice, “the national interest is replaced with humanitarian interests or the interests of the international community. But the “sharp line between power politics and a principled foreign policy based on values would be a disaster for American foreign policy as American values are universal.”<sup>58</sup>

What was then being called “dualism” appears to have been nothing more than rhetoric vital to the explanation of foreign policy practices in need of rationalization and such rationale(s) are, in turn, grounded in a nationalistic discourse. I thus name this interdependence as “Individualistic Realism,”

coupled with an “Opportunistic Humanitarianism.”<sup>59</sup> It is individualistic because it is self-centered; opportunistic because it is tactical.<sup>60</sup> Thus, the first term suggests that “individuals may be state or non-state actors pursuing their foreign policy agenda aiming at the achievement of their interests to the maximum without regard to the dictates of the international environment to the extent that they target to remain intact from the need to be shaped by it” whereas the second implies “an occasional call for humanitarian values [as adjusted] to their national needs.”<sup>61</sup> The United States thus adopts a humanitarian approach adjusted to its interests for the legitimization of its actions.

Condoleezza Rice would interpret this same perception as, “the old dichotomy between realism and idealism has never really applied to the United States, because we do not really accept that our national interest and our universal ideals are at odds. For our nation, it has always been a matter of perspective. Even when our interests and ideals come into tension in the short run, we believe that in the long run they are indivisible.”<sup>62</sup> This is what she would call “Unique American Realism.”<sup>63</sup>

Although U.S. realism is one of absolute and “enlightened self-interest,” the U.S. strategy is unique.<sup>64</sup> What Obama’s administration realized only with the 2010 the Arab uprisings is that the “support of democratic transitions is a strategic necessity”<sup>65</sup> and that U.S. long-term interests could only be served by identifying itself with the forces for change. Rice, as George W. Bush’s national security adviser, had long since argued, “For six decades, under both Democratic and Republican administrations, a basic bargain defined the United States’ engagement in the broader Middle East; we supported authoritarian regimes, and they supported our shared interest in regional stability. After 9/11, it became increasingly clear that this old bargain had produced false stability. There were virtually no legitimate channels for political expression in the region. But this did not mean that there was no political activity. There was in madrasas and radical mosques. It is no wonder that the best organized political forces were extremist groups.”<sup>66</sup> In this sense, Barack Obama’s reorientation toward transforming U.S. policy from maintaining the regional balance of power into the promotion of democratic development in the Middle East as a top U.S. priority is a

fundamental interest in place since the previous administration.

What is observed then, as idealists would argue, is an interaction and an often tense relationship between U.S. foreign policy’s realistic aims coupled with its idealistic discourse; these factors codetermine U.S. national interest throughout the period(s) under examination. The “Arab Spring” thus came as another event that confirmed this perspective. Perhaps Obama’s administration, coming on the heels of that of George W. Bush, was no longer supportive of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East but was still unwilling to alter long-standing policies; the provision for a humanitarian discourse implemented through the means of military intervention for the protection of the citizenry reflects another aspect of this same interrelation between “Individualistic Realism” and “Opportunistic Humanitarianism.” The Iraq War (2003), the ongoing Afghan civil war, the U.S. 2011 humanitarian military intervention in Libya with the support of NATO and the international community as allied forces determined to topple Libya’s ruler, Muammar al-Qaddafi, let alone Syria, differ little in terms of discourse and intentions reflected in past U.S. foreign policy practice.

## THE CASES OF LIBYA AND SYRIA

In the case of Libya, a coalition began a military intervention (March 19, 2011) to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1973 in response to armed conflict during the Libyan civil war. In the case of Syria, Obama would argue in the same vein that the “U.S. should take military action against the Syrian regime.” Similarly, “there will be no American boots on the ground and action will be limited . . . designated to deter the Syrian government [from] gashing its own people.” Following the discourse of previous presidential administrations, Obama argues that “We are the United States of America and cannot take a blind eye . . . [and] ignore chemical weapons attacks. Failing to respond . . . would increase the risk that chemical weapons could be used again. They would fall in the hands of terrorists who might use them against us. This would pose a serious threat to our national security.”<sup>67</sup>

Although the same discourse was adopted in the case of Syria, U.S. policies were far more controlled,

contrary to the current administration's desire to continue George W. Bush's neoconservative strategy of "regime change" in the Middle East as reflected in his GMEI program. The lack of support from the international community (France's and United Kingdom's hesitancy); Bashar Al Assad's regional and international alliances; Syria's close proximity to Israel, where a border war is considered a threat; and certainly the reawakening of Russia's aspirations for greater influence in the broader region give possible explanations for the U.S. foreign policy stance toward Syria.<sup>68</sup> Other possible influences/considerations: Moscow's rearming of Syria, the limitations imposed on U.S. foreign policy by the rise of Islamic radicalism, the assassination (September 11, 2012) of U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens, the lack of engagement with different grassroots groups, the fighting of extremism, and, finally, Obama's favoring addressing domestic issues over foreign policy issues.

## CONCLUSION

U.S. foreign policy since the onset of its engagement in international affairs has not changed dramatically. Its steady involvement has thus kept the United States engaged in most of the regions where U.S. interests are at stake. The relation between U.S. practice and discourse is undisrupted as the one sought to legitimize the other. In that sense, their relations have grown equally to the extent that today an assertive foreign policy practice is followed by an ultra-pacifistic discourse.

A consistency between words and deeds was observed throughout the different periods—even when U.S. foreign policy practice and discourse were subjected to changes from one term of office to the other during the same administration. Hence, with the most evident rule that different developments dictated different tactics or even strategies, they always appeared to work to bolster the U.S. national interest. This inflexibility could probably also explain the lack of a long-term strategic vision, with each incident being dealt with individually in an effort to "adjust any given environment to its own needs rather than adapt itself to international events."<sup>69</sup>

The emergence of a series of new actors, either state or non-state and the empowerment of the regional ones have altered the existing balance of

power, with the most explicit example being the transformation of the political setting of the Middle East.

Hitherto, U.S. administrations appear to have continued more or less the linear—in the sense of uninterrupted—U.S. foreign policy with controlled fluctuations. In the case of Barack Obama's presidency, which seems to be mired in inertia and lacking clear orientation, this raises questions about the extent to which presidents enjoy the freedom of imposing their own agenda to the extent that scholarly works claim that "Washington has changed Obama far more than he has changed Washington."<sup>70</sup> The Syrian crisis is a case in point: the U.S. administration was driven by the same desire to implement and impose its discourse and thus policies but that proved impossible. Such had also been the case in the formulation of George W. Bush's foreign policy—probably the starting point in contemporary politics, driven by the bipartisan neoconservative team in the U.S. administration, the interests of which have also raised questions about their policies' alignment with U.S. core national interests.

In that sense, the lack of concrete policies and a coherent and long-term U.S. strategic vision of how to preserve enduring U.S. interests appear to have damaged the U.S. image, while, at the same time, weakening Middle Eastern states because neither targeted action nor a firm commitment to a clear strategic long-term vision seems to exist. This indecisiveness and uncertainty have trapped U.S. foreign policy—demonstrated even in Barack Obama's rhetoric between the two terms (2009–2012, 2012 to present)—in a Catch-22. The bigger loser, though, appears to be the Middle Eastern polities that are being dragged day by day to anarchy and the state of paralysis that run counter of the achievement of freedom, justice, and rights. The current state of affairs, though, constitutes an *impetus* for U.S. foreign policy to reassess its objectives and the environment in which it tries to achieve them.

The takeover of U.S. foreign policy by the War on Terror has proven dangerous for U.S. national interests in the Middle East. This obsession has started to gradually drive U.S. influence out of regional political alliances—the most recent case being the Syrian crisis. Thus, the impact of 9/11 and its results can be observed today in the constrained U.S. Middle

Eastern foreign policy choices. Barack Obama's reset policy of gradual diversion from regional Middle Eastern to Asia-Pacific politics or the administration's turn to domestic politics has left U.S. Middle Eastern policy at an impasse.

The United States must seize the moment or lose the opportunity to reflect on the effectiveness of its strategies in the Middle East. The passing from the era of the Founding Fathers when realist policies were viewed (and pursued) through an ethical lens to that of the forty-third and forty-fourth presidents—when circumstances outweighed idealism makes realism imperative. Barack Obama's attempts to achieve a rapprochement with Iran and a resolution of its nuclear issue as well as recent declarations of intent to withdraw from Afghanistan by 2016 and "to shift our [U.S.] counterterrorism strategy...to more effectively partner with countries where terrorist networks seek a foothold" should be viewed as positive developments within this context.<sup>71</sup> The U.S. paradigm in response to the Arab uprisings was to support democratic change and to follow a policy of humanitarian intervention; this was challenged by the reemergence of Russia and China in regional politics and cannot but reinforce the necessity of reevaluation of the role of both international and regional actors in the formulation of regional policies as well as U.S. strategy.

## Notes

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2. Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa" (speech, The White House, May 19, 2011), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa>.
3. Barack Obama, "President Obama's 2012 Address to UN General Assembly," *Washington Post*, September 25, 2012, [http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-09-25/politics/35497281\\_1\\_libyan-people-benghazi-diplomatic-facilities](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-09-25/politics/35497281_1_libyan-people-benghazi-diplomatic-facilities).
4. Marianna Charountaki, *The Kurds and US Foreign Policy: International Relations in the Middle East Since 1945* (New York: Routledge, 2010).
5. Fawaz A. Gerges, *The End of America's Moment? Obama and the Middle East* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
6. Katerina Dalacoura, "The Arab Uprisings Two Years On: Ideology, Sectarianism and the Changing Balance of Power in the Middle East," *Insight Turkey* 15, no. 1 (2013): 75–89; Allen L. Keiswetter, "The Arab Spring: Implications for U.S. Policy and Interests," Middle East Institute, January

13, 2012, <http://www.mei.edu/content/arab-spring-implications-us-policy-and-interests>; Mahmood Monshipouri and Ali Assareh, "The New Middle East and the United States: What to Expect after the Uprisings," *Insight Turkey* 13, no. 3 (2011): 121–138; Colin H. Kahl and Marc Lynch, "U.S. Strategy after the Arab Uprisings: Toward Progressive Engagement," *The Washington Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 39–60.

7. Eisenhower would state, referring to a few centuries earlier, that "it is well to remind ourselves that our basic national objective in international affairs remains peace—a world peace based on justice. Such a peace must include all areas, all peoples of the world if it is to be enduring." He stressed "the immense importance of the Middle East... if the nations of that area should lose their independence, if they were dominated by alien forces hostile to freedom, that would be both a tragedy for the area and for many other free nations whose economic life would be subject to near strangulation." Eisenhower continues, "all this would have the most adverse, if not disastrous, effect upon our own nation's economic life and political prospects." Finally, "the national integrity of other free nations is directly related to our own [U.S.] security." Dwight David Eisenhower, "Eisenhower Doctrine" (speech, Congress of the United States, Washington, DC, January 5, 1957), <http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/3360>.
8. Harry S Truman, "Inaugural Address" (Washington, DC, January 20, 1949).
9. Harry S Truman, "Speech to the 89th Congress" (U.S. Senate, Foreign Relations Committee, Washington, DC, 1967). *A Select Chronology and Background Documents Relating to the Middle East* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1969), 29.
10. Robert M. MacIver, *The Rampart We Guard* (New York: Macmillan, 1950), 107–108.
11. Ralph Magnus, *United States' Interests in the Middle East: Political Strategic Interests* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1968), 30.
12. Condoleezza Rice, "Promoting the National Interest," *Foreign Affairs* 79, no. 1 (January–February 2000): 47, 49.
13. Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little Brown, 1982), 713.
14. According to the U.S.–Israeli agreement (November 1971), the United States would provide Israel with "technical information and assistance that would allow Israel to produce advanced weapons components itself," *New York Times*, August 4, 1971. According to President Obama, "when I consider Israel's security, I also think of a nuclear armed Iranian government that has called for Israel's destruction." Barack Obama, "Remarks of President Barack Obama to the People of Israel" (speech, The White House, March 21, 2013), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/03/21/remarks-president-barack-obama-people-israel>.
15. Peter Dickson, *Kissinger and the Meaning of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 84.
16. Nixon employed regional states such as Iran and Saudi Arabia "to protect American interests in the area... to stop the Soviets, ensure U.S. access to Gulf oil, and achieve stability through the establishment of pro-Western regimes." Howard Teicher and Gayle Radley Teicher, *Twin Pillars to Desert Storm: America's Flawed Vision in the Middle East from Nixon to Bush* (New York: Morrow, 1993), 23. Another

- purpose was to "deprive the U.S.S.R. of maritime access." Henry Kissinger, *For the Record: Selected Statements, 1977–1980* (Boston: Little Brown, 1981), 152.
17. Kissinger, *For the Record*, 79, 83, 87.
  18. Dickson, *Kissinger and the Meaning of History*, 91, 93, 95.
  19. Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the Annual Washington Conference of the American Legion," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, February 22, 1983), 271.
  20. Seymour M. Hersh, "Target Qaddafi," *New York Times*, February 22, 1987.
  21. Kenneth M. Pollack and Ray Takeyh, "Doubling Down on Iran," *The Washington Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (Autumn 2011): 7–21.
  22. Hersh, "Target Qaddafi."
  23. George Shultz, speech given at the National Defense University (Fort McNair, January 15, 1986).
  24. *Ibid.*
  25. George H. W. Bush, "National Security Strategy of the U.S." (Washington, DC: The White House, January 1, 1993), <http://nssarchive.us/NSSR/1993.pdf>.
  26. *Ibid.*
  27. Bush, "National Security Strategy of the U.S."
  28. See Charountaki, *The Kurds and U.S. Foreign Policy*, 71; Marianna Charountaki, "Turkish Foreign Policy and the Kurdistan Regional Government," *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs* 17, no. 4 (Winter 2012): 185–208.
  29. George H. W. Bush, "First Inaugural Address" (Washington, DC, January 20, 1989).
  30. Bush, "National Security Strategy of the U.S."
  31. George H. W. Bush, "U.S. Policy towards the Persian Gulf," National Security Directive 26 (Washington, DC: The White House, October 2, 1989), <http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsd/nsd26.pdf>; George H. W. Bush, "U.S. Policy in Response to the Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait," National Security Directive 45 (Washington, DC: The White House, August 20, 1990), <http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsd/nsd45.pdf>.
  32. For further information on Carter's doctrine, see [https://www.princeton.edu/~achaney/tmve/wiki100k/docs/Carter\\_Doctrine.html](https://www.princeton.edu/~achaney/tmve/wiki100k/docs/Carter_Doctrine.html).
  33. George H. W. Bush, "Responding to Iraqi Aggression in the Gulf," National Security Directive 54 (Washington, DC: The White House, January 15, 1991), <http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsd/nsd54.pdf>.
  34. "America stands alone as the world's indispensable nation," Bill Clinton, "Second Inaugural Address" (Washington, DC, January 20, 1997).
  35. Bill Clinton, "National Security Strategy of the U.S." (Washington, DC: The White House, December 1, 1999), <http://nssarchive.us/NSSR/2000.pdf>. Compare to Barack Obama, "National Security Strategy of the U.S." (Washington, DC: The White House, May 2010), <http://nssarchive.us/NSSR/2010.pdf>.
  36. Bill Clinton, "National Security Strategy of the U.S." (Washington, DC: The White House, February 1, 1996), <http://nssarchive.us/NSSR/1996.pdf>. Mann, *The Obamians*, 218.
  37. Clinton, "National Security Strategy of the U.S." (December 1, 1999).
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  41. George W. Bush, "National Security Strategy of the U.S." (Washington, DC: The White House, September 17, 2002), <http://nssarchive.us/NSSR/2002.pdf>.
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  43. Clinton, "National Security Strategy of the U.S." (February 1, 1996).
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  45. George W. Bush, "National Security Strategy of the U.S." (September 17, 2002), 27.
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  47. Condoleezza Rice, "Remarks at the American University of Cairo" (Cairo: American University of Cairo, June 20, 2005), <http://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2005/48328.htm>.
  48. George Friedman, *The Next Decade: Empire and Republic in a Changing World* (New York: Anchor Books, 2012), 41.
  49. *Ibid.*
  50. Mark Landler, "Secret Report Ordered by Obama Identified Potential Uprisings," *New York Times*, February 2, 2011.
  51. "Former Vice President, Dick Cheney, argued that Obama in his second year, in many ways represented a continuation of George W. Bush's administration." Mann, *The Obamians*, 15.
  52. *Ibid.*, 258.
  53. *Ibid.*, 264.
  54. *Ibid.*, 266–267.
  55. *Ibid.*
  56. See Charountaki, *The Kurds and US Foreign Policy*, 73, 82–83.
  57. Clinton, "National Security Strategy of the U.S.," December 1, 1999.
  58. Rice, "Promoting the National Interest," 47, 49.
  59. See Charountaki, *The Kurds and U.S. Foreign Policy*, 73, 82–83.
  60. "Prior to Iranian engagement in Afghanistan... U.S. Deputy National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley... adopted rules to regulate how Washington should interact with rogue states such as Iran." "Hadley Rules" signified no more than a tactical collaboration with rogue states since the U.S. overall strategy toward these states would remain intact. Trita Parsi, *A Single Roll of the Dice: Obama's Diplomacy with Iran* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 41.
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