

THE U.S. NATIONAL INTEREST REDEFINITION AND THE FUTURE OF ITS LEADERSHIP IN CRITICAL REGIONS. STRONG AND SUSTAINABLE AMERICAN LEADERSHIP?

Iñigo ARBIOL OÑATE*

Abstract

In the last half of the 20th century, the United States provided a strong centripetal leadership that brought the country to form an economy that remains the bedrock of the global financial system. America's military superiority remains unrivaled. While far from perfect, the U.S. has the oldest democratic constitutional regime, as well as strong institutions and rule of law to accompany it, as Americans continue to enjoy an unmatched quality of life. In general the U.S. enjoys still a privileged position in the world today.

For the last one hundred years, American foreign policy has rested on a commitment to use its power. Nevertheless, many criticize that over the last two decades, the U.S. has scaled down its presence, ambitions and promises in the world.

Is the U.S. abnegating its leadership? Are U.S. national interests changing and refocusing towards home affairs? Or will the 21st century, due to fragile alternative powers (EU, China, Russia, ...) be again an American century?

Keywords: *US, national security, foreign policy, leadership, American hegemony.*

Introduction

For the last one hundred years, American foreign policy has rested on a commitment to use its power to guarantee the post WWII international system in general, and particularly the interests of the U.S. and its allies abroad. Nevertheless, many criticize that over the last two decades, the U.S. has scaled down its presence, ambitions and promises in the world. An increasing number of analysts and academics understand that this is not temporary and that humanity is probably witnessing the birth of a new international order. Its structure is still vaguely defined but already includes a redistribution of global power, a change in the center of gravity towards the Asia-Pacific region, and an expansion in the number of players: state, non-state, intra-state, transnational, groups and even individual actors.

On the first part, this brief paper intends to consider, examined the nature of the challenges posed by US adversaries, how is the United States current role in the world. In this new status-quo, is the U.S. abnegating its leadership? Is the refocusing of U.S. national interests towards home affairs an option?

On the second part and starting from the existing literature and public papers on the geopolitical challenges, the paper introduces some critical issues for the immediate future of U.S. decision-makers strategic thinking. First, to what extent can the United States retreat in the face of committed adversaries? Is the United States capable of maintaining a firm stance, given the reality of defense budgets today and a public opinion hesitant

to act? Could a more collaborative one, taking into consideration the weakness of its closest allies, substitute the current approach?

Inexorably within 6 months we will all witness a change in American leadership. This new leader will take a very short period of time, foreign policy decisions of great significance. These decisions will be critical for the strategic future of the United States and its allies in some of the most critical regions of the world.

Content

American hegemony has sustained an unprecedented global peace and prosperity, despite well known negative consequences that irremediably this hegemonic position has occasionally caused. After a post-Cold War period in which the United States assumed the role of hegemon of the international order, 9/11 opened metaphorically a new historical period. For Washington, this date marked the end of the 90s "strategic pause", a term popularized by Secretary Les Aspin as a way of justifying measures to be taken after the end of the Cold War, and the long-term fight against the USSR. The shocking images of the attacks on New York put an end to a model of national security that had extended successfully throughout the 90s Clinton administration, and forced the new administration to face a situation it was not prepared for.

Through eight years, as Gray explains¹, America was exposed to the new face of war: The limits of American military power were revealed, the apparent unipolarity of the international order of the

* PhD Department of International Relations and Humanities, University of Deusto, Spain.

¹ Gray, C. (2010) 'War: Continuity in Change, Change in Continuity', *Parameters* 40, 5-13.

post-Cold War ended and the consolidation of new powers capable of limiting the influence and challenging the hegemony of the previously ubiquitous United States, at least in some regions, was facilitated. Last, but not least, the “War on Terror” over-focus on specific objectives, left large strategic issues unattended for around eight years.

Obama doctrine: reset and re-engage

With the arrival of the Obama administration and the historic elimination of Bin Laden, the war on terror ended de facto, advancing the reduction of presence in Iraq (2011) and Afghanistan (2014) and facilitating the replacement of exhausted national security policies - previously focused on “democracy building” and counterterrorism - by a new paradigm aimed at “reengaging diplomatically” and maintaining supremacy against any future adversary as the core of a polymorphic foreign policy. Conceived and described in the 2010 National Security Strategy, this new approach was consolidated militarily in early 2012, when President Barack H. Obama presented the “Strategic Defense Guide”², a roadmap which sets the guidelines for defense policy and military organization for next years.

Despite being accused by republican and democrat critic voices for being a soft-foreign policy promoter, Goldberg explains brilliantly³, Obama has maintained a pragmatic interpretation of the U.S. role in the world. Throughout the approved public documents, this administration has never accepted that diminishing western hegemony would inspire and motivate the world to follow. Indeed, Washington has assumed throughout these years that the reduction of American military, political and financial force could create a vacuum of power that would lead to a far more dangerous and unstable world where mass destruction weapons users, and wishers, would exponentially proliferate.

Even when it took almost 3 years to the current administration to “reset and re-engage”⁴, and some major operations still consume a part of the American military manpower and financial resources, a new list of challenges in critical areas concerns Washington. In nowadays almost post-Obama strategic moment, the most important challenge to be faced by the United States is the resurgence of conflicts with a series of renewed potential adversaries; first between the U.S. and

other great powers and second, between the U.S. and some rogue states or proto-states. On one hand, the still most powerful nation, faces on one hand, a risk of conflict with strong adversaries. On the other hand, America faces an extremely fragmented and diverse group of radical actors, mostly with misinterpreted religious inspiration. An excellent example of this is how the country is trying to negotiate and lead an alliance to implement a military campaign against the Islamic State (ISIS). Finally it is also required to take into consideration the potential (and plausible) combination of some of these opponents, hypothetically creating a far more complex challenge for the United States.

There are great differences between these new potential challenges in terms of their ability to threaten vital US interests, and therefore it has been Washington’s priority, during the Obama administration, to design policies adapted to the different levels of threat of each enemy.

With President Obama, the risk of social fracture provoked by an antiwar intense consensus is gone, but a close to a trillion dollars deficit⁵, a society recovering from an unemployment rate close to 10%, and domestic disputes are still conditioning the foreign policy turn. In other words, America still remains in a serious unbalanced financial condition that affects its foreign and security policy projection capabilities.

Surrounded by a diverse group of advisers and having reoriented the previous doctrine, Obama has provided a touch of realism that has put an end to the arrogance of the 90’s and 00’s and has forced to rethink the foreign and security policy of the country. He has lost some of the aura of idealism that characterized the “Yes We Can” campaign and that earned him the Nobel Peace Prize, as he has shown in recent years as a pragmatist understanding the need of maintaining American leadership. Similar to the polemic decisions made by the Clinton team in the early 90’s, and in part counseled by some of the same then NSC advisers, Obama has considered the extreme difficulty of a solid democracy to use armed force in defense of its national interest and the infeasibility of maintaining long and costly military campaigns. As a result, the President has promoted a strategy containing at least five main points: geographical expansion of drone strikes, reduction of the military presence on European soil, limitation of the range of its military actions, resistance to use ground forces and pivot towards Asia preparing for a potential confrontation against regional adversaries.

² Department of Defense. *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*. Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2012.

³ Jeffrey Goldberg. “The Obama Doctrine. The U.S. President talks through his hardest decisions about America’s role in the world”. *The Atlantic*. April, 2016.

⁴ The White House. “U.S.-Russia Relations: “Reset” Fact Sheet”. *Office of the Press Secretary*. June 24, 2010. Accessed March 2016: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/us-russia-relations-reset-fact-sheet>

⁵ Schlesinger, Jill. “12 Scary debt fact for 2012”. *CBS News*, February 17, 2012. Accessed March 2016: <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/12-scary-debt-facts-for-2012/>

New challenges and patterns

While America was intensively reconstructing its relations, other countries and non-state actors have experienced an spectacular economic growth and have emerged as competitors on the international chessboard. More explicitly, the United States now has to focus in defeating ISIS, deterring North Korea, containing Russia, contracting Iranian power, and finding an approach to China as cooperative as the Asian giant permits it to be.

As previously explained, the Obama administration has prioritized global engagement, but the next president will have to manage global responsibilities with limited resources. Various authors have catalogued the possibilities of the post-Obama foreign policy strategy. Using the Rand Corporation study terminology⁶, the United States could take: an “assertive approach” focused on American values and limiting compromise with potential adversaries; a “collaborative engagement” in which the United States would act based primarily on its interests and would seek to harmonize its policies with its major allies and strategic partners; and a “retrenchment” approach reducing its ambitions and focus on only the most critical challenges to its own vital interests.

In practice, the next executive will obviously suffer limitations to implement any of these theoretical alternatives. Assertive engagement would be constrained by the current U.S. defense budget and the reluctance of the American public opinion to re engage in large military operations they do not understand. Retrenched engagement would mean that the U.S. should make significant concessions to adversaries and to adjust commitments to partners, seriously undermining its credibility as a superpower. Finally, a collaborative engagement would be restrained by the fact that most allies will most likely not be ready to take up an acceptable share of the global responsibility burden. Washington has argued for a greater burden sharing for decades, but only the new threats of potential adversaries have created enough concern among US partners that could mean a greater load distribution. Some of the U.S. allied nations, not only Europeans but Southeast Asians, Australians, Middle East traditional allies etc. are in more danger than the United States itself, but if the U.S. is brought into conflict (something that could easily happen in the near future) is likely to be to defend its allies and assuming a serious risk of escalating and involving

any of the three nuclear powers (Russia, China, and less likely, North Korea).

Whatever approach is taken, the United States will deal with a situation of overextended responsibilities and ascending threats with the resources devoted to national security shrinking and with no big collaboration from its partners expected.

Critical areas

Europe

Well integrated institutionally and with a low sense of threat, since 2008, Europe is combating a deep economic crisis. Inside the European Union, as well as among European non-member states, there are profound divisions on how to focus national security, specially after some exhausting military missions abroad. The two strongest allies in Europe, the United Kingdom and France, are drained because of the defense of the Mediterranean and Baltic states. This situation creates a tension, as the United States feels forced to maintain a significant force structure in Europe even with European partners contributing. This problem has been temporarily solved by improving NATO capabilities: force structures operating flexibly, new efficiencies, “smart defense” and, above all, a commitment to a larger defense spending by the allied nations. In this regard, United States’ European allies now spend roughly 50% of what the United States spends on defense⁷, including the European one. At the September 2014 NATO Summit in Wales, they agreed to balance this situation, and those countries with the lowest defense budgets agreed to increase a 2 percent of GDP by 2025.

A review of 60 years of national security burden sharing, shows that only in the 1970s did the Europeans drastically increase their share of defense spending of NATO. The United States had about 350,000 troops in Europe in the 70s, while today they have been reduced to 65,000.⁸ An insufficient deployment to deter an increasingly aggressive Russia? Many defense analysts are already considering how to increase US forces in Europe.

Being realistic, European commitment and therefore, American commitment are going to be limited by numerous factors such as Russian participation in Ukraine, Germany’s eroded leadership, Turkey’s Islamic drift, ISIS consolidation in Northern African territories, Britain’s potential divorce from the European Union,

⁶ Binnendijk, Hans. *Friends, Foes, and Future Directions: U.S. Partnerships in a Turbulent World. Strategic Rethink*. Santa Monica (CA): Rand Corporation, 2016.

⁷ SIPRI. Military Expenditure Database. Accessed March 2016: http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex_database/milex_database

⁸ U.S. Department of Defense. “Total Military Personnel and Dependent End Strength By Service, Regional Area, and Country”. Defense Manpower Data Center. Accessed February 2016: <https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/dwp/index.jsp>

which could profoundly affect the future of the transatlantic relationship.⁹

Asia

To counter a future security disturbance requires developing closer multilateral cooperation among the U.S. and Asian allied nations. Unfortunately, the lack of strong collaborative security institutions is the ultimate limitation in the U.S. posture in the region.

Japan, South Korea, and Australia are the three strongest U.S. partners today and American “pivot to Asia” has focused on strengthening current security mechanisms, also reassuring South Korea, the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam. Unfortunately, American security arrangements in the region are predominantly bilateral and there are no sufficiently developed regional institutions comparable to the European Union, or even less to NATO. For a collaborative engagement that guarantees U.S. leadership in Asia, it would be required the strengthening of such institutions, therefore, the United States cannot retrench from its Asian strategic positions. This is tough and limiting in times of strategic redefinition, but necessary. Let us consider this, the second big decision for the next president.

Unfortunately for Foggy Bottom’s and the Pentagon’s decision makers and planners, American allies and partners in Asia are feeling increasingly vulnerable to Chinese expansionism and are getting closer to the United States for protection. American reinforcement in response to Chinese behavior in the South China Sea has inevitably led China to conclude that the United States and its partners in Asia are encircling it.

One of the most reactive U.S. allies is Japan. Under Prime Minister Abe, the country has increased its defense spending, reinterpreted Article 9 of its post-war constitution to allow it to perform a wider regional defense role, and developed its first national security strategy¹⁰.

It is to be seen whether China will react with more aggressive policies or with compromise.¹¹ The United States could help design a procedure to resolve maritime claims in the region before they transform into a major conflict, but in case China decides to go for an aggressive attitude, the U.S. leadership and determination would be more necessary than ever before.

The Middle East

The Middle East presents a much more complicated partnership problem than does Europe or Asia. During the previous republican two terms administration, the U.S. posture in the region was assertive. Recently, Washington has shown a complete different attitude, not only in terms of the intensity of the regional involvement but also in terms of traditional alliances’ maintenance.

On one hand, none of the four most important traditional U.S. allies in the greater Middle East: Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan, do maintain easy relations with the United States. For many countries, the Obama administration has carried out a major alteration of traditional American policy in the region. Since 2008, Washington has had no problems in leaving in the lurch President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt; taking sides with the Shiite opposition in a time when the Gulf countries were sending protection forces to Bahrain to support the monarchy, or not intervening when Syrians rose against President Bashar al Assad, an Arab leader that the Arab countries wanted to get rid of.

On the other hand, imports of oil from Saudi Arabia and other countries in the region have gradually dropped over the years, and revolution in oil and shale gas industry will probably further reduce them. That is, the United States soon will not be dependent of oil imports from countries who are distrustful allies and who doubt the sincerity of the U.S. commitment and are reluctant to unconditionally endorse the leadership of Washington. While this will reduce U.S. dependence and commitment in the long run, in the short term, most of the Middle East countries are still counting with the United States to maintain security in the region with its presence.

The case of Israel requires special attention; both because of the historical bilateral relationship and the criticized political turn made by the Obama administration in recent years. Away from the role Israel played during the Cold War, the main factor currently pushing America to intervene on behalf of Israel is domestic policy: Israel has indefatigable and well-organized pressure groups in Washington. Consequently, although theoretically United States has joined many of the actions of his government, especially the expansion of settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, in practice it has tolerated them and will continue doing so in an electoral year. Unfortunately, it is precisely this unconditional and enduring US commitment to protect the State of Israel,

⁹ North Atlantic Treaty Organization. *Wales Summit Declaration*. Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Wales. Press Release (2014) 120. September, 2014. Accessed March 2016: http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm

¹⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. *National Security Strategy (NSS)*. Accessed March 2016: http://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page1we_000081.html

¹¹ Two different views on the “Pivot to Asia” policy effectiveness can be found in Schiavenza, Matt. “What Exactly Does It Mean That the U.S. Is Pivoting to Asia? And will it last?”. *The Atlantic*. April 2013. And Ross, Robert S. “The Problem With the Pivot Obama’s New Asia Policy Is Unnecessary and Counterproductive”. *Foreign Affairs*, November/December, 2012.

which limits the possibility for Arab countries and Iran, to perceive a potential ally in the United States.

Iran

Searching for renewed partners in the Middle East, and seeking a new relationship with Iran at the same time, will be a demanding diplomatic challenge for the U.S. In Iran the nuclear deal appears to be working, with the country meeting the nuclear commitments required by the international community to lift the sanctions. For supporters as well as for detractors, there is a common assessment: this agreement stabilizes the situation but does not create a new permanent framework. This raises questions about whether U.S. policy needs to plan a post-deal reality. On one hand, U.S. military bases in this region still constitute the base of U.S. containment policy towards Iran, something that has not basically changed since the nuclear deal. On the other hand, some in the U.S. political establishment¹² believe that a larger international engagement with Iran can help shape the Iranian domestic struggle and favor moderate stakeholders, especially important now that a quasi-civil war is going on between Shia and Sunni Muslim world.

Finally, the expansion of Salafi terrorist activity, a reality that provokes that U.S. partners throughout the region become even more vulnerable, have complicated the Iranian influence in the Middle East, the ongoing civil wars in the region (Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Yemen) and the Syrian conflict.

To this respect, articulating previous actions such as Department of State Pan Sahel Initiative¹³, Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership¹⁴ with current efforts to fight the stream of terrorism from North Africa to the Middle East, is a third pending issue in the agenda for the next President.

Conclusions

For the last two decades, the U.S. has supposedly scaled down its global presence. Most likely, this situation is not temporary and represents the birth of a new international order, in which the United States will have to play to guarantee an hegemonic position. The American commitment of the Bush era, to preside over a unilateral world with

a single dominant power, opposes to the current multilateral world with regional power centers.

With the transformation of the missions in Iraq and Afghanistan on its way, the United States, guided by the paradigm of "leading from behind", has interiorized the end of unipolarity and accumulated a number of lessons learned during the last years. Since 2008, despite the critics, the Obama administration has reaffirmed its commitments to Europe, Asia the Middle East, and against the threatening challenge of fanatic terrorism. Since the end of unipolarity, some regional actors have risen and consolidated as potential adversaries to the interests of the United States. Specifically, the U.S. relations with China and Iran have shown as a first priority largely because America still feels the need to protect its regional partners, a reality part of a mid-long term strategy based on selective engagement.

Connected with this strategic collaborative approach, the next leader of the United States will certainly have to reinforce its relationship with traditional partners, focusing on strengthening security architectures that work on maintaining the United States hegemonic position with an assumable and shared cost.

Discussions on the possible decline of the US as a global hegemon must not lead, however, to the false perception that is the end of American power. Other actors have gained powerful positions; nonetheless, the advantages possessed by the United States remain immense. Open society and individual promotion based system remains an endless source of talent and creativity that puts the country at the forefront of knowledge and progress. His system based on respect for fundamental freedoms, remains attracting millions of people who enrich the American society. Its natural resources are extraordinary, and it is still unresolved what role they can play in strengthening the American strategic possibilities, domestic and abroad.

We will need to further analyze the future arrangements to describe American foreign policy. Nevertheless, in conclusion, it seems that if the United States people elect a leader capable of maintaining American opportunely engaged and far from populist isolationism, the 21st century could be American again.

¹² Kaye, Dalia D. "The Iran Deal Is Working: What Now?" *The National Interest*. March 9, 2016. Accessed March 2016: <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-iran-deal-working-what-now-15445>

¹³ U.S. Department of State. Office of Counterterrorism. "Pan Sahel Initiative". Washington, DC. November 7, 2002. Accessed March 2016: <http://2001-2009.state.gov/s/ct/rls/other/14987.htm>

¹⁴ U.S. Department of State. Bureau of Counterterrorism. "Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership 2005". Accessed March 2016: <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/programs/index.htm#TSCTP>

References:

- Gray, C. (2010) 'War: Continuity in Change, Change in Continuity', *Parameters* 40, 5-13;
- Department of Defense. *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*. Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2012;
- Jeffrey Goldberg. "The Obama Doctrine. The U.S. President talks through his hardest decisions about America's role in the world". *The Atlantic*. April, 2016;
- The White House. "U.S.-Russia Relations: "Reset" Fact Sheet". Office of the Press Secretary. June 24, 2010. Accessed March 2016: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/us-russia-relations-reset-fact-sheet>
- Schlesinger, Jill. "12 Scary debt fact for 2012". *CBS News*, February 17, 2012. Accessed March 2016: <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/12-scary-debt-facts-for-2012/>
- Binnendijk, Hans. *Friends, Foes, and Future Directions: U.S. Partnerships in a Turbulent World*. Strategic Rethink. Santa Monica (CA): Rand Corporation, 2016;
- SIPRI. *Military Expenditure Database*. Accessed March 2016: http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex_database/milex_database;
- U.S. Department of Defense. "Total Military Personnel and Dependent End Strength By Service, Regional Area, and Country". *Defense Manpower Data Center*. Accessed February 2016: <https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/dwp/index.jsp>
- North Atlantic Treaty Organization. *Wales Summit Declaration*. Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Wales. Press Release (2014) 120. September, 2014. Accessed March 2016: http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. *National Security Strategy (NSS)*. Accessed March 2016: http://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page1we_000081.html
- Two different views on the "Pivot to Asia" policy effectiveness can be found in Schiavenza, Matt. "What Exactly Does It Mean That the U.S. Is Pivoting to Asia? And will it last?". *The Atlantic*. April 2013. And Ross, Robert S. "The Problem With the Pivot Obama's New Asia Policy Is Unnecessary and Counterproductive". *Foreign Affairs*, November/December, 2012;
- Kaye, Dalia D. "The Iran Deal Is Working: What Now?" *The National Interest*. March 9, 2016. Accessed March 2016: <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-iran-deal-working-what-now-15445>
- U.S. Department of State. Office of Counterterrorism. "Pan Sahel Initiative". Washington, DC. November 7, 2002. Accessed March 2016: <http://2001-2009.state.gov/s/ct/rls/other/14987.htm>
- U.S. Department of State. Bureau of Counterterrorism. "Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership 2005". Accessed March 2016: <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/programs/index.htm#TSCTP>