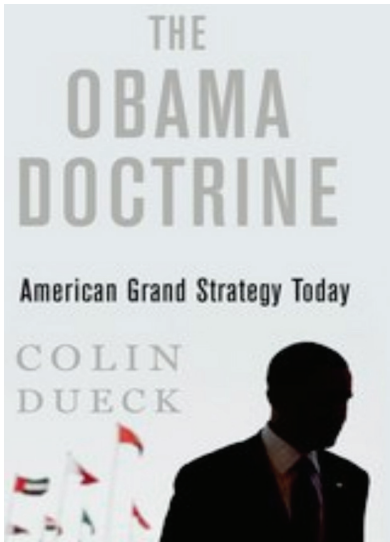


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## What Is the Obama Doctrine, and Has There Ever Been One?



Colin Dueck:  
*The Obama Doctrine. American  
 Grand Strategy Today.* Oxford  
 University Press, New York  
 [NY], 2015.

David Unger: „The Foreign  
 Policy Legacy of Barack Obama“,  
*The International Spectator*, 51(4),  
 2016, pp. 1-16.

### Introduction

The last year of President Obama's second term was strongly marked by the bizarre presidential election campaign and highly unexpected electoral results. This has mostly overshadowed Mr. Obama's own foreign policy legacy, his views and actions. Of course, the foreign policy of the two Obama administrations was regularly brought up and harshly criticized by the republican candidate, and current president-elect, Donald J. Trump. Likewise, Mr. Obama himself had the opportunity to defend his legacy while actively campaigning for Ms. Clinton. But campaign rants and quarrels are, more often than not, far away from rational delib-

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eration and cold-minded analysis. For these reasons, some successful attempts to grasp the complex issue of Barrack H. Obama's foreign policy doctrine and its legacy are all the more appreciated.

During the presidential campaign, as well as first days of governing, Donald Trump has presented himself and his foreign policy agenda as radically opposed to Obama's, in virtually every way and aspect. Whether the legacy is considered mostly positive or negative, there is no doubt that the new administration will, for some time, have to function within the context shaped by the policy of the last eight years. It is, therefore, particularly important to assess said legacy, and analyze whether it represents a result of a thought-through and systematically applied foreign policy doctrine.

Various authors put forward different assessments and evaluations of foreign policy actions and legacy of two administrations led by Barack Obama. For Harvard's Stephen Walt, Obama's foreign policy record can be labeled as nothing short of a failure. Colin Dueck (2015) would largely agree. On the other hand, David Unger (2016) from Johns Hopkins School for Advanced International Studies in Bologna, gives a lot more credit to President Obama regarding foreign policy achieve-

ments. Either way, it is instrumental to analyze what has been done (or failed to be done) and what way it's been done: strategically, tactically, or *ad hoc*.

This author's views regarding this issues are pretty grim. Although there were some indisputable achievements (most notably, multilateral deal with Iran regarding the country's nuclear program), it is without a doubt that international ambient left by Barack Obama is significantly more perilous than the one left behind by George W. Bush – which would have been rather hard to imagine at the time. Furthermore, it can be stated, with a strong confidence, that no such thing as “the Obama doctrine” will be remembered by foreign policy experts or international relations historians: think of Monroe, Wilson, Reagan or Bush Jr. in this context, regardless of particular doctrine's success. Rather, there has not been but a rudimentary and/or eclectic grand strategy during Obama's two administrations. It would not be unreasonable to regard his foreign policy failures as a consequence of lack of strategic thought. All this in spite of the large number of experienced foreign policy public servants around the president – or sometimes, it might also very well be argued, precisely because of them.

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## Doctrine, commission and omission

The notion of a president's foreign policy doctrine usually represents a succinct formulation regarding main international objectives and means for their achievement, while implying the reasoning behind the doctrine's adoption. In foreign policy and national security practice, as well as academic literature, doctrine is embodied in the grand strategy, or "a calculated relationship on the part of a country's leaders of ends and means in the face of potential international opponents" (Dueck 2016: 14). Functions of a grand strategy are threefold: to specify certain national goals, ends and interests; to identify existing challenges to those interests, and to select and recommend the particular policy instruments or means by which challenges are met and national goals pursued (*Ibid.*).

Grand strategy is not to be confused with National Security Strategy, which is a formal document usually adopted once per administration and represents a technical verbalization of the Government's strategic beliefs and choices. It is also not to be confused with particular types of foreign policy strategies, although it is, by definition, put to life and conducted through them. There is, of course, no single, globally

adopted list or classification of strategy types. Before proceeding to analyze Obama's grand strategy, Dueck presents six specific types of foreign policy strategies: retrenchment, containment, regime change/rollback, engagement (in the form of either integration or bargaining), accommodation (i.e. appeasement) and offshore balancing. Areas of interest, where the strategy (or rather, strategies) was to be conducted, according to Dueck, are: 1) counterterrorism; 2) nuclear proliferation, including Iran and North Korea relations; 3) great power competitors, most notably China and Russia; 4) complexities of, and relations with, the Arab World, and 5) relationship between US alliance commitments, defense spending and the new American posture overseas. Various types of strategies have naturally been used in regard to different key areas.

There has, for the most part, not been a rigorous and coherent doctrine or grand strategy under President Obama. External reason of such development is, of course, to be found in almost chaotically complex global environment that Obama's administration had inherited from Bush's. It was, in that sense, perhaps prudent not to formulate a strategy too rigorous or too narrow to grasp the many controversies of international politics. On the other hand, one internal factor has represented a particu-

larly strong constraint for the foreign policy of Barack Obama: his own tendency to treat foreign policy as secondary to domestic; in other words, to disengage from international issues in order to “free up national energy and resources to revive the US economy and pursue progressive domestic reforms” (Dueck 2015: 35-36).

This approach, along with some indisputable achievements like handling the international financial crisis, taking down Osama bin Laden or negotiating the New START treaty with Russia, seemed reasonable and successful, and granted Obama reelection in 2012. But overall, strategic failures have been much more far-ranging than occasional accomplishments. Mishandling of the Arab spring, especially regarding Egypt, Libya (with the use of overt rollback strategy) and Syria, along with incompetent military retreat from Iraq (which was planned in advance, but could and should have been postponed by Obama), gave room to a new adversary, far more dangerous than Al Qaeda: the so called Islamic State, while strengthening hostile elements of the presumably moderate Islamic opposition in Middle Eastern countries. Buildup of troops in Afghanistan didn't just compromise the President's announcements of ending the Afghan war, it was also unsuccessful and still allowed Al Qaeda

and the Taliban to regroup and be on the rise at the end of Obama's second term.

Although designed as predominantly accommodating strategy of strategic retrenchment, occasionally more coercive approaches gave results: apart from the bin Laden episode, “strategically patient” containment of North Korea and Iran seemed to work at times; however, the Iranian issue has not moved forward until engagement in P5+1 was applied. North Korean nuclear test in September 2016, on the other hand, has once again demonstrated that this country can hardly, if at all, be constructively dealt with in the absence of Chinese cooperation.

China itself has, according to Dueck (2016: 72) been subjected to a mixture of strategies, including engagement, integration and accommodation on the cooperative side of the strategic spectrum, as well as containment, balancing and deterrence (e.g. in maritime disputes) on the competitive side. Overall strategy towards China was not, however, coherent enough: so called Pivot to Asia, for example, was pompously announced as an innovative strategic shift, but, along with the TPP trade agreement, achieved virtually nothing. Deep economic interdependence thus remains the main factor that objectively suppresses the potential for a more

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open conflict between the US and China.

Regarding Russia, Obama's first term has begun with aspirations towards the reset of relations; although some progress was made (including the New START and continued Russian support regarding US efforts in Afghanistan), relations have deteriorated significantly with the beginning of the Ukraine crisis in 2014. Strategically speaking, there were hardly any reasons for America to meddle in Ukrainian politics, supporting pro-Western forces against the pro-Russian government, thus provoking strong Russian response. Once again, the combination of engagement and accommodation gave way to a smoldering conflict, degrading US-Russian relations to the lowest point since the end of the Cold War.

Clear, coherent and disciplined doctrine was never developed during Obama's two administrations. Foreign policy moves have mostly been coerced reaction, and often not particularly successful. What started as "A.B.B." (Anything but Bush) policy in 2009, soon became known as "*Don't Do Stupid S\*\*t*", as numerous reliable sources report that Obama has called his strategy in an off-the-record conversation with a group of journalists. As noble and prudent as such an intention is, however,

it is hardly a strategy, even if you abide by it.

## Legacy

For Professor David Unger, President Obama's foreign policy legacy is "mixed but positive". Unger rightfully emphasizes the internal constraints (such as hostile legislature) that prevented the President from fulfilling many of his plans and promises, while admitting that, as the highest elected Democrat, Obama had to share the blame for such development (Unger 2016: 3). The administration has "fallen short" on many occasions and issues, but the legacy is also comprised of some "impressive successes" (*Ibid*: 4-5). It is now up to external analysts to ponder the positive and negative elements of Barack Obama's foreign policy record.

The deal that re-established international control over Iran's nuclear program is, undoubtedly, an achievement that the administration can be proud of – even though there are signals that it might be jeopardized by the incoming administration's actions. Normalization of relations with Cuba, not as much: while it is certainly a generally positive development, it is still unclear what the actual logic behind this move is;

or, to put it differently, normalization of relations between any two actors is hardly an achievement *per se*.

Turn away from the Middle East and towards East and South-East Asia has mostly failed, in spite of the administration's significant efforts. Relations with Russia have worsened dramatically, in comparison with the Clinton and Bush era; and, what is worse, without a clear reason for such an outcome on America's behalf. Although Professor Unger disagrees (2016: 15), it is highly debatable whether Obama has actually left the international Arena in better shape than he himself has inherited: virtually none of the major, transformational goals have been achieved, initiatives on big international trade deals (TTIP and TPP) have by now been completely abandoned, great power relations are dangerously fragile and critical regions such as the Middle East and South-East Asia are even more turbulent than at the end of Bush's time.

Such a grim perspective is, of course, far from being exclusively Obama's fault. His lack of strategic thinking and, occasionally, dubious choices regarding foreign policy and national security staff have,

naturally, had their impact. But the world had already taken an unusual and uncertain turn with the end of "the unipolar moment", making it particularly hard for a statesman, even the US President, to steer the wheel of global politics in a simple manner. After all, after the rampant interventionism of the previous administration, it may be regarded as a significant success that Obama has not drawn the US in another full scale, all-in conflict, with boots on the ground and no endgame in sight. Consequences of his foreign policy choices will definitely be visible in the years and perhaps decades to come, and like with Bush and Obama earlier, it is now up to the new administration to try and make the most of the global environment it inherited. Otherwise, there are always enough possibilities to make things worse, however bad the starting position. The record of Obama's foreign policy will, thus, inevitably be judged only in the context of Trump's.