



CISS Analysis on
Obama's Foreign Policy: An Analysis
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Introduction

President Obama on 28th May 2014, in a major policy speech at West Point, the premier military academy of the US army, outlined the broad contours of US foreign policy for the coming decades. The speech included a focus on the upcoming withdrawal of US military from Afghanistan and the future role of the US in global politics. President Obama chose this occasion to defend the US foreign policy which had come under heavy criticism in recent years, both at home and abroad. The speech had two broad themes: the nature of future US engagement with the rest of the world, and placing limits on US overreach in its engagement with other countries.

America has viewed itself as the global hegemon who has the sole right and responsibility to shape events around the world since the breakup of the Soviet Union. Obama has described it as "US exceptionalism". In recent years, heavy military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan, have considerably eroded US public opinion support for foreign wars and have strained the US militarily and financially. For this reason, when Obama had announced the withdrawal of troops from Iraq and Afghanistan, his decisions had popular domestic support, although there was muted criticism in some quarters. It was against this back drop that Obama delivered his speech at the West Point. His words attempted to strike a balance between future US military engagements; the US role in the international system and the need to revive US economy for growth in coming years.

The decision to disengage America militarily, in recent years, from various fronts has given credence to a growing perception across many regions that the US is not the power it once was. In order to reassure the US domestic audience Obama emphasized that the military might of the US was still unmatched by any other power. He recounted accomplishments of his administration; in countering terrorism and bringing an end to Iraq and Afghan wars. His speech reinforced the operating narrative that US military engagements had made the world a safer place, in spite of the tremendous military and economic losses suffered by the US.

Obama acknowledged the fact that the world has changed in fundamental ways in the last few decades. He emphasized that for sustaining its dominant position the US must adjust to the changing global environment. The forces of globalization such as the rise of media, expanding communications, and increasingly connected economies mean today the world is more linked together than at any other time in history. These factors are changing the dynamics underlining international politics. It is in such a world that the US has not only to lead but to lead by example. It cannot succeed by merely adapting itself to meet the new challenges. What Obama advocated is interventionism in a new form with new strategies of power projection, instead of isolationism. In other words he advocated a new form of imperialism which would sustain the US' power primacy in the world. As President Obama put it:

“The world is changing with accelerating speed. This presents opportunity, but also new dangers. We know all too well, after 9/11, just how technology and globalization has put power once reserved for states in the hands of the individuals, raising the capacity of terrorists to do harm. Russia's aggression toward former Soviet states unnerves capitals in Europe, while China's economic rise and military reach worries its neighbors. From Brazil to India, rising middle classes compete with our own, and governments seek a greater say in global forums. And even as developing nations embrace democracy and market economies, 24 hours news and pervasive social media makes it impossible to ignore sectarian conflicts, failing states and popular uprisings that might have received only passing notice a generation ago.”

According to President Obama the US, as the sole super-power, has the responsibility to lead the world while facing multidimensional threats. In doing so Obama broke away from the policy followed by the previous US administrations. He advocated preference for multilateralism over the use of brute military force but emphasized that the US would use military power in exceptional circumstances. Mr. Obama clearly defined redlines for use of military force by the US.

“First, let me repeat a principle I put forward at the outset of my presidency - the United States will use military force, unilaterally if necessary, when our core interests demand it - when our people are threatened; when our livelihood is at stake; or when the security of

our allies is in danger. In these circumstances, we still need to ask tough questions about whether our action is proportional, effective and just. International opinion matters. But America should never ask permission to protect our people, our homeland, or our way of life.”

This can be called the “Obama doctrine” i.e., the US will fight for its core interests and to protect its allies. Here US policy differentiates between ‘allies’ and ‘core interests’. It may mean the US will use military force to protect its western European allies, but will not fight for Ukraine or Georgia. Obama, in his speech has drawn a clear line. For regional powers who are challenging US hegemony in various parts of the world the message is clear: they now know where they cannot safely push against the US interests, and areas where their actions may go unchecked.

Second element of this strategy is building alliances with regional countries., This includes boosting military capabilities of the US allies; using other tools of power including economic incentives and threat of sanctions, and in extreme cases multilateral military actions to contain threats. This element of the strategy seems a throwback to the Cold War era when the US policies were designed to contain the Soviet Union. Back then the US built alliances in various regions, for example SEATO and CENTO. The regional powers were the pillars of the strategy. They were given economic, military and political support by the US in order to play a role in containment of communism in their respective regions.

President Obama continues to believe that the threat of terrorism is likely to keep America preoccupied in the near future. In order to defeat terrorism, Obama outlined strategies which seem a continuation of Bush era policies. These include ongoing policies such as partnering with countries in which terrorist have hideouts, and the use of military force and covert actions to attack terrorist networks. In the speech Obama announced the expansion of such programs, and announced a \$5 billion Counter-Terrorism Fund to undertake the capacity building of countries countering terrorism. The announcement during the speech that the US is substantially increasing its assistance to Syrian rebels meant that, earlier policies of restraint have been revised, and now the US will treat Syria as an imminent threat. However, on covert action and drone strikes, Obama claimed all strikes should pass a simple test:

“We must not create more enemies than we take off the battlefield”

Judging by available evidence, this policy is already a failure. In recent years civilian deaths in drone strikes have increased anti-American sentiments both in Pakistan and Yemen, where majority of drone strikes have taken place. President Obama also focused on the need to revisit the existing international financial system:

“After World War II, America had the wisdom to shape institutions to keep the peace and support human progress – from NATO and the United Nations, to the World Bank and IMF. Though imperfect, these institutions have been a force multiplier – reducing the need for unilateral American action, and increased restraint among other nations. But just as the world has changed, this architecture must change as well. Evolving these institutions to meet the demands of today must be a critical part of American leadership.”

When a US president calls for transforming the international financial architecture and other multilateral institutions, a deeper analysis is required. It was the US which, after Second World War, was the main architect of International multilateral security and financial institutions such as NATO, UN, IMF and World Bank. These institutions mainly served to consolidate the US power and build financial and strategic structures that promoted its influence across the globe. At certain moments in history the US has sometimes elected to bypass these institutions when they refused to support military action by the US. A case in point is invasion of Iraq. Advocating change in these institutions at this point in time means that the US no longer feels it has the ability to shape events around the world unilaterally. It seeks to deepen its engagement and role within these institutions in order to be able to better align institutional policies with the US national interests.

Nonetheless, President Obama's initiative to counter Russian aggression on Crimea and Ukraine through institutional mechanisms was unsuccessful. Russia was not deterred by OSCE or NATO. It managed to achieve its original goal of annexing the Crimean Peninsula despite the US opposition and taking full advantage of divisions within European countries on the issue. The US' inability to act decisively provided Russia the opportunity to behave aggressively and get away with it.

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