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The Tragedy of Obama's Foreign Policy

MICHAEL J. BOYLE

During his first campaign for the presidency in 2008, Barack Obama held out the promise of a “post-post-9/11 foreign policy” through which the United States would leave its obsession with terrorism behind and begin to focus on an array of other transnational challenges, such as nuclear proliferation and climate change, that demanded its attention. He promised to reduce the burden on the armed forces by ending the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and reinvigorating the civilian elements of American power. Obama cast himself as a brighter alternative to the prevailing course of US foreign policy. He asked his followers to imagine a world in which the United States had not made the disastrous mistakes of the George W. Bush administration (Iraq, Guantánamo Bay, and torture, to name a few) but had instead forged a more careful and pragmatic path. It was this world that he promised to bring into being.

Eight years later, President Obama's foreign-policy legacy is a mixed one. There is no doubt that he has racked up some noteworthy accomplishments, including easing the futile embargo on Cuba, striking a deal to suspend and reduce the stockpiles of Iran's nuclear program, and signing a historic climate-change agreement with China. Throughout most of Asia, Obama's tenure has been marked by improved diplomatic relationships and economic ties facilitated in part by his efforts to pass the now-shelved Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal. In Latin America and Africa, he has perhaps inevitably not lived up to lofty expectations, but he has managed to improve ties with a number of governments and to remove some of the distrust that characterized US relations in those regions. Obama has handled the United Nations and other regional and international organizations without the rancor that marked his predecessor's approach, and has even steered their agendas toward American interests when possible. Although he has not fully succeeded in restoring America's reputation, global public opinion of the United States has rebounded from the darkest days of the Bush administration.

In the eyes of Obama's critics, these victories pale in comparison with the magnitude of his defeats. Many critics have pointed out that the world has become more unstable, violent, and divided over the course of his term. As Obama prepares to leave office, the Middle East has descended into sectarian conflict with civil wars raging in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya. Security in Afghanistan has deteriorated and the major cities appear vulnerable to Taliban reconquest. A descendent of al-Qaeda, the Islamic State (ISIS), has escalated the gruesome spectacles of its predecessor and inspired terrorist attacks in US and European cities.

Russia has positioned itself once again as a chief foil to the United States by dismembering Ukraine and finding new ways to rattle the nerves of the smaller NATO allies. China is growing more aggressive; it has expanded its territorial claims in the South China Sea and begun to construct the foundations of an alternative world order that excludes the United States. The economic crisis of the Eurozone and the British vote to exit the European Union have left the United States facing much of this disorder without being able to call on its closest allies for energetic support. More generally, a tide of ugly nationalism—including elements of both economic anxiety and xenophobia—has swept through the United States and Europe, demoralizing governments and leaving them increasingly hostage to restive, sometimes violent, interest groups. The election of Republican businessman Donald Trump to the US presidency on a campaign platform of nationalist nostalgia and

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hostility to trade and immigration shows how desperate the politics of the Western world have be-
come.

It is not fair to blame all of these developments on Obama. Although it remains a superpower, the United States cannot roll back the forces of nationalism and economic disarray in other states, nor can it prevent all adverse outcomes. A Trump administration will exemplify these dark forces rather than stand against them.

Obama has steered through many crises with a steady hand. Yet his legacy may ultimately be judged as a tragedy of sorts. Throughout his eight years in office, Obama showed an awareness that the fundamental contours of American foreign policy in the post–Cold War era must change. Some of his most important moves—such as the pivot to Asia and the new engagement with Iran—indicate his desire to escape the familiar categories of enemies and friends. He acknowledged that the military was too often seen as a solution to every problem Washington faced and wanted to think creatively about other dimensions of American power. But he never broke free of the prevailing assumptions and policy choices of his predecessors. The execution of much of his foreign policy has been a confused mix of Clinton and Bush, and its justification has been little more than a jumble of buzzwords lifted from the Democratic foreign-policy orthodoxy. Historians may well conclude that Obama glimpsed a different world for American foreign policy but never exerted the kind of strategic direction needed to turn that vision into reality.

THE MISSING DOCTRINE

The absence of strategic direction is evident in analysts’ struggles to define an Obama Doctrine in foreign policy. This pursuit has become almost a cottage industry, with partisans on both sides sifting through Obama’s speeches and policy documents in search of an overarching idea that is equivalent to the doctrines of previous presidents. It is likely that Obama himself would view their efforts with skepticism; a president who instinctively rejects ideological thinking is likely to find the strictures and simplifications of a foreign-policy doctrine too limiting. Among his first noteworthy statements on foreign policy was a condemnation of the looming Iraq war that he issued while he was still a state senator in 2002. For Obama, this “dumb war” was not just a mistake; it was an attempt by “armchair, weekend warriors in this administration to shove their own ideological agendas down our throats, irrespective of the costs in lives lost and in hardships borne.” This was a rebuke of the Bush Doctrine of preventive war, but also a rejection of ideological thinking in general.

By defining himself in opposition to the Bush administration’s ideological worldview, with its utopian belief in the value of democracy promotion, Obama was casting himself on some level as a realist, though the precise content of his realism was never quite clear. Obama claimed to be influenced by a distinguished older strain of realism based on the thought of the Christian theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, who wrote persuasively about the dilemmas of American foreign policy in the early Cold War. Obama once called Niebuhr his favorite philosopher. The president said he took from Niebuhr a belief that irredeemable evil did exist, but that humility about one’s ability to eliminate it was necessary when setting a course of action.

One of Niebuhr’s key themes—clearly adopted by Obama—was that good or noble intentions can produce unintended outcomes. For Niebuhr, this was best described as “irony,” and it suffused much of political life, often thwarting our ability to produce positive political change and reinforcing the need for skepticism about our own aims and actions. Niebuhr did not accept that this leads to inaction; to the contrary, he saw a moral duty to act as a necessary element of statesmanship even if the results are likely to be unintended, or even perverse. Obama’s clearest inheritance from Niebuhr was his aversion to simplistic visions of global politics and dichotomies based on neat moral categories of good and evil.

Despite that inheritance, Obama’s embrace of Niebuhr’s realism never amounted to a doctrine or a strategy. Niebuhr’s critical rather than prescriptive vision of politics is not one that translates easily into an overarching strategic doctrine or clear guidelines for action. But Obama’s inclination toward grand rhetoric also did not correspond with Niebuhr’s account of politics. Always a gifted orator, Obama tended to make sweeping statements about the possibility of change in international

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politics that reflected neither the skepticism nor the humility that Niebuhr would have recommended. In his rhetoric, Obama is only partially a follower of Niebuhr.

No committed Niebuhrian would have thought it possible for the United States to recast its relationship with the Muslim world by giving the kind of grandiloquent speech Obama gave in Cairo in 2009; no one attuned to Niebuhr’s subtle understanding of power as the prime motive for the behavior of states would have dismissed Russia’s moves to seize Crimea and invade Ukraine as outmoded thinking, as Obama did. Obama’s foreign policy was incoherent because it was only half-premised on Niebuhr’s realism. It overestimated the possibility of change, especially change resulting from public persuasion, while setting expectations for collective action and enlightened cooperation among states that Niebuhr would have dismissed as unrealistic.

Yet Obama’s practice of foreign policy was often closer to the conservative realism of Dwight Eisenhower and George H.W. Bush than to Niebuhr. Fareed Zakaria has made the case that Obama was governed by a sense of “strategic restraint” and a desire to avoid needless military engagements, as Eisenhower was during the 1956 Suez crisis. Obama himself has acknowledged that he is a fan of the first President Bush and his foreign policy team, especially his national security adviser Brent Scowcroft, for their restraint in managing the collapse of the Soviet Union and ending the Gulf War without occupying Iraq.

Obama’s speeches, however, rarely reflected such careful pragmatism, but rather returned to the liberal internationalist boilerplate about shared values, human rights, and the need for working with allies that marks the speeches of Bill and Hillary Clinton. In a sense, Obama the orator cannot help himself and slips too easily into moralism, and sometimes even utopianism, which is inconsistent with realism. His rhetoric has not always squared with his careful, cold-blooded realism when it comes to actual decisions, as many critics have bitterly noted in regard to his inaction on the Syrian civil war. The Obama foreign policy formula—to act like Eisenhower but speak like Clinton—provokes regular charges of hypocrisy from both realists and liberal internationalists. It is a compromise that ultimately satisfies no one.

In part due to his suspicion of ideological thinking, Obama has also come to distrust the Washington foreign-policy establishment, with its rehearsed arguments and undue emphasis on military action as a solution to messy problems. In an interview with the journalist Jeffrey Goldberg published in the Atlantic in March 2016, he rejected wholesale the interventionism of both liberal internationalists and neoconservatives:

“There’s a playbook in Washington that presidents are supposed to follow. It’s a playbook that comes out of the foreign-policy establishment. And the playbook prescribes responses to different events, and these responses tend to be militarized responses. Where America is directly threatened, the playbook works. But the playbook can also be a trap that can lead to bad decisions. In the midst of an international challenge like Syria, you get judged harshly if you don’t follow the playbook, even if there are good reasons why it does not apply.

The playbook that Obama rejects is the same one that both the Clinton and Bush administrations favored, with its sequential use of diplomatic pressure, sanctions, air strikes, and ultimately ground troops in places like Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Obama’s critique is sound but he never articulated what the alternative could be. He knew what he did not want to do, but he never drew up a new playbook for the exercise of American power. What he came up with—a mix of Special Forces, drones, and cyberattacks in a shadow war against an array of enemies—may ultimately be no more effective than the playbook he discarded.

**Shadow Wars**

In an irony that Niebuhr would have appreciated, Obama struggled to avoid costly military occupations like those in Afghanistan and Iraq but wound up entrenching a less transparent way of fighting. If Obama leaves a legacy, it will be one in which the United States is locked in a series of shadow wars—undeclared conflicts against non-state actors fought by Special Forces, proxy armies, drones, and other covert means—of indefinite duration. This trend was already evident at the end of the George W. Bush administration but it has been reified into an operational concept under Obama. One could argue that Obama has overseen its transformation into a new American way of war.

The fundamental impulse of the Obama administration has been to end costly occupations, especially in Muslim countries, and to look for “light footprint” ways of fighting the same battles. In his
speech announcing the withdrawal from Afghanistan in May 2014, Obama called on Americans to “turn the page” from the trauma of 9/11 and the indefinite occupations that followed. He argued that withdrawal would allow Americans to redirect their energies toward other vital priorities. But this did not happen. While thousands of troops left, the United States did not fully withdraw and today has 8,400 troops conducting training and counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan.

As the Taliban continues to gain strength, US forces have shifted toward assisting Afghan army units with air strikes, while Special Forces “snatch and grab” al-Qaeda, ISIS, and other terrorist operatives from hideouts across the country. Beneath the headlines about the withdrawal of US troops, America is still fighting both the Taliban and al-Qaeda, but has pushed the parallel struggles against these groups into the shadows. The problem is that this model has clearly failed in Afghanistan; it was recently described in a Washington Post report as putting “a Band-Aid on a bullet wound.”

A similar dynamic has occurred in Iraq. The United States officially pulled out most of its troops by the end of 2011, but since mid-2014 has been gradually sending advisers and troops—estimated by some to number 4,000 or even more—to back Iraqi government and Kurdish forces in their efforts to retake territory from ISIS. America is not officially at war in Iraq or Syria, but has in practice been sending Special Forces against “high value targets” associated with ISIS and other radical groups in both countries. The United States is no longer directly overseeing a counterinsurgency campaign, as it did during the occupation of Iraq, but is deploying forces in a targeted counterterrorism campaign in the middle of a counterinsurgency war fought by proxy forces. Whether this strategy will succeed is not yet clear, but it has already made for some strange and inconsistent bedfellows. Today, the United States is tacitly aligned with Iran in backing the Shia-led Iraqi government against Sunni forces, but in Yemen’s brutal civil war, Washington is allied with Saudi Arabia in a regional proxy war against Iran and its Houthi allies.

This shadow war is not limited to the old battlefields in Iraq and Afghanistan. The United States is fighting al-Shabaab forces in Somalia and the remnants of ISIS in Libya. In October 2016, a US warship fired on Houthi positions in Yemen, signaling a deeper involvement in that war. Over the course of 2016, the United States conducted air strikes in seven countries and Special Forces operations in even more. Many of these strikes are barely acknowledged by the Pentagon and news of them drifts into the public domain with scarce, sometimes inconsistent details.

The Obama administration has adopted an expansive definition of its legal authority for these strikes, sometimes claiming without evidence that they are crucial for self-defense. To some extent, this is a self-perpetuating rationale: as more US troops are deployed worldwide to fight shadow wars, more inevitably come under fire from enemy forces, necessitating more military action in their defense. But the forward deployment of Special Forces and their embedding with proxy forces has become a distinctive approach to fighting under the Obama administration. And it has occurred in the shadows, without public discussion or an articulation of the costs and benefits.

The shift toward shadow wars also indicates that conflict is becoming increasingly deterritorialized. The Obama administration has not been troubled by the fact that the battle with ISIS stretches across Syria and Iraq, and may lead to involvement in the civil war in Libya. It has adopted a view of conflict against non-state actors in which formal state borders are increasingly irrelevant. In some respects, this view is a continuation of the US approach to al-Qaeda under the Bush administration, but it has been expanded under Obama to include many more enemies and battlefields.

This expansion can be seen particularly in the deployment of drones. The Obama administration has been responsible for a vast increase in the number of drone strikes both on declared battlefields (Afghanistan, Iraq) and off them (Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia). These strikes have targeted al-Qaeda but also an array of other Islamist groups. In Pakistan, drone strikes have become almost routine events within the tribal regions. According to data from the New America Foundation, Obama authorized 355 drone strikes in Pakistan from 2009 to November 2016, killing between 1,904 and 3,114 people. The Obama administration insists that drone strikes in Pakistan and

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elsewhere have killed relatively few civilians—the official estimate is between 64 and 116 noncombatants across all battlefields between 2009 and 2015—but almost no evidence has been provided for this claim.

Through the steady expansion of drone usage, the Obama administration has undermined the sovereign right of noninterference that traditionally accompanied the possession of territory. Under Obama’s stewardship, the United States operated as if it did not need to hold ground or declare war to operate militarily in other countries without their permission. This has inculcated an acceptance among the American people that the US government has the right to strike anywhere in the world it sees a threat. This lowered threshold for the use of force creates precedents that America’s enemies—and indeed its new president—may exploit.

**Middle East Containment**

The shadow war approach derives from a recognition of the limits of American power, but it also stems from a judgment about the future of the Middle East. Although Obama offered a sweeping vision of change in his Cairo speech, his actual Middle East policy has been anemic and reactive. This is because he quietly recognizes that the regional order is tearing itself apart and may do so for some time. Obama is a believer in what can be described as the Islamic Reformation thesis: that the Middle East is confronting a virulent, nihilistic strain of Islam that will shake the foundations of the leading states in the region and destroy much of the existing political order. Only when governments reform themselves, modernize, and rid their countries of “tribalism,” as Obama once put it, will this battle end and the Middle East be able to join the other regions of the world in offering a hopeful future for its people. In this reading, the Arab Spring is the first shot in a drama of modernization and reform that will take decades to play out. The United States, Obama has suggested, is a bit player in this drama, and needs to pay due attention to the limits of its influence while watching events unfold.

From this vantage point, Obama’s inaction on Syria makes sense; he sees the country as one of many contemporary battlefields in a struggle that could last for generations. Exhausting American power to resolve it will do nothing to tilt the region toward modernization and political order. The most it merits is a shadow war that does not jeopardize other American interests.

This approach to the Middle East is containment in all but name. But there is no evidence that containing historic levels of violent disorder in the region will actually work. There have been numerous points in Obama’s presidency when his initiatives at home and abroad were interrupted or derailed by terrorist attacks emanating from the Middle East. It may be that ISIS is an apocalyptic death cult that will be vanquished in an Islamic Reformation, but in the meantime it can inflict real harm through attacks in Brussels, Paris, and New York. Even when the human costs are minimal, the political effects of terrorism are sufficiently powerful that they can throw democratic governments off their axis. Obama’s strategy tries to ignore this fact. Instead, it proclaims the traditional security promise of presidents—that they will keep Americans safe from threats at home and abroad—while undertaking a strategy that actually abandons the Middle East and quietly accepts that periodic bursts of terrorism will be a fact of life.

The containment approach to the Middle East has additional costs. It opens a space for other players like Russia to insert themselves in the regional balance and constrain US policy choices. This is what has happened with Syria. Russia’s support for President Bashar al-Assad’s regime radically increases the risks that the United States faces in any Syria intervention and effectively rules out a number of military options. The result is that the Obama administration has been stuck with a policy of shadow wars and fruitless negotiations among warring Syrian factions because it invested too much in defeating ISIS to leave but lacks the leverage to change circumstances on the ground.

Other costs have been more subtle. Although the Obama administration tried to signal its desire for continued engagement with the region, both Saudi Arabia and Iran read Obama’s containment policy as a withdrawal and have escalated their sectarian-flavored competition for regional dominance using subversion and military force. Although a policy of containment seems like a balanced, clean solution, it has left the United States on both sides of the Sunni-Shia conflict in different theaters of war.

Finally, containment can allow some problems to become almost intractable. Obama’s decision to abandon efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has rendered a Palestinian state less viable and allowed Israel to succumb to its worst instincts by expanding its settlements in the West Bank.
For many governments in the Middle East, Obama's legacy will be seen as damning. He wanted to avoid costly entanglements in the region in order to respond to shifts in the global balance of power that he rightly saw as more important. Instead, he left the United States too deeply enmeshed in the region's politics to withdraw but too removed to make much of a difference. The great drama of the Middle East, with all of its political and religious convulsions, was not one in which Washington could relegate itself to being only a bit player.

THE NEW ILLIBERAL ORDER

The final development that will tarnish Obama's legacy is the emergence of an illiberal global order. The return of a nationalist Russia and the rise of China have tilted the momentum of global politics toward illiberal states and against the United States and its European allies. It is hard to overstate the importance of this shift, even if its effects are only now coming into view.

For decades, the United States enjoyed the privileges of a liberal international order that it created, according itself a “first among equals” position with special rights to break and amend the rules of that order when it saw fit. Washington made efforts to integrate states like Russia and China into the liberal order, but imposed conditions on their entry in an attempt to socialize them. Yet the relative power position of the United States against China began to decline following the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the global financial crisis in 2008. These two shocks upended some of the main assumptions about the global order—particularly that the United States would always remain dominant—and led a number of governments to challenge it.

This shift began in 2009 with the emergence of the BRICS coalition of large developing nations—Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—that sought new ways to constrain American influence and to increase their relative power. This is a loose grouping with a variety of conflicting interests, but its members are unified around a neo-Westphalian conception of sovereignty that rejects the interventionism that has characterized American foreign policy throughout the post–Cold War period. Their call for a new international order is designed to force the hand of the United States and its allies to grant them a greater role in existing institutions. They aspire to be rule makers rather than rule takers.

By Obama's second term, China had begun to construct the foundation of an alternative international order. It spearheaded the creation of new institutions, including the BRICS-led New Development Bank and the Beijing-controlled Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. While neither was initially as well-resourced as the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund, their creation, coupled with China’s call for a new reserve currency, signaled a new push to reshape the global order in a form more congenial to authoritarian and illiberal states. As highlighted by their July 2016 joint declaration on international law, Russia and China have also offered a reinterpretation of some key political concepts that now underlie the liberal order—such as human rights, self-determination, self-defense, and more recently the “responsibility to protect”—that is a direct challenge to the way that the United States and its allies have deployed these concepts for years.

Obama initially seemed to recognize that this growing assertiveness of the rising powers, backed by China's economic might, necessitated some changes in America's foreign policy. His administration tried to “reset” US relations with Moscow and inaugurate a new era of global cooperation. It sought to treat China as a stakeholder in the global order and continue its socialization into existing institutions in the hope that doing so would strip away its illiberal character. Washington also sought a “divide and rule” approach with the BRICS, trying to win the favor of Brazil and India by appealing to their common democratic character.

The Obama administration became enamored with the hope of transcending great power politics and overestimated the feasibility of socializing illiberal states into the liberal order. It did not take the challenge that they offered seriously. Distracted by shadow wars and the growing chaos in the Middle East, Washington was slow to acknowledge that both Russia and China were laying the groundwork for a sustained military challenge to American power.

By Obama's second term, it was clear that both global rivals had ramped up efforts to undermine

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American power in different ways. China expanded its territorial claims and military presence in the South China Sea and increased its cyberattacks on US government agencies; Russia invaded Ukraine and began aerial incursions to test the nerves of NATO members. The initial response of the United States was to downplay China’s actions and to dismiss Russia as little more than a regional power playing a weak hand. But after Russia’s interference in the 2016 US presidential election, it has become harder than ever to sustain the argument that Moscow and Beijing are not looking to challenge Washington in a more serious way in the years ahead.

The Obama administration will leave the United States with deteriorating relationships with both powers. It did not wish to admit the reality that America will be locked in a triangular diplomatic competition for global influence with Russia and China for decades to come. While it may have been inevitable that the geopolitical ground would shift under Obama’s feet, it was far from preordained that his administration would be so slow to recognize this fact and to amend its approach and rhetoric accordingly.

Obama never publicly identified the precise nature of the challenge posed by the ascendency of illiberal powers like Russia and China—that they are trying to change the character of the liberal international order, shifting it toward the preferences of illiberal states. He is leaving the admission that we are in an increasingly cold, violent, and competitive world to the next president. And the illiberal tendencies of that president suggest that he will hasten the birth of that new order and leave American democracy in a state of advanced decay.

**Noble Intentions**

These three developments—the proliferation of shadow wars, the collapse of the Middle East, and the emergence of an illiberal global order—have to be weighed against the successes of President Obama’s foreign policy. A critique of his legacy must be tempered by recognizing his accomplishments and by asking what, if anything, he could have done to prevent these adverse outcomes. Obama now knows that many of his accomplishments will be undone by a Trump administration. But beyond that melancholy fact, it is clear that his foreign policy bears at least two elements of tragedy that Niebuhr would have recognized.

First, some adverse outcomes came as an unintended result of the president’s noble intentions. In his efforts to avoid costly wars like Iraq, Obama wound up recasting the US approach to the use of force in ways that are less transparent and perhaps even dangerous to American democracy. He will now hand that terrifying apparatus of power over to Donald Trump and look on as Trump bends it to his own ends. Obama’s good intentions also led him to abandon the Middle East to chaos. This qualifies as ironic in Niebuhr’s sense, but it can also be described as tragic if fighting and containing wars distracted Obama from actions that might have prevented the emergence of a global illiberal order.

Beyond that, Obama’s foreign policy can be described as tragic because the protagonist in this story—the president himself—came to a greater understanding of the limits of American power through his own failures. He is now wiser and more sober about the possibility of transformative change than the Obama who first appeared on the national stage in 2007. He knows that Washington cannot forever proceed with the same presuppositions and playbooks, but he never systematically made that case to the public or laid out a new foundation for American foreign policy. At the end of his term, the foreign-policy bureaucracy remains the same in its routines and assumptions, and its pathologies show no sign of changing.

The final judgment may be that Obama glimpsed the need for change but lacked the focus and political courage to push the United States onto a different path. Now he must watch as Donald Trump demolishes his legacy and charts a course that will show America’s most ugly and isolationist face to the world. That Obama himself appears to know this, and shows remorse in his more reflective moments, gives his foreign-policy legacy more than a hint of tragedy.