

# Obama's Retrenchment–Protraction Doctrine: The Decline of the Middle East and the Rise of Asia and the Pacific

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US foreign policy during the Obama presidency has been driven by the notion that the military foray into Iraq undermined America's standing in the world and threatened more fundamental economic and security interests brought on by contemporary globalization and the return to global multipolarity. Obama's initial goal was to complete the military withdrawals from Iraq and Afghanistan and to encourage Middle Eastern states to provide their own security and regional stability so the United States could rebalance or "pivot" to emerging markets and security challenges in Asia and the Pacific. America's struggle to understand the Sunni–Shia divide, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the low risk of terrorism, less reliance on Persian Gulf oil and increased US domestic production, economic significance of markets in Asia, and China's economic and military ambitions drove the Obama administration's effort to scale back from the Middle East and focus economic and military resources on the Asia-Pacific region.

Although the Obama administration maintained some military forces in the Persian Gulf to prevent Iran from altering the geopolitical equilibrium, it set its sights on expanding US economic and security interests in Asia and the Pacific to contain and prevent China from altering the balance of power in the region—or even undermining the US-led international order. The administration was especially eager to contest China's expansive territorial claims in the South China Sea by conducting freedom-of-navigation operations; boosting American military power in support of its allies; and moving closer to Vietnam, Myanmar, Indonesia, and India. It also sought to increase trade and commercial interests with the Trans-Pacific Partnership to counter China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative and the Asia Infrastructure and Investment Bank.

However, the catastrophic civil war in Syria led to the rise of the Islamic State (IS), which rampaged across Syria and Iraq and forced the Obama administration to retake ownership of security in the Middle East. Russian military intervention on behalf of the Assad regime forced millions of civilians to flee to Turkey, Jordan, and European destinations, which empowered far-right-wing groups and politicians to spread their hatred of displaced persons, Muslims, and immigrants. Also, the United States participated in the NATO-led mission to topple Muammar Gaddafi in Libya but was unable

to provide postwar security; launched airstrikes in Iraq and Syria; deployed Special Operations Forces in Iraq, Syria, and beyond; expanded armed-drone strikes against suspected militants in Yemen, Pakistan, and Somalia; resisted Iranian intervention on behalf of the Shia regime in Iraq; and watched Saudi Arabia launch airstrikes against Iranian-backed Houthi rebels. High-profile IS-directed and -inspired terrorist attacks across the Middle East and in the West demonstrated that terrorism was still a threat to global security. These challenges seemed to reflect that the US rebalance to Asia and the Pacific was coming at the expense of the Middle East.

## SCALING BACK FROM THE COMPLEXITY OF THE MIDDLE EAST

The Obama administration believed that in the past, the United States used military force to topple regimes, such as Saddam Hussein in Iraq, with little regard for ideological complexities and sectarian divisions between Sunnis led by Saudi Arabia and the Shia by Iran. Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Saudi Arabia has feared the rise of Shia states and opposition groups throughout the region—fears shared by IS and Al-Qaeda. Over the years, Sunni states have severed or downgraded diplomatic relations with Iran, most recently after Iranian street demonstrators attacked the Saudi embassy in Teheran to protest the execution of Shiite cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr (Graham 2016). Saudi Arabia even launched airstrikes against Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen and supported the Sunni monarchy in Bahrain (Al-Mujahed and Naylor 2016).

Obama's long-term goal seemed to be to establish a stable multipolar order between Sunni and Shia states that would obviate the need for the United States to provide security or intervene and respond to flare-ups driven largely by ideological complexities. Obama stated that the intention was to establish a "geopolitical equilibrium" among "Gulf states and Iran in which there's competition, perhaps suspicion, but not an active or proxy warfare" (Harris 2015). Key to this strategy was supporting the P5+1 nuclear agreement with Iran, a decision the Obama administration believed would empower Iranian moderates as the country integrated with the global economy following the end of sanctions in exchange for weapons inspections (Cambanis 2015).

The inability to end the Syrian civil war—which as of 2016 killed 470,000 people—and plan for a post-Assad regime is reflective of the extent to which ideology and sectarian divisions

shape the region (Barnard 2016). For example, wealthy Saudis have funded fundamentalist Sunni clerics and militant groups to mitigate Iranian influence—even though these same extremists often declare war on the Saudi royal family and provoke the United States (Council on Foreign Relations 2016). However, only Saudi Arabia and Arab states can reach out to Sunni leaders in Syria and Iraq to help move them away from Sunni extremists and terrorists (Beinart 2016; Hubbard, Barnard, and Sengupta 2016). The decision by Obama not to strike against the Assad regime in the wake of its chemical attacks in 2013 was a reflection of the president's desire to not become embroiled in another war in the Middle East and further enmeshed in the contradictions, confusion, and ideological complexities that define the region and frustrate US foreign policy (Goldberg 2016).

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#### PETROLEUM

For decades, the goal of US foreign policy in the Middle East was to promote regional stability with a strong US military presence to ensure access to petroleum and secure global energy markets. According to Hudson (2005, 288), foreign oil was “a cheap supplement to declining U.S. reserves and the West's oil-driven postwar economic development.” However, during the Obama presidency, US domestic production of oil expanded from 1,954,241 barrels per day in 2009 to 3,442,205 in 2015, which resulted in significant decreases in the price per barrel (Energy Information Administration 2016; NASDAQ n.d.). Also, production increases allowed the United States to scale back imports of crude oil and petroleum from the Persian Gulf from 68,757,000 barrels per day in January 2009 to 47,129,000 in January 2016 (Energy Information Administration 2016).

The boost in US production was driven primarily by two developments. First, among the world's 1,470 offshore oil rigs, 247 are located in the United States: 213 in the Gulf of Mexico (the most in the world), 28 off both coasts of the United States, and 6 off the coast of Alaska (Brixey-Williams 2015). Second, the United States expanded hydraulic fracturing (i.e., fracking) and horizontal drilling and developed new projects in the Gulf of Mexico and other basins to boost production. Fracking has enabled US energy corporations to tap into reservoirs of oil and natural gas long ensnared in shale formations. This resulted in a 33% decrease in US energy imports between 2011 and 2013 and an almost 40% decrease in petroleum imports between 2006 and 2014 (Lawrence 2014; McBride 2015). According to a 2014 Energy Information Administration (EIA) report, more than 25% of US-produced natural

gas was extracted from shale, and this is expected to reach 50% by 2035 (Brown and Yuce 2013; EIA 2015).

#### TARGETED KILLINGS AND TERRORISM

Although the Obama administration resisted deploying significant numbers of US troops around the world as a way to limit American casualties, it has intervened in other ways. In particular, the size of US Special Operations Command increased under Obama from approximately 53,400 in 2009 to 69,700 in 2015 (Feickert 2016; US Special Operations Command 2015, 2012, 2009). Specifically, Obama called for increasing the number of special operators from 50 to approximately 300 in Syria to advise and assist groups taking on IS (Jaffe, Ryan, and DeYoung 2016), and he deployed Special Operations Forces to Cameroon and Nigeria to combat Boko

Haram (Almukhtar 2015). Although Obama opposed larger numbers of ground forces, the increased use of Special Operations Forces has led some to question whether he abandoned his “no boots on the ground” pledge (Williamson 2015).

The United States also has operated a covert drone program targeting terrorists and militants in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia. According to New America, since 2002, there have been 579 drone strikes that killed between 3,548 and 5,222 militants, civilians, and unknown individuals. This includes between 2,969 and 4,428 militants, between 370 and 445 civilians, and between 209 and 349 unknown individuals (New America n.d.; North Atlantic Treaty Organization 2016). Sustained public opposition to the deployment of US ground forces in the Middle East may be contributing to the US use of drones and Special Operations Forces (CNN/ORC 2015; Pew Research Center 2014, 2013).

Whereas Special Operations Forces and armed drones were used against suspected terrorists and militants outside of the United States, terrorist attacks against the United States are remote and have been highly exaggerated by the media, public, and policy makers (Mueller and Stewart 2015). Since 1970, terrorists have killed 3,305 Americans; not including the September 11 attacks, this number is 397. The probability that an American will be killed in a terrorist attack is 1 in 110,000,000, despite federal, state, and local governments spending approximately \$75 billion a year on intelligence and counterterrorism efforts (Meyer 2015). In fact, the majority of terrorist activity, as well as deaths and injuries from terrorist attacks, take place in Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Syria (US Department of State 2015). The number of terrorist attacks that took place around the world decreased by 13% in 2015, along with a 14% decrease in the number of terrorist-related deaths compared with 2014 (US Department of State 2016).

Deadly terrorist attacks in the United States are especially rare. Since 2002, 45 people were killed in 9 jihadist attacks in the United States (including San Bernardino in 2015) and 48 were killed in 18 far-right attacks by white supremacists, antigovernment extremists, and other non-Muslim militants (New America n.d.; Shane 2015). By comparison, in the United States in 2013, there were 11,208 firearm homicides (or 3.5 per 100,000) and a total of 16,121 homicides (or 5.1 deaths per 100,000). Stated simply, there were more than 200 times as many homicides by firearms in 2013 alone as deaths caused by terrorists in the previous 13 years (US Centers for Disease Control 2016).

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#### THE STRATEGIC PRIORITY: ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

At the same time it was seeking to end large-scale troop deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Obama administration sought to make a much-needed rebalance or pivot to Asia and the Pacific because of the region's vital economic importance and in response to the rise of China. This strategic decision was explained by former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who argued in her October 11, 2011, article in *Foreign Policy*: "As the war in Iraq winds down and America begins to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan, the United States stands at a pivot point...we will need to accelerate efforts to pivot to new global realities.... One of the most important tasks of American statecraft over the next decade will therefore be to lock in a substantially increased investment—diplomatic, economic, strategic, and otherwise—in the Asia-Pacific region" (Clinton 2011).

From an economic standpoint, the economies in Asia and the Pacific are deeply connected with the United States. As of 2015, the overall volume of trade in goods between the United States and Asia far exceeded all other regions, with \$419,850 billion in US exports and \$924,012 billion in imports—making it the largest and most significant trading region for the United States (Lawrence 2013). Specifically, US trade in goods with China expanded from \$7.7 billion in 1985 to \$550 billion in 2015. China is now America's second-largest trading partner in goods, its third-largest export market, its main source of imported goods, and one of the largest markets for US corporations. In 2014, the United States imported approximately \$466.8 billion in goods from China, which increased from \$425.5 billion in 2012, \$321 billion in 2007, and \$125 billion in 2002. US exports to China increased to \$123.7 billion in 2014 from \$110 billion in 2012, \$63 billion in 2007, and \$22 billion in 2002—making China the third largest destination for US exports (US Census Bureau 2015). Moreover, as of October 2015, of the major foreign holders of \$6.046 trillion in treasury securities, China held approximately \$1.255 trillion, the most of all foreign holders, followed by Japan at \$1.149 trillion (US Department of the Treasury n.d.).

China's economic power has enabled it to compete with the United States on a global scale. The elevation of China's voting shares in addition to the earlier decision by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) board to elevate the renminbi to an elite reserve currency is evidence of its increased economic power and status (Mayeda 2015). China's massive wealth, huge economy, vast holdings of foreign currency, and the IMF's designation of the renminbi as an elite global currency means that China is now a major economic rival of the United States. The leading state banks in China—the China Development Bank and the China Export-Import Bank—have exceeded the

World Bank in terms of lending volume by issuing more than \$110 billion in loans to governments and businesses around the world (Hedinsson 2011). In particular, the "One Belt, One Road" initiative and the China-led Asia Infrastructure and Investment Bank reflect China's interest in challenging the trade and investment structures of the global economic order by funding multilateral, multibillion-dollar investments in infrastructure projects designed to expand China's economic influence in the Pacific, Central Asia, and Europe. The Obama administration's rebalance to Asia and the Pacific means that the region occupies as great a strategic priority in US foreign policy as Europe, with China being viewed as a major rival seeking to challenge or reshape the prevailing economic order (Kazianis 2016).

The increase in wealth and the size of its economy have allowed China the opportunity to modernize its military force, expand its capabilities to project power, and deter America's allies throughout East Asia and the Pacific Rim (Shambaugh 2014). Its emergent strategy, which includes rising energy demands, burgeoning global trade and financial relationships, the building of artificial islands, and the assertion of air-defense zones and the deployment of ballistic and cruise missiles, means that China intends to expand its freedom of action. Although economically interconnected, the United States and China are geopolitical competitors locked in a struggle for influence and leverage that will define the future of the Asia-Pacific region.

One of the most critical flashpoints involves territorial disputes and competing claims among China, Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam over disputed islands in the South China Sea—namely, the Scarborough Shoal, Paracel Islands, and Spratly Islands. Moreover, China has constructed and militarized artificial islands in disputed waters that it claims fall under its territorial sovereignty (Perlez 2015). In response, the United States has launched freedom-of-navigation operations near disputed territory to challenge China and to show solidarity with other claimants.

To demonstrate its commitment to a sustained, long-term military buildup in the region, the Obama administration boosted spending on top weapons systems—namely, advanced warplanes, attack helicopters, aircraft carriers, destroyers, submarines, and combat ships—at the same time it was making cuts to overseas contingency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan (Davidson and Brooking 2015; US Department of Defense 2013). This reflects a US defense strategy designed for deterring and containing major powers, not small states and terrorists. US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter stated, “These challenges reflect a return to great power competition...” focusing US attention “in the Asia-Pacific, where China is rising and where we’re continuing and will continue our rebalance, so-called, to maintain the stability in the region that we have underwritten for 70 years and that’s allowed so many nations to rise and prosper and win. That’s been our presence” (Carter 2016).

Under Obama, the United States has deepened military ties throughout the Asia–Pacific region to counter China’s anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) defense strategy of using cost-effective military means—namely, missile systems—to deter or deny the United States freedom of action in the Western Pacific (Center for Strategic and International Studies 2012; Saylor 2016). South Korea and Japan maintain host-nation programs of \$765 million and \$1.6 billion, respectively, that support US forward basing and force structure in their countries (Cronk 2015). The centrally located US basing arrangement in Okinawa allows the United States to conduct deterrence operations near disputed islands, maritime missions in the East and South China Seas, and patrols near Taiwan and the Korean Peninsula. Furthermore, the Obama administration lifted the arms embargo against Vietnam; agreed to station US Marines in Darwin, Australia; signed a nuclear agreement with India; expanded bases in the Philippines; and hosted Association of Southeast Asian Nations states in the United States. President Obama made several high-profile visits to Vietnam, Myanmar, India, and Indonesia to move the United States closer to states that compete with China. The current composition of the region and geographic realities reflect a balance of power favoring the United States and its allies, thereby mitigating the ability of China to project economic and military power (Kazianis 2016; RAND 2015).

#### ENGAGING THE MIDDLE EAST AND ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

Obama came into office hoping to scale back America’s foreign-policy commitments in the Middle East in order to effectively rebalance to Asia and the Pacific. The president concluded that the problems facing the Middle East are far too ideological for any external power to address, making regime change or the use of massive numbers of US troops counterproductive in the long run (Goldberg 2016). However, the challenges and struggles in the Middle East demonstrated that the Obama administration could not downgrade the US role in the Middle East at the same time it sought to upgrade and prioritize America’s role in Asia and the Pacific.

In the absence of serious US engagement in both the Middle East and Asia and the Pacific, there is greater potential for confrontation, conflict, and instability in these regions.

The goals for Obama’s successor will be (1) to ensure that the United States shares with Middle Eastern states the responsibility for developing a rules-based security architecture in the region, and (2) to lead its allies and partners in Asia and the Pacific in preventing China from gaining leverage in the region or undermining the prevailing US-led global order in ways that do not risk the economic connections that benefit both the United States and China. The challenges faced by the Obama administration will be the same for its successor, which is to remain as deeply engaged and to exert strong US leadership in both the Middle East and Asia and the Pacific. ■

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