

Matthias Maass

# THE WORLD VIEWS OF THE OBAMA ERA

From Hope to  
Disillusionment



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Editor

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From Hope to Disillusionment

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*Editor*

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*In memoriam*  
*Elsbeth Rostow*

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Seoul, May 2017

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## “The World Views” of Barack Obama

*Matthias Maass*

In late 2008, the US chose Barack Obama as its 44th president and, as I observed then, “[t]he world approved.”<sup>1</sup> This current volume is the analytical “bookend” to the previous cooperative study. Then, the task was to capture the world views on the US presidential election. The claim was that the US-American election was indeed a global election in the sense that it was watched and evaluated across the world. Its anticipated effects globally made it in fact a global event.

In early 2017, the Obama presidency ended, and now the task is to evaluate the Obama era. As before, the task is to judge the Obama presidency from foreign, non-US perspectives. To be sure, each country is different and its bilateral relations with the US have its unique features. Moreover, different countries can or even must be studied differently and the analytical focus can or must be placed individually. And this is certainly reflected in the chapters below, which use a spectrum of methods, frameworks, and foci. They all, however, speak to the bilateral praxis of relations with the US during the Obama era and evaluate the Obama White House from one particular, foreign perspective.

In fact, over a dozen case studies are compiled here. But they not only offer insights into foreign views on the Obama White House but, when

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considered collectively, offer a worldview, an outside-in perspective on eight years of US external interactions under President Obama. The claim is that each country studies in itself is valuable, but taken together, they amount to more than the sum of the parts.

In the end, a picture emerges of the world viewing Obama's record positively but with a sense of disillusionment. Despite much international enthusiasm, Obama was not in a position to effect international change on the scale and with the speed initially hoped for. Much has to do with the "indifferent"<sup>2</sup> and "disappointing"<sup>3</sup> Obama complained about. Equally, much is due to the limitations to and restrictions of even most well-intended statecraft. Hence, the sober world view that he performed well, and much of any disappointment is due to overly optimistic expectations at the beginning.

#### FROM HOPE AND ANTICIPATION TO DISILLUSIONMENT AND DISAPPOINTMENT

When Obama was elected to his first term, he certainly had "the overwhelming support"<sup>4</sup> of the world in addition to most of the US electorate's votes. The international support was to no small degree an expression of disapproval of Obama's predecessor, George W. Bush. As a result, the change of leaders in the White House led to a remarkable improvement in "America's reputation abroad."<sup>5</sup> Moreover, many foreign observers were looking at the new president as somebody who would now return the US to the benevolent superpower they wished it to be. As *The Economist* reported in 2009: "Around the world the young new president has become a symbol of what people think American should be."<sup>6</sup>

And in fact, Obama seemed to be off to a good start. Once in office, he extended many of his promises of "change"<sup>7</sup> to the international world. In his first year, he promised to undo what the world had been most critical of during the Bush administration: ending the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, closing the prison in Guantanamo Bay, and repairing the relationship with the Arab world. His promises culminated in his speech in Cairo on 4 June 2009, where he laid out a vision for a new foreign policy, leading to a better world. His vision seemed honest and, for many, idealistic but feasible. And in October, after less than a year in office, he received the Nobel Peace Prize.

However, the promises he made and the hopes that he symbolized soon became a burden. Realistically, there was no way he could fulfill all these

international expectations. And he had many domestic issues to tackle as well. As a result, reality settled in after the global excitement over his election had settled down. His first year’s record was mixed. Abroad, people were uncertain what to make of it.<sup>8</sup> Soon, the realization set in that after all was said and done, Obama was still just a normal president in the historical tradition of the US.<sup>9</sup>

Uncertainty soon turned into disillusionment. Not only did Obama appear not to return the international affection,<sup>10</sup> but he did not live up to expectations. To be sure, keen observers at the time noted that he faced truly “inflated”<sup>11</sup> and “absurd expectations.”<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the expectations were real and he had fostered them himself with speeches, writings, and campaign slogans. But now, global disillusionment began to set in.

The evaporation of hope and anticipation that had followed the election in 2008 was particularly notable in Europe and Africa. In Europe, the highly inflated expectations about how much change new leadership in the White House could bring had to lead to disappointment.<sup>13</sup> In a similar fashion, the African hope for a pivot to Africa was overblown. Such optimism stemmed from Obama having a Kenyan father but “was always misplaced.”<sup>14</sup> For many African states, the actual record of their bilateral relations with the US and of Obama’s overall Africa policy was twice as disappointing because of the high hopes they had placed in him.<sup>15</sup>

As Obama steered the US toward normalcy, the world disengaged. In 2011, the Arab Spring largely disregarded the US, its historical role in the region, and its ideological prescriptions.<sup>16</sup> The US under Obama was neither the evil force behind all the region’s ills nor the “shining city on a hill”<sup>17</sup> to aspire to. And this reflected the overall American attitude quite well. The ideas and ideals the US traditionally stands for remain popular and remain part of America’s self-identity, although US foreign policy continues to favor power and power politics.<sup>18</sup>

Although hopes were dashed and promises left unfulfilled, and although Obama scaled down America’s involvements and entanglements, worldwide disillusionment did not turn into hostility. In many ways, an underperforming US on the global stage was still much more acceptable than an overambitious and overaggressive America. In this spirit, the world expected Hillary Clinton to accept and protect Obama’s legacy and continue on his international course. In light of this assumption, the election of Donald Trump instead of Clinton in 2016 was the ultimate disappointment.

In fact, most of the world not only disapproved but fell into a state of shock over Trump's election. It seemed certain that Obama's legacy would not be handed over to a safe-keeper but would fall into the hands of a political charlatan.

But what is Obama's legacy? In 2009, when he took office, the US economy and with it the global economy were in danger of sliding toward a worldwide depression. Obama was instrumental in steadying the US economy and preventing a global economic disaster. The dangers were real but his economic achievements can be easily overlooked since success came in the form of preventing something from happening.

Similarly, Obama was successful in rejecting isolationist impulses and keep the US engaged on the world stage. Although it had to pull back in a number of areas, the US did not withdraw from the world stage. Under Obama, the US did not repeat the beggar-thy-neighbor economic policies of the Great Depression of the 1930s. Nor did it give in to isolationist temptations in the international political realms as it had done in the 1920s. Again, Obama's policy was in line with the expectations of his domestic bases. During the Obama administration, most Americans rejected outright isolationism but were expecting that transatlantic friends and global allies would pick up a larger share of security burden, in particular with respect to military expenditures and potentially humanitarian intervention.<sup>19</sup>

In two critical areas, the jury is still out: Whether Obama's decision to keep the US out of the Syrian conflict prevented the US from being sucked into another endless conflict or whether his passivity in the early 2010s made things even worse remains to be seen.<sup>20</sup> In a similar way, the evaluation of the Obama White House's so-called pivot to Asia must wait. The rise of China constitutes a challenge to the US, and whether the pivot to Asia and a re-balancing in the region is the proper response remains to be seen.

Overall, the notion of being seen as a benevolent superpower and cooperative leader remains an attractive and popular idea among Americans,<sup>21</sup> and in this sense Obama's foreign policies had domestic support. America's military commitments overseas during the first decade of the twenty-first century made it disinclined to entangle itself in new conflicts.<sup>22</sup> From the perspective of foreign countries, however, Obama's refusal to lead a coalition against Muammar Gaddafi's Libya in 2011 and his unwillingness to commit major US forces to the emerging civil war in Syria of the same year in particular were widely seen as disappointments.



In some areas, Obama failed in or came up short of his own ambition. He failed to end the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as quickly as he had thought; he managed only to downsize the prison at Guantanamo Bay, but not to close it down completely; he tried but failed to improve relations with Russia; he failed to halt North Korea’s nuclear weapons programs; he continued and in some areas intensified the war against terrorism his predecessor had started. In fact, there is a remarkable continuation of many of Bush’s policies into the Obama era.<sup>23</sup>

In the end, Obama’s presidency was not transformative, as many across the globe had anticipated.<sup>24</sup> Instead, Obama presided over a limited pull-back of the US. He revitalized the American superpower by reducing its global commitments. In this context, what has become known as the “Obama Doctrine” describes Obama’s policy well. Where no vital US interests were involved, the US under Obama would allow other states to take the lead. To be sure, the US would provide assistance where necessary and be generally supportive. But he would not claim US leadership for every international crisis. For example, the financial crisis in Greece that manifested itself in 2010 Obama left almost entirely to the Europeans to solve.

At the risk of appearing weak, the Obama Doctrine was geared toward caution. Prudence was needed to avoid unnecessary entanglements internationally and to keep US foreign policy in line with domestic political restraints.<sup>25</sup> In the 2010s, Americans were in no mood to follow its government into foreign adventures again. At the same time, the Obama Doctrine allowed the White House to carefully reposition the US.<sup>26</sup> By disengaging from the wider Near- and Middle East, military forces and diplomatic assets became available for the desired pivot to Asia.

When he took office, Obama inherited a country still reeling from the injuries it had suffered on 11 September 2001 but also tired and exhausted from the wars it had been fighting since then. In addition, the superpower’s domestic infrastructure was showing the effects of decades of neglect while the political landscape was deeply divided. Against this background, his achievements are quite remarkable.

He understood America’s current foreign policy limitations and shaped his international engagements and commitments accordingly. Clearly, the “unipolar moment”<sup>27</sup> was over. The US was still by far the strongest power,<sup>28</sup> but it was sliding. His response was a careful and limited retreat. In many ways, the situation in which the US found itself when it elected Obama corresponded to the “imperial overstretch” which the historian

Paul Kennedy had warned against two decades earlier.<sup>29</sup> Obama's response was to pull back and rebalance American resources with the country's commitments and thus avoid an accelerated decline of the US.

There can be little doubt that he got frustrated with his inability to move the world forward. Despite the initial accolades he received and his inspirational speeches, the notion of a Liberal "End of History"<sup>30</sup> did not return. The Obama White House failed in improving US–Russian relations. After the initial promise of the Arab Spring in 2011, the regional reality left much to be desired. And especially during Obama's second term, challenges mounted. In other words, not only was the world largely disappointed by Obama, but "[c]learly the world has disappointed him,"<sup>31</sup> too.

### THE PLAN OF THE BOOK

The book is about the Obama era only. To be sure, some evaluations of the Obama years can be made best by reporting the response to his successor's election. However, the focus is on the US, its foreign policies, its perception overseas, and an evaluation of the Obama White House from abroad.

The authors brought together for this project here tackle a set of inter-related questions. First, they ask how the Obama years have shaped bilateral relations. Second, how was the Obama White House seen from a particular country's perspective? Third, what is the final verdict, from a foreign country's perspective? All the questions open up related inquiries. The very first question raises the issue of changing security relationship and developments in connection with the so-called American pivot to Asia. The second question implies an understanding of the domestic context and possible differences between the popular view and the governing elite's perspective.

In pursuit of these larger questions, each tracks the major events that set the tone in bilateral relations and shaped the national perception(s) of the US under Obama and of the Obama White House. Such an exploration of issues and events allows the chapter to capture changes in and challenges to the bilateral relationship. In this context, the bilateral relationship is not limited to the governmental level, and various chapters incorporate opinion polls and mass media to catch a broader spectrum of national attitudes and perceptions. Taken together, the chapters provide a global survey of how the US during the Obama era has been judged.

### *Road Map*

The chapters follow a roughly geographic “journey,” and the order in which they appear does not imply a ranking. Instead, the chapters start on the American continent and then move eastward. A concluding chapter brings together the various country-specific insights and uses them to build up a global or world view of the Obama era.

During the Obama era, US-America’s western hemispheric neighborhood was not particularly high on Washington’s list of priorities. To be sure, China pursued efforts to make inroads in a region where US continues to claim a position of *primus inter pares*. However, overall, US relations in the region remained stable and unchallenged.<sup>32</sup> The exception to a policy of status quo was Cuba, where Obama’s agenda of change created the context for normalization of bilateral relations. The process was begun in 2014 and led to a presidential visit in Havana in 2016.

In the opening chapter, Michael Parmly turns to one of the most prominent coups of Obama, the restoration of full relations between the US and Cuba. Parmly explores the particular approach Obama took, the emphasis of broad-based relationship going beyond economic interactions from the beginning and including the issue of mutual respect. He identifies what was achieved and what still needs to be done to fully normalize relations between the superpower and the island state. After all, Obama pushed open the door and started a process, but it is for his successors to continue down this path and complete the project.<sup>33</sup>

Obama’s predecessor in the White House, George W. Bush, had shown noticeable interest in African affairs. In particular, his efforts to stem the tide of HIV/AIDS have left a lasting legacy. Against this backdrop, much more was expected from the incoming president, who had after all a Kenyan father. However, such high expectations were soon shattered when Obama’s pragmatism in external affairs led him to follow in a traditional path in US foreign policy that does not prioritize Africa.<sup>34</sup>

In his chapter on Kenya, Elijah Munji contrasts the expectation of an “Obama Bonus” with the complex record of US–Kenyan relations. Before even his candidacy, Obama had singled out corruption as the key problem and good governance as the solution for Kenya, his father’s homeland. But in the end, Munji finds, the US under Obama went back to a much more traditional agenda and focused on economic, trade, and development relations in addition to global security affairs. From the perspective of Kenya, Obama did quite well and economic interaction grew and secur-

ity cooperation strengthened. But a particular “Obama Bonus” for Kenya was nowhere in sight.

Cassandra Veney’s chapter “Nigeria: Views from the Hegemon in West Africa on the Obama Administration” starts by exploring the African state’s shift from a regional hegemonic outlook to a more narrowly defined national interest policy. From there, she moves on to Nigeria–US relations. She paints a broad and rich picture, with Nigeria moving from disappointment to resentment over US policies and with a sense of unreturned support affection for Obama as America’s president.

In his chapter on Egypt, Nael Sharma focuses on official diplomacy during the years following the removal of Egypt’s President Hosni Mubarak during the Arab Spring in 2011. Sharma shows the ambivalent and growingly uncomfortable position of Egypt’s foreign policy elite which distrusts the Obama White House and disapproves of its policies but finds no alternative to maintaining a solid working relationship with the US.

In 2008, when Obama’s election to the presidential office emerged as a real possibility, much of Europe looked at the developments in the US with much hope and anticipation. The opposition to America’s war in Iraq in particular was projected on candidate Obama, who promised to rectify things as soon as possible. France, too, enjoyed its “Obamania.”

However, conservative foreign policy elites in Europe were less enthusiastic and in Germany, for example, candidate Obama was not allowed to speak in front of the Brandenburg Gate, the symbol of united Germany today. President Obama’s advice, address in particular to Germany, was loudly ignored.<sup>35</sup> However, over time, European leaders, including Germany’s Chancellor Angela Merkel, warmed up to Obama and transatlantic relations regenerated considerably. Over the years, Obama and Merkel developed a strong working relationship and worked together on containing Russia’s maneuvers on its western frontiers.<sup>36</sup> In fact, when Hillary Clinton lost the presidential race against Donald Trump in 2016, Obama lost someone to be his legacy’s standard bearer. Instead, the baton went to Merkel, now tasked with keeping a watchful eye on western and transatlantic positions and policies.

French–American relations did improve significantly under Obama, Ruchi Anand finds in her chapter. For the majority of French, Obama and the US under his leadership recovered much, but not all, of the political losses accrued during the George W. Bush years. In parallel, the French

people’s increased liking for the US under Obama was reinforced by a sense of shared victimhood when Paris became victim to terrorist acts in 2015.

In stark contrast to transatlantic relations, US relations with Russia went from bad to worse, as Ivan Kurilla and Victoria I. Zhuravleva find. Unfortunately, this development was not limited to the states’ leaders, and anti-Americanism in Russia rose up to the very end of the Obama era. Although both sides had made efforts to steer bilateral relations toward trust and cooperation, the initial upswing in relations was soon followed by a broadly shared view in Russia that looked at Obama’s US with distrust and enmity.

Müge Kinacıoğlu and G. Aylin Gürzel Aka describe the hope and anticipation among the Turkish when Obama was elected. However, soon reality set in. Regardless of America’s top leaders, US interests vis-à-vis Turkey remained what they had been before. Strategic needs and incentives to cooperate were balanced by diverging interests and regional reorientation. The bilateral security relationship and the strategic importance of Turkey in NATO offered a starting point for a deepening of relations, but overall, the Turkish–US relationship did not change fundamentally or deeply during Obama’s era.

Whereas the wider Middle East and Central Asia were front and center during the George W. Bush years, Obama’s strategic shift of American attention efforts to Asia implied an equally strategic retreat from the Middle East.<sup>37</sup> Obama refused to intervene in the Syrian civil war and thus provided openings for national and regional actors, and, most prominently, Russia. The US president also adjusted to a poisoned relationship with Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Ronnie Olesker tracks the continuing deterioration of US–Israel relations, finding that a long-term trend got reinforced by the clash of personalities. However, while top-level relations between Tel Aviv and Washington deteriorated rapidly, working-level cooperation between the two historical partners continued unabated. Olesker concludes by arguing that the Obama era marked a turning point in American–Israeli relations which have turned now from a special to a normal relationship.

Whether Obama achieved a critical first-stage win in Iran or whether he failed to effect truly lasting, deep change in US–Iranian relations remains to be seen. Barbara Ann Rieffer-Flanagan points out that significant change in the Iranian nuclear weapons issue was achieved. Whether it will last and in this sense be “the final word” on nuclear proliferation in the

region only time will tell. It was, however, a critical step in the non-proliferation direction. Unfortunately, Rieffer-Flanagan argues, the change was limited narrowly to the nuclear issue and did not spill over to broader changes and a bilateral détente. Ever since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, US–Iran relations have remained poisoned and neither side has moved much since then. Obama’s reign in the White House did not trigger broader changes in Iran, changes that would go deeper than government-to-government security affairs and speak to Iran’s public directly.

Part and parcel of Obama’s foreign policy agenda was to scale down America’s concentration on and involvement in the post-9/11 regions of war in and around Afghanistan and Iraq. For Obama, both wars were a regrettable legacy of the ill-conceived “War on Terror” of his predecessor. However, the regional entanglements of the US turned out to be difficult to unravel and undermined Obama’s efforts to quickly “turn the page” and reposition the US.<sup>38</sup>

Still, Obama went ahead with a strategic reconfiguration of the US and a reorientation of US engagement in Pacific-Asia. The so-called pivot to Asia took place in this context. It was an attempt to draw down US involvement in the Middle East, reduce the transatlantic focus, and reorient the US toward the rising Asia.<sup>39</sup> And overall, this reconfiguration of US interests and efforts was welcome in the region, as “[m]ost Asians seek continued U.S. involvement in the region—diplomatically, economically, socially, and militarily.”<sup>40</sup>

Unsurprisingly, much of Obama’s pivot to Asia had to do with a still rising China, the largest regional actor by far. In this context, the pivot to Asia can be interpreted as an effort to re-balance of a potential hegemon or a Cold War era-type “containment”<sup>41</sup> of an emerging superpower. Whether China’s hegemonic rise will lead to conflict with the US remains controversial today, but it seems that during his time in office, Obama managed a difficult relationship reasonably well.<sup>42</sup>

In her chapter entitled “Chinese Views of US Foreign Policy Under the Obama Administration,” Gaye Christoffersen focuses on the bilateral relationship between China and the US under Obama and the US president’s regional policies. Judging the US as poorly positioned in the region when he entered the White House in 2009 and sensing no accommodating strategy on the part of China, Obama initiated America’s pivot to Asia. China’s response was fairly predictable and it resented American efforts to restrain China’s forceful rise regionally and increasingly also globally.

This placed both superpowers on a political collision course. The dilemma of how to accommodate a rising power by a status quo power was not resolved by Obama. The bilateral relationship of the US and China will remain high on the agenda of succeeding US administrations.

Beyond China, the negotiations of the Transpacific Partnership treaty and North Korea’s ongoing nuclearization shaped America’s outlook on Northeast Asia,<sup>43</sup> where Japan and South Korea are critical allies of the US. Mason Richey investigates “South Korea’s Perceptions of Obama’s Foreign Policy Towards Northeast Asia.” He comes to the seemingly contradictory conclusion that although Obama’s policy of “strategic patience” toward North Korea turned out to be a “dangerous failure,” the evaluation of the US generally and Obama specifically remained favorable in South Korea.<sup>44</sup> He attributes this phenomenon largely to the sympathetic perception of Obama. However, the issue of North Korea’s nuclear weapons programs remained unresolved under Obama and his legacy will be determined in part by how things develop on the Korean Peninsula under his successor.

The pivot to Asia Obama initiated seemed half-hearted to some, and in Southeast Asia doubt sprang up whether America’s turn to Asia will be robust and lasting enough for regional states to build their security policies around it.<sup>45</sup>

Indonesia, the focus of Prashanth Parameswaran’s chapter “The Obama Era: The View from Indonesia,” had put high hopes in candidate Obama because of his life story and two and a half years of residence in Indonesia as a child. However, the initial anticipation for strong and friendly relations with the US under Obama’s presidency was checked quickly as challenges mounted and complexities in the bilateral relationship reasserted themselves. Parameswaran describes the Indonesian elite’s perspective as “sustained ambivalence” toward the Obama White House. However, beyond the elite’s view, Obama managed to broaden the bilateral relationship and extend it down to the Indonesian people. Still, overall a sense of disappointment emerged as Obama was about to step down, because, fairly or unfairly, the early anticipations on the Indonesian side were not met.

During Obama’s time in the White House, South Asia remained affected by the unresolved situation in Afghanistan and the continuing US involvement there.<sup>46</sup> In Pakistan–US relations, the topic of Christopher Clary and Niloufer Siddiqui’s chapter entitled “Obama and the US–Pakistan Marriage of Convenience,” pragmatism characterized the Obama era.

Front and center was the ongoing war on terrorists and the bilateral cooperation this required. At the same time, a growing sense of distrust became noticeable on the Pakistani side. It was fueled by the uninspiring pragmatism in the bilateral relationship on the one side and the perception that the US was turning more and more to India, Pakistan's rival. Obama's disregard for Pakistan's sovereignty in the case of the assassination of Osama Bin Laden in Pakistani territory further worsened a growingly distrustful relationship.

However, US–Indian relations did not move much beyond pragmatism, either, as Shivaji Kumar finds in his chapter on “India’s Views of the Obama Era: Maturing Defense Partners but Reluctant Asia-Pacific Friends.” Initially, India was hopeful to see its relations to the US improve. It was certainly more than ready to move beyond the George W. Bush White House. However, during Obama’s first term in particular, India felt overlooked and sidelined. From New Delhi’s perspective, most if not all US attention in Asia was given to China. After Obama’s reelection, the US–Indian relations improved somewhat but remained limited to military and strategic cooperation in the wider context of the pivot to Asia Obama had initiated. To be sure, the only limited improvements were in good part due to India itself. Its foreign policy bureaucracy in particular stuck to its traditional suspicion of US regional designs and remained reluctant to open India’s bilateral relationship to a broader partnership. On balance, bilateral relations improved during the Obama years, but not to the extent initially anticipated.

What emerges is an Obama presidency that “the world” views as solid and overall helpful but not nearly as successful as initially hoped for. To be sure, much of the early anticipation of change in US foreign policy was misplaced. The assumption that the inspiring candidate Obama would be able to carry out all his campaign promises quickly and completely as President was unrealistic. The world’s hopes were real nonetheless. The worldwide score cards of the Obama White House collected here thus paint a picture of an overall solid perception of the Obama presidency that still feels much like a disappointment, though.

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# The Barack Obama Presidency: Cuba

*Michael Eleazar Parmly*

## INTRODUCTION

Imagine the general surprise of the inside-the-Beltway crowd—not to mention the rest of the US-American population, the Cuban populace, and the rest of the world—when CNN and the BBC put out the word on the morning of 17 December 2014 that President Barack Obama and President Raúl Castro would speak that afternoon on the subject of relations between the two countries.

General surprise, despite the fact that there was a fairly broad consensus that an improvement in bilateral ties, and especially a change in US policy, was long overdue. There was, indeed, a consensus, judging from almost all polling data.<sup>1</sup> And that consensus prevailed in the US and worldwide. For several decades every autumn, there had been a vote in the UN General Assembly condemning the US embargo on Cuba. With each passing year, that resolution was approved with ever-larger margins of victory.<sup>2</sup>

In the Western Hemisphere in 2014, there were virtually no countries that aligned with the US's Cuba policy. Within the US, whereas proposing an improvement in ties with Cuba had through the decades been considered anathema in US politics, the then candidate for the presidency

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Barack Obama broke that mold when he earned the support of sizeable portions of even the Cuban–American vote in the 2008 national elections even after he spoke in favor of breaking with past policy.<sup>3</sup>

What had taken so long? After all, as was just noted, Obama had spoken of new beginnings with Cuba all the way back in 2008, and yet here he was, more than half way through his second term and less than two years before he would be leaving the White House, and seemingly very little had occurred. Until 17 December 2014.

It is true that there had been small steps by the two governments in the direction of improving communication from the time Obama entered the White House in January 2009. Nevertheless, in their public stances, the two sides had continued to maintain essentially antagonistic postures. Among the standard litany of mutual recriminations, the US side continued to insist on the liberation of a detained USAID contractor being held by Cuba, while Havana had clamored for years for the freeing of “Los Cinco,” five Cuban citizens who had been convicted in US courts for espionage.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, “surprise” is the least one can say to describe the general reaction to the announcements of 17 December 2014. Why now, after nearly 55 years of chill—if not downright antagonism bordering on open hostility? One editorialist, tracing the history of bilateral ties, said it best: “Cuba has been the thorn in America’s side for over half a century.”<sup>5</sup> Some observers date the poor relations all the way back to the beginning of the Cuban Republic at the beginning of the twentieth century. (See the article by this author in December 2013 in the *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* entitled “Cuba, the United States and Guantanamo: Dealing with a Historic Anomaly.”)<sup>6</sup>

In light of that troubled history, the speed and depth with which the two sides proceeded from 17 December 2014 onward was all the more remarkable. Raul Castro on the Cuban side had his own reasons—partly economic, given the poor state of the Cuban economy and the restlessness (reflected in steady departure of Cuban youth from the island) of its population—for wanting to overcome the decades-long hostility with its neighbor to the North. This chapter will discuss below the Cuban rationale—and Cuba’s stakes—in overcoming the decades of bilateral hostility, but first, it is the US motivation which draws attention.

For Obama, the explanation—in stark contrast to his 10 immediate predecessors, from Eisenhower through George W. Bush—was at once simple and very profound. In the years and decades to come, historians and

political analysts will plumb the depths of the thinking of America's 44th president. They will seek to explain why Obama continued to reach out to Vietnam, why he pushed forward to build ties to Burma, why he drove with steely determination for a resolution of the nuclear issue with Iran.

### TOWARD A NEW US–CUBAN RELATIONSHIP: OBAMA'S NEW APPROACH

To explain the shift in Cuba policy, this author is drawn to Obama's own words. Arguably, of his entire eight-year presidency, the most broadly indicative of Obama's public pronouncements on his personal political and diplomatic philosophy was his speech in Oslo, Norway, on 10 December 2009, when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Pundits have disputed the authorship of Obama's Oslo speech, but it is clear that the president put more of his own time into parsing the words than anything he had delivered before—and arguably afterward. It is worth quoting him at some length:

*We must direct our effort to the task that President Kennedy called for long ago. 'Let us focus,' (Kennedy) said, 'on a more practical, more attainable peace, based not on a sudden revolution in human nature but on a gradual evolution in human institutions [author's emphasis].'*<sup>7</sup>

In Oslo, Obama then went on to assert the following:

*No repressive regime can move down a new path unless it has the choice of an open door [author's emphasis]. ... We must try as best we can to balance isolation and engagement, pressure and incentives, so that human rights and dignity are advanced over time.*<sup>8</sup>

Finally, in Oslo in 2009, the Nobel Peace Prize recipient emphasized that, “[a] just peace includes not only civil and political rights—it must encompass *economic security and opportunity* [author's emphasis].”<sup>9</sup> Those few short phrases encapsulate the essence of the eventual policy initiatives of Barack Obama with Cuba.

There were three key elements to Obama's policy initiative. As impatient as he may have been to change a policy which he felt had not worked in over 50 years, Obama first recognized that any change in the US stance toward Cuba would take time. As a corollary, that change would require patience. Obama clearly wanted a new Cuba policy, but he wanted it done

right. The fact that the initiatives started in earnest only in Obama's second term, and only bore fruit in the second half of that term, does not mean he wasn't thinking about it for a very long time. In order to get the dialogue started, speed was *not* of the essence.

Second, even if he rarely—if ever—said so explicitly, Obama sensed that it was for him, and not Castro, to take the first step. Thus his reference in 2009 to leaving “an open door.” In this sense, Obama's Cuba initiative differed somewhat from most of the other breakthroughs he pursued (Iran for sure, where excruciating care was taken to ensure that the initiative was perceived as balanced and was thoroughly verifiable). Obama was aware that with Cuba, there was a lot of history of perceived US lack of respect for Cuba to work through. Thus it was Obama who sought out a first contact with Raul at the funeral of South African leader Nelson Mandela in December 2013, not the other way around.<sup>10</sup> Even if there were only perfunctory greetings exchanged over the handshake in Pretoria, the ice was broken on that day in 2013, a point not lost on Raul Castro.

And third, Obama realized that in pursuing a dialogue with Cuba, for him and for the US to focus exclusively on political issues—the straight human rights agenda that had characterized the US agenda under most of his predecessors—would not work. Obama sensed that if there was pressure for change in Cuba, especially among the rising generations of Cuban youth, it was more economic than political. That did not stop Obama from speaking out about Cuba's human rights record,<sup>11</sup> including during his 20–22 March 2016 visit to the island. However, whatever other open-source information and classified intelligence he might have been receiving, throughout his presidency Obama was most aware that the numbers of Cubans—especially young Cubans—trying to leave the island was not dropping, but rather was rising. He knew there was pressure for change in Cuba, especially from Cuban youth. That pressure was his “ace in the hole.”

### NOT ONLY ABOUT ECONOMICS: THE ISSUE OF RESPECT

On its surface, the Cuban motivation for wanting to overcome the half century of hostility with the US came down to economics. As a small island nation, Cuba has always been dependent on a relationship—commercial and political—with someone wealthier and bigger. Through the centuries, from Columbus's time at the beginning of the sixteenth

century to that of Castro at the end of the twentieth century, Cuba has sought a reliable partner. From the start of its colonial era through to independence, it was Spain that monopolized the exchanges.<sup>12</sup> When Cuba broke from its colonial power at the start of the twentieth century, the US assumed the role of Cuba's major partner.<sup>13</sup> After the 1959 Revolution, the Soviet Union became the priority trading relationship with and source of assistance to Cuba.<sup>14</sup> With the collapse of the USSR in 1989 and through the 1990s, Venezuela assumed a disproportionately large role in Cuba's economic and political worldview.<sup>15</sup> Venezuela's eclipse over the last decade incited Raul Castro's government to look elsewhere. Seeking rapprochement with the US thus was a natural place to seek to build relations.

However, it would be a mistake to think that Raul's willingness to build new ties was only about cash. The Castro Revolution, and even long before that, stretching back in Cuban history to the nineteenth century, had been about asserting Cuban identity in the shadow of its larger neighbor to the North. For over five decades, Cuba had been willing to wait out the hostility of the US—undergoing real poverty as a result<sup>16</sup>—until it got what it really wanted from its northern neighbor: respect.

The question of respect has always been critical to Cubans. In his opening words as he announced to the Cuban people the breakthrough with Obama on 17 December 2014, Raul Castro stated, “From the time of my election as President ..., I have reiterated on multiple occasions our willingness to sustain with the Government of the United States a *respectful dialogue* (author's emphasis), based on sovereign equality ...”<sup>17</sup> To further underline the legitimacy of his action, Raul invoked his brother Fidel, who he said had made the same point to the US government “at different moments of our long struggle.”<sup>18</sup> The question of respect has continued at every point of the evolution of the bilateral relationship from 2014 until the present. In public remarks while in Europe in the Spring of 2017, Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez was quoted as saying, “The current government of the United States has said it is reviewing its policy towards Cuba. We reiterate our readiness for dialogue and cooperation on the basis of *absolute respect* (author's emphasis) for our sovereignty.”<sup>19</sup> It is rare that a Cuban official addresses the question of bilateral relations with the US without injecting an element of “respect” into the discussion.

Once the Cuban side was convinced that it had in the Obama administration a US interlocutor that would show the sensitivity it sought, progress was possible. There was some urgency on the Cuban side. Raul Castro



sensed the pressure for change from within the island. It was that awareness that had led him in 2014 to do away with one of the most fundamental aspects of post-1959 Cuban migration policy—the requirement that any potential emigrant first obtain “a white card”—a kind of “exit visa” or permission to leave Cuba, always very hard to come by—from the Cuban government.

In January 2014, Raul announced that the only requirement for Cubans to leave the country was that they possess a valid Cuban passport and that they have a visa to enter the country where they wanted to go. Raul was aware that, contrary to the pattern through the 1960s and 1970s, when Cubans mainly fled what they saw as oppressive politics of the young revolutionary regime, by the second decade of the twenty-first century, most Cubans were leaving for economic reasons.<sup>20</sup>

### THE REASONING BEHIND OBAMA’S NEW POLICIES

For its part, the economic emphasis of the Obama administration was a reflection of two things: One was the conviction, given Cuba’s depressed economic state that Cubans would respond most readily to economic initiatives that would benefit their personal lives.<sup>21</sup> The Obama team was fully aware that, especially when dealing with an authoritarian interlocutor like Castro’s Cuba, they first had to be conscious of the views of their government counterparts, and throughout the efforts to negotiate the breakthrough, the US side showed that sensitivity. However, Obama knew he could always count on something much more profound: Popular pressure from within Cuba on the Havana government to change. In all of his public pronouncements on Cuba policy, Obama has cited popular attitudes in both the US and Cuba to explain the steps he was taking.<sup>22</sup>

Obama had another reason for his economic focus: From the outset, there was a clear desire to build solid political constituencies in the US for the policy change. That started with American business, but there was also a desire to have average Americans benefit from the improved relations. Thus there was an emphasis on facilitating increased communications between Cubans and Americans. According to a January 2017 State Department Fact Sheet, among the first American firms to sign deals with Cuba were Western Union, AT&T, Sprint, T-Mobile and IDT (a New Jersey telecom firm).<sup>23</sup> Furthering that aim to build support for the policy among average Americans, the Obama administration pursued agreements with Cuba for landing rights for 10 US flag carriers to fly to Cuba.<sup>24</sup> In

addition, Fedex signed an agreement to provide air cargo service to Cuba, and IBC Airways has a deal to deliver mail twice a week.<sup>25</sup> And the Florida-based Crowley Shipping Lines, which has long had commercial relations with Cuba (e.g., carrying authorized agricultural commodities permitted even under the George W Bush administration in the middle of the previous decade) continues to provide common carrier services for licensed cargo to Cuba. Average Americans, that is, American voters, and not just corporate players, benefitted from Obama's policies.

There was a third element that characterized the Obama policy initiative with Cuba: The personal involvement of the president himself. From the outset, the policy change with Cuba was the work of a very small handful of close aides to Obama in the White House. In the 18 months that the new policy was being pursued, the State and Commerce Departments were largely left in the dark about the initiatives. It was Obama himself who first shook hands in 2013 with Raul Castro in South Africa,<sup>26</sup> and it was Obama's National Security Council staff that carried out all the contacts with Havana. On 16 December 2014, it was Obama himself who spent almost an hour on the phone with Raul pinning down the final details of the policy shift to be announced the next day.

In the end, the intensity of the effort reflected a realization that President Obama had only a short time to implement his new policy, as well as a recognition that Obama lacked majorities in the two Houses of Congress to effectuate more permanent changes. There was from the outset a realization that for all the initiatives taken by the White House, using primarily Executive Orders and other instruments of the presidency, it would be Congress that would have to change US legislation that had built up on Cuba since 1959. Partly for that reason, once the breakthrough was announced, Cuba became one of the destinations of predilection for US Congressional and Senatorial delegations. According to a State Department count,<sup>27</sup> from December 2014 to January 2017, 31 Senators and 85 Congressional Representatives visited Cuba. In the same timeframe, seven governors, from both political parties, led delegations to the island. That intensity of travel may reflect in part curiosity on the part of the travelers, but it certainly was encouraged by the White House as well.

The Obama effort to build a more solid political and popular basis for his policy change is also reflected in the areas his administration chose to pursue with Cuba. In part, they appeal to Cuba's strengths, for example, in the area of disaster response, where Cuba, despite its relative poverty,

has a strong record in rapid and comprehensive reaction to natural disasters (earthquakes, hurricanes, etc.). Given Cuba's worldwide reputation of comprehensive health care for its own population, the cooperation between the US and Cuba in responding to the Ebola outbreak was a natural follow-on. With the proximity of Cuba to the US, and Cuba's sitting astride a main thoroughfare for powerful storms every hurricane season, that the two countries would work together in response to the annual storms was seen as even more of a "no-brainer." Just as clearly, the areas the two sides agreed to concentrate on were in fields where broad swaths of Americans would see benefit from the changes. Obama is counting on that popular support in the US to carry his policy through succeeding administrations. No foreign policy is truly irreversible, but the Obama administration is hoping that its initiatives with Cuba will be close to politically untouchable.

Obama's Cuba policy was in almost every area in sharp contrast with the policies of his predecessors, but one area where the Obama presidency showed considerable continuity, even with the policies of his immediate predecessor George W Bush, was in cooperation with Cuba on migration. All the way back to 1976, and most especially since the Mariel boat crisis in 1980, the two countries had maintained an informal dialogue to control the flow of migrants from Cuba to the US. That cooperation led in 1994 to a formal agreement to limit the number of Cubans annually allowed into the US to 20,000 migrants. Cuba still was convinced that the US "wet foot, dry foot" policy (by which any Cuban who reached dry land in the US was immediately eligible for parole and eventual immigration status in America) constituted a permanent incitation for Cubans to try to flee to the US. Acceptance of that view by Obama led him to end the policy almost on the eve of his leaving the White House. Given the hostile rhetoric of the Trump presidency on the issue of migration into the US, some saw the last minute Obama policy step as a gift to the incoming Trump presidency.

### CONCLUSION: STILL MORE CHANGES NEEDED

For all the progress made by President Obama on relations with Cuba, there remain several key areas left unfinished on both sides. Given Cuba's earnest need to improve its economy, completion of investment codes and, where necessary, appropriate legislation are absolute musts. So too is Cuba's joining the International Financial Institutions (IFIs), most especially the

Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the advice of which could be critical in finding both the funding for and technical advice on the necessary major infrastructure investment and financial reform so badly required on the island. Even if it was for the Cuban government to take the sometime-painful but unmistakably required first steps in those two areas, the Obama presidency could have helped, and it chose not to.

The two main areas where the Obama presidency fell short—including by its own admission—were lifting the embargo and closing Guantanamo. The US trade embargo was repeatedly identified by Obama himself, including in his final 2016 State of the Union address,<sup>28</sup> as something that had to be removed. Optimists hold out faint hope that even under a Trump presidency, a combination of popular sentiment and business interest will, including in the current Congress, bring about a modification in the laws that impede normal commerce between the two countries. The fact remains that Obama chose not to take that on, other than rhetorically. The reasons may be understandable, given the hostility toward almost anything the president proposed from the Republican majorities in both Houses, but the failure remains.

The issue of Guantanamo is different. As President, from the day he entered the Oval Office on 20 January 2009 until almost the day he left eight years later, Obama was haunted by the negative image the US detention facilities in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, gave to the US, and he spoke out repeatedly on the subject. However, Obama never addressed the broader issue of the very US presence in Guantanamo Bay, to which Cubans have objected from the time the US occupied the location in 1903. The issue is raised regularly by the Cuban side in the periodic meetings of the Bilateral Commission of the two countries, but up until the end of the Obama administration, the US side simply took note of the Cuban point. Until that issue is dealt with, regardless of what policy the Trump administration settles on with regard to Cuba, Cubans will always have a bone to pick with their northern neighbors.

The final question in any examination of the Obama administration's Cuban policy is whether the 44th president, for all the boldness of his action, went as far as he could have. Certainly in Raul Castro, Obama had an interlocutor who was more open than Raul's brother Fidel to approaches such as those pursued by the 44th president. The shifting popular sentiment in the US cited at the beginning of this chapter left the White House as much of a political opening as could have been hoped for. It is true that

a Congressional line-up in favor of a wholesale lifting of the embargo or of a handing back of Guantanamo would have required a full-scale political push such as was carried out in Obama's first term on ObamaCare. Even there, the fact that the president's party controlled neither of the two houses of Congress for most of Obama's two terms would have made such an effort problematic at best.

Still, for someone of the proven courage of a Barack Obama, it might have been worth a try. When it came to sensing the need to show respect for the southern neighbor 90 miles off US shores, Obama repeatedly showed that he understood the point. Arguably more than any of his 10 most recent predecessors, Obama would have been the right person to do it. This author fears that it will be a very long time before that opportunity comes again. With a change in leadership in Cuba also looming in 2018, the uncertainty is compounded.

The answer to the question, including for diehard Obama supporters, of whether Obama could have gone further is bound to be disappointing. Because of the unfavorable line-up in Congress for most of Obama's two terms in office, too much of the Obama Cuban policy perforce had to be undertaken by Executive Order and other such constitutional devices that any follow-on administration, especially one seemingly as diametrically opposed to Obama as that of Donald Trump, could easily reverse. In addition and in particular, the failure of Obama to act on the overall status of Guantanamo, and instead to concentrate exclusively on the detainee issue there, was almost certainly an opportunity missed. If US-Cuban relations are ever to be built on a base of sincere mutual respect, the Guantanamo issue will have to be addressed by a future US administration.

Nonetheless, given that 10 of his predecessors had handled Cuba and had *not* taken the opportunity of putting ties on a long-lasting and even keel, Obama deserves credit for having pushed things as far as he did. He got the tone right. And in concrete terms, he got things started. Among other things, Obama's own personal involvement in advancing his Cuba policy left a very good taste in the mouths of Cubans at all levels of society, as was reflected in the U of Chicago's NORC survey cited above. Given the natural affinity of Cubans toward things American, that intangible of making a good impression among Cubans is an important asset being left on the table by the 44th president.

Some of that legacy will remain. It is interesting that Trump did *not* act on Cuba in his first 100 days, despite pressure from many hardliners that he do so. Therefore, the medical dictum of "First, Do No Harm" may

apply to Cuba policy, and may work in favor of a future positive resumption of the Obama momentum.

For a country which lacks the checks and balances that are supposed to characterize US politics, Cuba is experiencing a healthy debate, including within government circles, about the right policy to pursue with America. Opinions may be divided as to the exact right course to pursue *vis-à-vis* the neighbor to the North—the US has left a deep imprint in Cuban history—but for the moment, even when Raul Castro hands power over in early 2018 to his successor, the likelihood is that Cuba can be counted on to stay the course and at a minimum, to keep the door open, if for no other reason than that the Cuban population favors such a stance. Traditionally, and even in the toughest times under Fidel, Havana has been open to initiatives from the US that respect Cuban identity and interests. A future American president will have the chance to complete the journey that Obama started. That is as positive a legacy as Barack Obama could have hoped for.

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## Nigeria: Views from the Hegemon in West Africa on the Obama Administration

*Cassandra Veney*

### INTRODUCTION

In the eight years of President Obama's administration, Nigeria has had three presidents. When he began his first term, Umaru Musa Yar'Adu was president beginning in 2007. He died in 2010 and then his vice president Goodluck Jonathan became the acting president and served out Yar'Adu's term. Jonathan was elected in 2011 after which he served one term. Muhammadu Buhari was elected in 2015 after defeating Jonathan. Changes in leadership at the top were made possible through the democratic process and Nigeria remained a stable ally of the US, although the relationship had its problems under all three presidents over issues of security, terrorism, and corruption.

This chapter will examine views on the Obama administration by analyzing Nigeria–US foreign policy under the Yar'Adu, Jonathan, and Buhari administrations. It is an attempt to determine if views on the Obama administrations have changed under each Nigerian president or have they remained consistent. This examination and analysis will be done within the context of the two countries' bilateral relations that center on economic

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trade, security issues, and the “War on Terrorism.” The factors and actors that underscore consistency or inconsistency in the views held by Nigerians toward the Obama administrations will be discussed. The views will be situated within the context of two democratically elected presidents in 2011 and 2015 that were preceded by the democratic transfer of power to the vice president following the death of the president in 2010. After 29 years of military rule, these democratic developments are important to discuss in and of themselves, but also because Nigeria has a very active and engaged media that expresses the frustrations, expectations, and views of Nigerian citizens.

### NIGERIA’S VIEWS ON THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION UNDER YAR’ADU

One practice that remained consistent in Nigeria’s foreign policy regardless of who was in power (whether the country was under military or civilian rule) has been that it is mainly formulated, articulated, and implemented by the military ruler or president. In all three Nigerian administrations under review, this practice has not changed under democratic rule. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is a secondary actor in foreign policy as it carries out policies dictated by the president’s office.

In 2007, when Yar’Adu assumed office, many viewed Nigeria as on its way to stronger democratic rule, although there were bumps in the road. Former military ruler turned civilian politician and then democratic president, Olusegun Obasanjo, desired a third term, despite a two-term constitutional limit. The democratic process held firm. This ushered in the election of Umaru Musa Yar’Adu who was viewed as favorite of Obasanjo to serve as his successor. Nevertheless, Yar’Adu wanted to put his own stamp on the country’s foreign policy and he adopted the concept of citizenship diplomacy to guide the country’s relations in the international arena.<sup>1</sup> It is important to point out that regardless of Yar’Adu’s plans and intentions in this regard, his ill health and long absences out of the country to seek medical treatment made it almost impossible fully enact a policy of citizenship diplomacy. Because the president is at the center of foreign policy<sup>2</sup> and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs takes its orders from the president, Nigeria’s views on the Obama administration from 2007 to 2010 when Yar’Adu died in office were muted at best and silenced at worst. However, it remains critical to examine Yar’Adu’s concept of citizenship diplomacy and to identify why this concept was adopted.

By the time Yar'Adu assumed office, Nigeria had already been a major contributor and participant in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and its military wing, the Economic Community Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the African Union (AU), and the Maritime Organisation of West and Central Africa (MOWCA).<sup>3</sup> Its role as the hegemon in West Africa was demonstrated by troop deployments in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Sudan as part of the United Nations' peacekeeping missions. Prior to this, it had held steadfast on its anti-apartheid stance toward South Africa. Still, Nigerian leaders, the media, ordinary citizens, and Nigerians in the diaspora believed that the country and its citizens were portrayed in a negative light and for all that Nigeria had given, very little was given in return.<sup>4</sup> In sum, previous administrations had championed an Afro-centric foreign policy that left Nigeria holding the short end of the stick in some citizens' and government leaders' views.

Yar'Adu's citizenship diplomacy came on the heels of decades of military rule, Nigeria's tarnished image both inside and outside the continent, and the country's efforts to consolidate democratic rule. President Obama was elected one year after Yar'Adu and Nigerian leaders and nationals had high hopes and expectations for the new president with the Kenyan father. It was hoped that Obama's ties to Africa would result in a new relationship with Africa—one that was more equal and mutually beneficial and less patronizing. This was not the case.<sup>5</sup>

Citizenship diplomacy had the following pillars that were designed to recast Nigerians both at home and abroad in a more favorable light and their economic wellbeing would serve as the cornerstone of foreign policy. Therefore, citizenship diplomacy entailed the following: Crafting and pursuing foreign policy objectives that would lead to the basic needs of Nigerians being met in bilateral and multilateral agreements. The Yar'Adu administration, Nigerian politicians, and nationals were under the belief that Nigerians abroad were mistreated and they wanted this to end. In other words, all of the resources and efforts that the Nigerian government had dedicated to African causes and other people and places seemed not appreciated and Nigeria's goodwill not reciprocated. Simply put, it was no longer in Nigeria's best interest to play nice guy or big brother.<sup>6</sup> Whereas the Obasanjo administration had stressed and focused on economic development in light of the country's transition to democratic rule, Yar'Adu stressed the protection and citizen welfare as the center of his foreign policy.

How was citizenship diplomacy implemented with the Obama administration, and what were Nigeria's views on the administration for the short period of time that Yar'Adu was in office? The excitement and expectations of the Obama administration were short-lived. It became clear shortly after Obama was sworn in that the US relations with Africa let alone Nigeria would not fundamentally change. The same tenets that undergirded the relationship under the Clinton administration were maintained: Respecting human rights and the rule of law, upholding democratic values, adhering to neo-liberal economic policies, and continuing to fight the so-called war on terror. Also, in the post-Cold War era, Nigerian-US relations revolved around peacekeeping, health issues, and the sale and trafficking of drugs.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, the Yar'Adu administration and Nigerians believed that Obama would make a visit to the country one of his first overtures to a new relationship and to signal the continent's and Nigeria's importance. Therefore, Nigerians were disappointed when an announcement was made that Obama would visit Ghana but not Nigeria. It was not understood why Nigeria was overlooked in favor of Ghana. Nigeria had the continent's largest population; the US imported a lot of oil from Nigeria; thousands of Nigerians lived in the US (estimates are as high as one million)<sup>8</sup>; and Nigeria was a stable and reliable ally to the US.

Instead, from the Nigerian viewpoint, a visit to Ghana was a ringing endorsement of its efforts to consolidate democratic rule and to uphold the rule of law and to respect human rights—all cornerstones of Obama's foreign policy toward Africa. In some circles, Obama's oversight of Nigeria on his 36-hour trip was a snub and the country and its citizens were punished for the lack of progress in curbing corruption and cleaning up its human rights record. Many media outlets portrayed it in this manner.

However, there were others, including the Yar'Adu administration, that treated it as a "non-issue."<sup>9</sup> Although Obama did not visit Nigeria in July 2009, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton visited in August 2009. Her visit received a mixed response even before she landed in the country. This is because she had criticized Nigeria harshly on her visit to Angola. The Nigerian media, government ministers, and citizens "condemned her comments"<sup>10</sup> along with Yar'Adu's party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP). Still, there were "[t]hose in Nigeria who do not belong to or who are not linked to the government took quite a different perspective."<sup>11</sup> Segments of civil society responded to Clinton's comments in a positive manner because they believed that the government engaged in corruption

and was not doing enough to eradicate it. By the time Clinton landed in Nigeria, the Obama administration was viewed positively by some but negatively by others.

According to Edmond J. Keller, “in the context of a changed global environment since the end of the Cold War, Africa assumed renewed importance in U.S. foreign policy calculations. U.S. security interests and African states are seen to be converging. One of the major goals of U.S. foreign policy is to combat international terrorism, and Africa as a whole is vulnerable as a breeding ground and incubation site for international terrorists.”<sup>12</sup> The establishment of ARFICOM in 2007 was, according to the US, designed to address this issue. However, it was not viewed in this light among African governments and citizens, and Nigeria was not the exception. The Yar’Adu administration made it clear upfront to the Obama administration that it would not provide a base for AFRICOM in Nigeria and it should not be based anywhere on the African continent, either.<sup>13</sup> The perception from the Nigerian media, the government, and citizens was that the establishment of a base for AFRICOM on the continent was an effort to militarize the continent and suspicion surrounded AFRICOM.<sup>14</sup>

One test in Nigerian–US relations under Yar’Adu that brought out Nigeria’s views on the Obama administration clearly concerned the “War on Terror.” In 2009, a Nigerian-born passenger, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, on a flight from Amsterdam to the US on an American carrier attempted to detonate a plastic explosive. This prompted the Obama administration to place Nigeria on its terror watch list. With an out-of-sight Yar’Adu, along with a vice president and foreign ministry without authority to conduct foreign policy, citizenship diplomacy was not conducted.<sup>15</sup> The placement on the watch list outraged the Nigerian government because this meant that every Nigerian passport holder would be highly scrutinized by US immigration authorities.<sup>16</sup> The media and the Nigerian people believed that the actions of one did not warrant the designation and subsequent monitoring of all by the Obama administration. Again, citizenship diplomacy was intended to protect the welfare of Nigerians both at home and abroad. Abdulmutallab was a Nigerian by birth who resided in the United Kingdom. What could the Yar’Adu administration do to protect him? The attempted terror attack occurred in late December 2009. By then, it was an open secret that the president was in ill health but, as stated above, remained at the center of foreign policy. Therefore, not even the vice president, Goodluck Jonathan, or head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs could act on the president’s behalf after he

sought medical treatment in Saudi Arabia and subsequently went into a coma. By May 2010, Yar'Adu was dead.<sup>17</sup>

## NIGERIAN VIEWS OF THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION UNDER GOODLUCK JONATHAN

The Obama administration as well as many Nigerians themselves were concerned that the democratic progress that Nigeria had achieved beginning in 1999 would be undermined by the death of Yar'Adu. His eventual successor Jonathan served as acting president beginning in February 2010 due to Yar'Adu's failing health; he was flown out of the country to Saudi Arabia for medical treatment in November 2009. He was not seen in public again—this meant that from November 2009 to February 2010, there was no president or acting president to conduct foreign policy. The Nigerian view that the Obama administration favored Jonathan before Yar'Adu died was reinforced by Obama's invitation to Jonathan to attend the World Nuclear Security Summit in April 2010. Yar'Adu died the following month. In addition, under acting president Jonathan, the US–Nigeria Binational Commission was established in April 2010. Again, Yar'Adu was still alive. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and Yayale Ahmed Secretary to the Government of the Federation signed the agreement to establish the Commission.<sup>18</sup> The Commission has four working groups, focusing on good governance, on energy and investment, on the Niger Delta and regional security cooperation, and on food security and agriculture.<sup>19</sup> It is important to point out that the first working group—tasked to tackle good governance, transparency, and integrity—met as early as 25–27 May 2010. This was right after Yar'Adu died and from the Nigerian perspective, this was an indication that Jonathan was backed by the Obama administration because he was viewed as advocating democracy. The second group—focused on energy and investment—met in June 2010. The third—set up to address issues of the Nigeria Delta and work on security cooperation—met in September 2010. The fourth group with its focus on agriculture and food-related issues, met in February 2011.<sup>20</sup> Regardless of the Nigerian perception of Obama's support for Jonathan, all four groups met in record time before Jonathan was elected in April 2011.

The constitution mandated that Vice President Goodluck Jonathan would become the president upon the death of the president, but there

was still uncertainty whether this constitutional provision would be upheld. It was, and Jonathan served out the remainder of Yar'Adu's term before being elected as president in 2011.

Now, the view in Nigeria was that relations between the two countries would improve because many thought that Obama snubbed Yar'Adu because he was a Muslim from the north whereas Jonathan is a Christian from the south and thus would receive better treatment and more attention.<sup>21</sup> Also, Nigeria's perception was that President Obama favored Jonathan in the 2011 election because at this time he was viewed as an embodiment of democracy and good governance. Moreover, the US–Nigeria Binational Commission is a manifestation of the importance of trade between the US and Nigeria, especially under the African Growth and Opportunity Act. The trade is by no means equal, as the US mainly imports oil from Nigeria and agricultural produce, including cocoa beans, cocoa paste, cocoa butter, feeds and fodder, cashews, leather, cassava, and spices. Nigeria imports from the US mineral fuels, vehicles, plastics, machinery, and cereals.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, the Jonathan administration's foreign policy with the US was focused on attracting more foreign direct investment in an effort to reduce the numbers of the unemployed.<sup>23</sup> The Nigerian view toward the Obama administration was very favorable in the short run. The removal of Nigeria from the US Terror Watch List was part of the favorable view. The Jonathan administration and Nigerians viewed the standoffish and less than warm relations with the Obama administration as a thing of the past and there was the strong possibility that relations were on track to be strengthened and broadened.

The concept of citizenship diplomacy was abandoned. Jonathan stressed that his administration's foreign policy was committed to: “[I]mproved military cooperation worldwide, improved bilateral and multilateral relations among nations, help in curbing health challenges, and promoting the welfare of Nigerians abroad.”<sup>24</sup> It is argued that under the Jonathan administration Nigeria's foreign policy was rebranded under the direction of Professor Dora Akunyili. Citizenship diplomacy was replaced with: “Nigeria: Good People Great Nation.”<sup>25</sup>

However, Nigeria and the US did not maintain warm and close relations throughout the Jonathan administration. There were issues that the two administrations had difficulty finding a shared and mutual understanding. The main issues concerned security, the war on corruption, terror, and the activities of Boko Haram.

Corruption or how to fight it has been a cornerstone of Nigeria–US relations under the Jonathan and Obama administrations. When Jonathan pardoned Deipreye Alameiyeseigha, the role and importance of corruption in the two administrations’ relations was evident. Alameiyeseigha served as the governor of Bayelsa State from 1999 to 2005; Jonathan served as his deputy. Alameiyeseigha was arrested in 2005 in the United Kingdom for money laundering. He was released on bail, and before his case was tried, he jumped bail and fled back to Nigeria.<sup>26</sup> He was impeached and removed from the governorship. This paved the way for his prosecution, conviction, and sentencing and for Jonathan to assume the governorship of Bayelsa State. Although Alameiyeseigha was not impeached, prosecuted, or arrested under the Jonathan administration, his pardon was viewed by the Obama administration as “a setback on the fight against graft,”<sup>27</sup> and it struck a blow to Nigerian–US relations. The US had also charged Alameiyeseigha with money laundering and corruption and the Obama administration was frustrated and upset by the pardon.<sup>28</sup> The displeasure demonstrated by the Obama administration had little bearing on relations. It was the manner in which it was communicated—on social media via Twitter that upset the Jonathan administration. Nigeria’s Minister of Foreign Affairs stated that this was an internal affair and it was inappropriate to comment on such matters using Twitter. The Nigerian perception in the US from Ambassador Ade Adefuye was that the media attempted to create a rift between the two governments.<sup>29</sup>

As an ally of the US in its fight against terrorist activities in West Africa, the Obama administration expected the Jonathan administration to crack down on and eventually eradicate Boko Haram. On Nigeria’s part, it expected the Obama administration to provide assistance for the fight against Boko Haram, especially military assistance. However, it was not easy as the geo-political realities on the ground made Boko Haram not just a menace to Nigeria. It also served as a menace in the region.

Moreover, the Obama administration was hampered in its ability to provide military assistance due to the American Leahy Law which prevented the US State Department and the Department of Defense from supplying weapons to any country whose military is engaged in human rights violations with impunity. This served to further strain relations between Obama and Jonathan.<sup>30</sup> The Obama administration viewed the Jonathan administration’s military as corrupt and accused it of engaging in human rights violations. On one hand, the Obama administration used corruption and human rights violations by the military as the reason why it refused to sell



weaponry to the Jonathan administration. On the other hand, the Jonathan administration argued that it needed the weapons in its fight against Boko Haram. The US ambassador, James Entwistel stated that “the Nigerian military is notoriously known for human rights abuses which is why the US would not sell weaponry to Nigeria.”<sup>31</sup>

Needless to say, this was not well-received by Nigerians who viewed Entwistel as taking the opportunity to “demean and discredit Jonathan.” Nigerian Ambassador Joe Keshi stated that “such tactless and undiplomatic language of an American ambassador should surprise no one. For years now and against diplomatic norms, it has become the hallmark of American envoys in Nigeria to utilize various public platform providing by unsuspecting Nigerians to lecture and disparage the country, its leaders and institutions ... including some past leaders who ... demean, discredit and disparage President Goodluck Jonathan and his administration.”<sup>32</sup>

Relations between the two countries did not improve and perceptions of the Obama administration went from bad to worse after Nigeria canceled military training due to its belief that the Obama administration was not providing enough support. The warm relations enjoyed by Jonathan when he served as acting president and at the beginning of his administration had cooled off until they could be characterized as frosty. This was illustrated by the Nigerian ambassador to the US, Ade Adefuye, who openly accused the US of refusing to sell arms to Nigeria to defeat Boko Haram. Ambassador Adefuye publicly stated: “I am sad to inform you that the Nigerian leadership: military and political and even more general populace, are not satisfied with the scope, nature and content of the United States’ support for us in our struggle against terrorists.”<sup>33</sup> In return, the Obama administration accused the Jonathan military of engaging in human rights violations. Nigeria’s positive perceptions and expectations for the Obama administration were clearly a thing of the past. And the Nigerian media now openly criticized what they believed was Obama’s unwillingness to sell needed weapons to fight Boko Haram.

Uchenna Ekwo, executive director of the Center for Media and Peace Initiatives, also argued that US–Nigeria relations had taken a turn for the worse after the Obama administration refused to sell arms to fight Boko Haram in the northeastern part of the country.<sup>34</sup> Dapo Fafowora, a distinguished former diplomat and intellectual, accused the Obama administration of engaging in hypocrisy because it accused the Nigerian military of human rights violations while at the same time committing human rights violations itself in its “War on Terror.” He cited Guantanamo Bay, Iraq,

and Afghanistan as further examples. Fafowora went further in his criticism when he pointed out that the US had been selling weapons to countries that violate both combatants' and civilians' human rights. He referred to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the apartheid government of South Africa specifically.<sup>35</sup>

There was now distrust on both sides. From the Nigerian perspective, the US enforced the Leahy law in an inconsistent manner and turned a blind eye to countries that had a record of gross human rights violations within their militaries. The Obama's administration continued to fund Israel and its resumption of military aid to the Kingdom of Bahrain following the government crackdown on protestors following the Arab Spring.<sup>36</sup> On one hand the Obama administration had the belief that Nigeria was not going to remain one unified country but would split up in the near future. On the other hand, the Jonathan administration believed that the US encouraged mutinies in the Nigerian military. Relations between the two countries soured and the perception that Obama was a friend of Africa in general and of Nigeria, in particular, was not articulated by the Jonathan administration, the media, or ordinary Nigerian nationals anymore. This perception of the US in Nigeria was made worse when Boko Haram kidnapped more than two hundred girls from the Government Girls Secondary School in Chibok, Borno State, on 14 April 2014.

The cooperation that was vital to both country's foreign policies appeared to be fraught with problems concerning how best to deal with Boko Haram, especially after the capture of the girls made global headlines in all traditional media outlets and social media. The Obama administration agreed to help search for the girls and deployed special service troops and aircraft. However, what appeared on the surface to be a sound diplomatic decision was not perceived as such by the Jonathan administration. This is because the Nigerian military was not informed because of the American belief that it was corrupt. The Obama administration instead decided to provide five million dollars to the surrounding countries: Cameroon, Chad, Benin, and Niger.<sup>37</sup> The Obama White House believed that Nigeria's military had been undermined because elements of Boko Haram were now a part of it and the Jonathan administration refused to investigate the allegations. This belief did not bode well with the Jonathan administration, as there was distrust on both sides.<sup>38</sup> The Obama administration, although it could not provide military weapons, agreed to train a Nigerian battalion (600 soldiers).

However, according to the US, the Nigerian government canceled the third phase of the training after the first two phases were already completed. According to the Jonathan administration, however, the third phase was not canceled, but rather it was not completed due to logistics problems. The Jonathan administration claimed that the US wanted it to divert military equipment away from the areas affected by Boko Haram. This would have endangered the lives of Nigerians in those areas, however.<sup>39</sup> The refusal of the Obama administration to provide weapons to fight Boko Haram, the cancellation of the third phase of training a Nigerian battalion, and also the suspension of buying crude oil from Nigeria, all formed a perception of Nigerians and in the media that relations between the two countries were “at a record low.”<sup>40</sup>

### BUHARI, BOKO HARAM, AND OBAMA

The same dynamics continued under the Buhari administration. As before, the presidents in Nigeria and the US were playing the key role in bilateral relations. President Buhari, who was elected in March 2015, inherited the issues from his predecessor. He was confronted by the same issues and problems the Jonathan administration had experienced in its relations with the Obama administration. Geoffrey Onyema, Minister of Foreign Affairs, outlined the pillars of the Buhari administration as combatting insecurity, fighting corruption, and job creation.<sup>41</sup>

Because Jonathan lost his bid for a second term, the election of Buhari was viewed as an opportunity for a fresh start between the two countries and initially it appeared that the chill between the two countries would warm up. However, this was not the case even though Buhari met with Obama very early in his administration. First, the “War on Terror” and Nigeria’s counter-terrorism efforts aimed at stemming the tide of Boko Haram ended up maintaining the strain in the two countries’ relations. As expected, Buhari fired all of the chiefs of the military who were appointed by Jonathan in an effort to demonstrate that he took seriously the allegations that the military was corrupt and had engaged in human rights violations.<sup>42</sup> Still, the Obama administration continued to uphold the Leahy Law. As a result, Buhari, like Jonathan, criticized the law and maintained that without the necessary weapons, Nigeria was unable to adequately engage in the counter-terrorism against Boko Haram.<sup>43</sup>

In a July 2015 visit to the US, Buhari adamantly expressed the Nigerian view on the refusal of the Obama administration to lift the Leahy Law. Buhari did not mince words when he stated that the Nigerian military “do not possess the appropriate weapons and technology which we could have had if the so-called human rights violations had not been an obstacle. Unwittingly, and I dare say unintentionally, the application of the Leahy Law Amendment by the US government has aided and abetted the Boko Haram terrorists.”<sup>44</sup> The perception from the top of the foreign policy team was that the Obama administration insisted on the Nigerian government doing more to combat terrorism and Boko Haram, but when it came to providing what the military really needed, modern weapons, it could not deliver. In addition, the “so-called human rights violations” were viewed as a means to justify the refusal to sell the necessary weapons to the Buhari administration. The fact that Buhari made his views known publicly on a state visit to the US demonstrated the level to which the relationship had fallen. The Nigerian view on the Obama administration’s insistence that the Leahy Law be upheld was not only seen as inconsistent but as unfair. The reason was the Buhari administration’s belief that the Amnesty International report was wrong and that if there were human rights violations, the military did not commit them while he was president.<sup>45</sup>

Again, the Nigerian media and citizens asked why Obama did not engage in reciprocity to undertake a state visit with Buhari, especially in light of the two slights during the Yar’Adu and Jonathan administrations. The Nigerian media pointed this out to Secretary of State John Kerry during his visit in August 2016. The refusal of Obama to visit Nigeria during both of his terms was viewed as a slap in the face and a manifestation of relations that were not mutually equal. In fact, they were viewed with suspicion by the media in Nigeria now.<sup>46</sup> By the time Buhari became president in March 2015, President Obama was quickly becoming a lame duck president because the Republican Party controlled the legislative branch and stayed true to its obstructionist efforts and blocked proposals that Obama favored. Therefore, even if Obama wanted to lift the Leahy Law, it is unlikely that he would have gotten the approval from a Congress that controlled the purse strings of the State and Defense Departments.

## CONCLUSION

During President Obama's eight years in office, Nigeria experienced the death of one president (Yar'Adu), one acting president (Jonathan), the democratic election of the acting president, the defeat of the acting president, and the democratic election of Buhari. The issues that undergirded Nigerian-American relations did not fundamentally change from Yar'Adu to Jonathan to Buhari. Yar'Adu wanted to shift Nigerian foreign policy's emphasis on economic development to citizenship diplomacy. The latter was intended to not only protect the welfare and security of Nigerians at home but do the same for the Nigerian diaspora. The Nigerian view and perspective of the Obama administration under Yar'Adu was limited because citizenship diplomacy was difficult to define and implement. In addition, his tenure in office overlapped with Obama's only for a short period of time. The time to actively engage with the Obama administration and put citizenship diplomacy into action was even shortened by his ill health and his inability to engage in foreign policy. This was made worse when it became clear that his vice president, Jonathan, had little power to act on his behalf. For the short period of time between January 2009 when Obama took office and November 2009 when Yar'Adu was no longer visible in public life, there were four issues that affected Nigerians' perception of Obama: The establishment of a base for AFRICOM on African soil, the attempted terrorist act of the so-called underwear bomber, the placement of Nigeria on the Terror Watch List, and Obama's decision to visit next door Ghana and not Nigeria. The issue of establishing a base for AFRICOM on the African continent fostered suspicion on the part of the president, the national media, and Nigerian nationals that this would lead to the militarization of Africa.

The image that this portrayed for Yar'Adu and Nigerians was that the US would attempt to militarize the continent and instead of AFRICOM, the US was moving to support the Africa Standby Force.<sup>47</sup> The placement of Nigeria on the US terror watch list did not help the perception of the Obama administration in the eyes of the Nigerian government and citizens. And finally, Obama's July 2009 visit to Ghana when Yar'Adu was still quite active in public life was viewed as a snub. And that Obama touted Ghana as an example of good governance while Nigeria needed to make

more concerted efforts to curb corruption was viewed in Nigeria as refusing to properly credit Nigeria for making the transition from military to civilian rule. The country had proven that it wanted to consolidate its fragile democracy by refusing to allow Obasanjo an unconstitutional third term, and in fact Yar'Adu succeeded him in democratic elections. It took a while for the government to officially make Jonathan acting president after Yar'Adu's failing health left him incapacitated, but ultimately it did and Jonathan was later elected in democratic elections.

It was anticipated that the democratic election of Jonathan would turn the tide and the two countries would enjoy robust relations and the perception of the Obama administration would improve. After all, as it was widely known that the US president supported Jonathan's election. The positive perception of the Obama administration under Jonathan did not last for long, however. The issue of terrorism and Nigeria's efforts to engage in counter-terrorism to fight Boko Haram turned a positive perception into a negative one. This was especially evident within the context of the Obama administration accusing the Nigerian military of engaging in human rights violations and corruption. In light of these allegations, the Obama administration refused to sell military weapons to the Jonathan administration. In turn, the Nigerian perception was that its friend and ally refused to come to its defense in its time of need. Furthermore, the perception was that the US—under Obama as well as previous presidents—supported other countries' militaries that engaged in human rights violations. To make matters worse, not only was the Obama administration not willing to sell Nigeria military weapons, but it blocked the Jonathan administration from receiving weapons from other states and continued this practice during the Buhari administration.

In sum, the Nigerian perception of the Obama administration has been that the US remains an important ally in economic relations and the fight against terrorism. However, the US is seen to continue to play the role of a big brother by castigating the Nigerian administrations for a poor record on human rights violations and corruption. This has remained consistent throughout the Jonathan and Buhari administrations in their counter-terrorism efforts against Boko Haram.

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## Obama Delivers for Kenya: On Business

*Elijah Nyaga Munyi*

### INTRODUCTION

Like most US presidents are wont to learn, the dictates of the presidential office are often more immediate and less charming than the rhetorical vision of a presidential candidate. When Barack Obama visited Kenya as a US senator in 2006, when he was not yet a presidential candidate, he charmed the civil society but lamented about the country's failure to create a government that was "transparent and accountable ... one that serves its people and is free from corruption."<sup>1</sup> The people were good, the government was bad, Obama seemed to suggest, and the single most debilitating factor in Kenya's putative poor governance was corruption. President Obama's roots in Kenya are well known. But from a policy perspective this speech marked a crucial beginning in understanding the evolution of Obama's views of the country and what eventually emerges as his legacy 11 years later. For the Kenyan government, the 2006 *An Honest Government, A Hopeful Future* speech similarly gave a glimpse into Obama's broad view of Kenya's general governance and specific governments in power.<sup>2</sup> For Obama, corruption was the country's supreme problem. Corruption was nefariously tied to major aspects of Kenya's domestic and foreign policy from abetting terrorist attacks to hindering a swift

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response to (unspecified) health crises, to job creation, to increasing costs for private firms and a hindrance to creating an efficient justice system.

One would expect therefore that upon becoming president, he might have had government corruption and how to diminish it in the country of his father, foremost on his mind. He does try to combat runaway corruption in Kenya, and then gives up in his second term to concentrate on his signature legacy project. In the future, when Kenyans look back at the Obama presidency it will not be his contribution to governance that they will remember. As soon as Obama became president, he was beset by more exigent problems of security and the need for a more distinct legacy that would bear his signature unlike governance activism, which is overcrowded. On security cooperation with Kenya, Obama goes high-tech in sanctioning the sale of stealthy US-made drones as well as institutionalization of US–Kenya joint operations in counterterrorism. On a signature legacy, Obama goes for the Power Africa Initiative (PIA) intended to raise US private capital for expansion of electricity production in Africa. As this chapter elucidates, Obama’s legacy in Kenya will eventually rest on these two primary contributions: the expansion in electricity production investments and a stealthy ratcheting up of joint security operations between Kenya and US security agencies.

This chapter makes two correlated arguments about Obama’s contributions to Kenya. While Obama’s earliest rhetorical views of his wishful contributions to Africa centered on governance (democratization, furtherance of human rights), his actual contributions as president are a lot more traditional—trade, investment, and security. The aspirational Obama of 2006–2008 is swiftly transformed into a pragmatic president whose principal contribution to Kenya becomes developmental with a focus on energy investments. Kenya–US relations have always been pendulous, the trajectory of which is determined by divergences on governance issues and convergences on security cooperation. The first section of the chapter begins with a recap of state-to-state relations over the Obama presidency with Kenya’s two governments over the course of 2008–2016. The second section of the chapter evaluates the objective reality of what has been called in Kenya “the Obama Bonus” with regard to traditional aspects of cooperation—expansion of Kenyan export market in the US, American foreign direct investment (FDI), expected surge of US tourists, and security cooperation. Did the Obama presidency deliver in expanding Kenya’s economic relations with the US?

## FROM CHALLENGES OVER GOVERNANCE TO PRAGMATISM: THE WINDING ROAD OF KENYA–US POLITICAL RELATIONS

Kenyans have always been proud of the association and curiosity that the private Barack Obama has shown toward his father's country. When Obama became president, Kenya was immensely proud of the feat of their kinsman. The then Kenyan president Mwai Kibaki not only issued the statement congratulating Obama and declaring Kenya's pride in "Obama's Kenyan roots"<sup>3</sup> but also issued a one-day holiday for Kenyans to celebrate Obama's win. The honeymoon period of warm relations did not last long, however. In line with Obama's scrutiny on the corruption problem in Kenya as he had earlier intimated in his 2006 speech, in 2009, the then US ambassador to Kenya, Michael Ranneberger, invoked the Presidential Proclamation 7750 to deny 15 Kenyan government officials US visas on account of being corrupt, or as in the case of then Kenya's Attorney General for being perceived as obstructing the fight against corruption. Following what they termed as provocative activist diplomacy of Mr. Ranneberger, the Kenyan government responded in unity and cleverly seemed to suggest that they took exception with the conduct of the US ambassador as an individual. Kenya not only had its then Foreign Affairs Minister summon and harangue Mr. Ranneberger on his "habitual breach of diplomatic protocol,"<sup>4</sup> but the presidential Press Service issued a press statement calling the "action *by* the US Government official out of step with international protocols in the conduct of relations between friendly nations."<sup>5</sup> Kenya tried to strike a delicate balance not to get into a fight with Obama's government by emphasizing their displeasure with the abrasive ways of the US ambassador, who ironically won the award for best reporting US Foreign mission in 2009 during the height of his spat with the Kenyan government. In 2010, WikiLeaks exposed Mr Ranneberger's cables, which portrayed Kenya's president and prime minister as political elites who had done nothing to prosecute or manage runaway corruption.<sup>6</sup> Thus, things remained tense and unpleasant between the US and the Kibaki government during Obama's first term, until the "activist" diplomat Ambassador Ranneberger left the scene in 2011.

The period between February 2011 and June 2012 was one of relative benign silence from both sides primarily because the US was going through its own debacle of the short-lived Ambassador Scott Gration's failed tenure in Nairobi (February 2011–June 2012), while Kenya was

itself in the heat of political transition with general election planned for March 2013. Obama himself was locked in his own re-election campaign. The transition from Ambassador Ranneberger to Ambassador Robert F. Godec, a counterterrorism expert, was also instructive in suggesting the ideational shift in Washington on what the priorities with regard to Kenya would be in Obama's second term. The idealism of Obama's governance change fizzled into its end with Ranneberger's exit. While Ranneberger had been intended to spearhead Kenya's governance change, the new Ambassador's role would focus more on counterterrorism matters. Ambassador Robert F. Godec was not to begin his service until the new administration came into government in Kenya. The US was thus effectively without an ambassador in Kenya in the momentous final months of election campaigns in Kenya when it was left to Assistant Secretary of State Jonnie Carson to issue the famous "*Choices have Consequences*"<sup>7</sup> declaration in February 2013 a few days before the general election. The portentous statement was to inform Kenya-US relations for the next two years (2012-2014), as the two countries waited on the verdict of the International Criminal Court (ICC) on the culpability or innocence of Kenya's president and deputy president, Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto, respectively.

Kenya-US relations are unerringly fraught with tensions during election years in Kenya, and never as much as during the 2012-2013 general election. With the election scheduled for March 4, President Obama issued a video message on February 5 in which the US distances itself from an endorsement of any candidate, stating that "the choice of who will lead Kenya was up to the Kenyan people."<sup>8</sup> However, just two days later on February 7, when polls suggested that Kenya was on the verge of electing a president and deputy president who were facing charges at the ICC, the then US assistant secretary of state Jonnie Carson gave his "*Choices have Consequences*"<sup>9</sup> declaration, which was understood in Kenya as a veiled threat to Kenyans not to elect the Uhuru-Ruto team. The statement proved to be a real diplomatic faux pas on the US part. The Uhuru-Ruto team was elected overwhelmingly and thus Kenya-US relations under the new administration of President Uhuru Kenyatta started off on a suspicious, tentative mode of relations with the US. Relations between Obama and Kenya for most of 2013 remained tepid as the shadow of the ICC cases loomed over the two Kenyan leaders.

The clearest sign that matters were beginning to thaw came in early 2014, when President Kenyatta was invited to the Whitehouse for the

US–Africa leaders’ summit. In spite of the fact that at least 50 African heads of state or government were represented, Kenya read a big deal into Kenyatta’s invitation. A change in relations was palpable. And Kenya pounced by making a counterinvitation to Obama for him to visit Kenya. In December 2014, the ICC dropped the charges against President Uhuru Kenyatta and the last significant hurdle in blocking a full revitalization of relations was removed.

Toward the end of his second term Obama decided to bequeath Kenya the honor of a US presidential visit. When President Obama visited the country of his father in 2016, it was to attend the Global Entrepreneurship Summit. The theme of his visit in 2016 was not only “all business,”<sup>10</sup> as the *Atlantic* magazine put it, but also from the White House framing of the visit, whatever hype there was about Obama visiting Kenya and the concomitant expectations of Kenyans, Kenya’s problems were subsumed into the broader “sub-African problem.” While in Kenya, there were hints that Obama’s view of government as the problem had shifted to nuances less categorical than those of Obama the Senator ten years earlier. Having come toward the end of his administration, the Obama visit to Kenya in 2016 was also instrumental in fomenting a discussion in Kenya of the inevitable question: What was the Obama legacy in Kenya? The following section reviews the actual outcomes of what has been called the Obama Bonus.

## THINGS ARE LOOKING UP: THE RECORD OF US–KENYAN ECONOMIC RELATIONS

### *On Trade: Exports Double, Imports Quadruple, and Boeing Comes to Kenya*

On 8 November 2008, four days after Obama was elected President, the expected boon to Kenya that the Obama presidency would bring was articulated in an article titled “Obama Bonus Is Coming to Kenya” in which the authors argued that the election of President Obama would bring substantive benefits to Kenya in trade (primarily meaning an expected expansion in Kenyan exports), tourism (more US tourists), better cooperation in countering terrorism, and possibly a bump in the number of Kenyans, both migrants and nonmigrants, traveling to the US.<sup>11</sup> This view—the so-called Obama Bonus—represents a typical traditional understanding of how better bilateral relations with the biggest economy in the world should have impacted on Kenya. It’s a view that is primarily economic in concert

with Kenya's most exigent ambition of becoming a middle-income state by 2030. As the section below shows, Obama has been instrumental in revitalizing trade relations and a boosting investment, but not tourism and migration.

Contrary to traditional expectations about the Obama bonus, the real surprise of the Obama presidency on Kenya has been the curious expansion of American exports to Kenya under Obama, as can be seen in Table 4.1. While Kenyan exports to the US have increased gradually in value in the course of the Obama presidency from \$343 million in 2008 to \$551 million in 2016, Kenyan imports under the Obama presidency more than doubled from \$442 million in 2008 to \$943 million in 2016 with 2014 peak of \$1.6 billion.<sup>12</sup> Thus, as can be gleaned from Table 4.1, while Kenya's trade with the US in 2008—the year Obama was elected—was modest, with a balance of trade of only \$98 million in favor of the US, the trade balance turned and became favorable for Kenya, ballooning to more than \$1 billion by 2014. This is not only remarkable because of the curious growth in the Kenyan appetite for US goods under Obama, but because for the past two decades, the US has had a trade deficit with sub-Saharan African states. Interestingly, for the first time since 2004, Kenya managed to run a trade surplus with the US in 2016. Kenya's principal exports to the US over the Obama years have remained coffee and articles of apparel, many of which are listed under the American Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) preferences.

**Table 4.1** Kenyan exports and imports to the US 2006–2016

<i>Year</i>	<i>Exports in billion USD</i>	<i>Imports in billion USD</i>	<i>Trade balance</i>
	<i>Imports</i>	<i>Exports</i>	<i>BOT</i>
2006	430.7	353.7	−77.0
2007	520.4	325.4	−194.9
2008	442.4	343.5	−98.8
2009	653.6	280.6	−373.0
2010	375.3	311.1	−64.2
2011	461.4	381.6	−79.9
2012	568.6	389.5	−179.1
2013	635.7	452.3	−183.4
2014	1640.7	591.3	−1049.4
2015	943.4	573.1	−370.3
2016	393.9	551.5	+157.6

Source: United States Census Bureau—'Trade in Goods with Kenya.' Accessed May 9, 2017. <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c7790.html>



Since AGOA is a critical pillar of Kenya–US trade relations, Obama’s extension of the AGOA preferences in 2015 is a boon as can be affirmed by a marginal increase in Kenya’s apparel exports to the US. But since AGOA is not solely targeted to Kenya, the more exigent question then becomes that of explaining the rapid growth in Kenyan imports from the US since the bulk of these imports have involved purchases by Kenyan-based companies with government ties. These purchases have primarily been those made by Kenya Airways for 5 787-type jets from Boeing, as well as purchases of General Electric’s locomotives by Kenya’s Rift Valley Railways. So trade generally does well for both states, fueled primarily by Kenya’s appetite for Boeing planes and the US’s appetite for AGOA-produced apparel.

*On Tourism: No Obama Bonus, But Kenyan Travel to the US  
Grows by 60 Percent*

As one of Kenya’s best “exports,” tourism by US citizens was also expected to be a major pillar of the Obama Bonus. The expectation was not that Obama would overtly advertise Kenya, but that the Obama presidency would provoke a curiosity about the country and hence have more US tourists visiting. Data from the Kenya Tourist Board (KTB) does not suggest that Kenya experienced any tourism boost from the US under Obama. As Table 4.2 shows, tourist numbers a year before Obama became president were comparable to numbers in the second year of the Obama

**Table 4.2** US tourists into Kenya 2006–2016

<i>Year</i>	<i>US tourists visiting Kenya</i>
2006	86,528
2007	101,095
2008	75,536
2009	102,255
2010	107,842
2011	119,615
2012	123,905
2013	115,636
2014	94,730
2015	84,759
2016	97,883

Source: Kenya Tourist Board, 3 February 2017 (From the author’s interviews with the Kenya Tourist Board personnel, 3 February 2017)

presidency or even in 2015. While the number of tourists rose in 2009, 2010, and 2011 and peaked in 2012, the Kenya Tourism Board<sup>13</sup> notes that this rise was primarily precipitated by the improvement in the personal fortunes of Americans following the 2008 debt crises. From the author's interviews with personnel of the KTB, the performance of Kenya's tourism, in terms of ability to attract US and European visitors, was much more dependent on domestic factors such as US citizens' perceptions about safety and security in Kenya.

The perceptions about the insignificance of the Obama factor in US nationals' travel to Kenya is also affirmed by Lele Gao who in a survey of US tourist perceptions on travel to Kenya finds that "safety and security issues and long traveling time between the US and Kenya have been the main obstacles for Americans when deciding travel to Kenya."<sup>14</sup> The long held ambition of direct flights between the US and Kenya came seven days after Obama left the White House when the US Federal Aviation Administration announced that:

*Kenya complies with international safety standards and has been granted a Category 1 rating under the agency's International Aviation Safety Assessment (IASA) program. A Category 1 rating means Kenya's civil aviation authority meets International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) standards. With the Category 1 rating, Kenyan air carriers that are able to secure the requisite FAA and DOT authority can establish service to the United States and carry the code of U.S. carriers.<sup>15</sup>*

Clearly, Obama could not reduce the distance between Kenya and the US, but direct flights could save a traveler up to 12 hours of flying and transiting either through Amsterdam or South Africa. Though the potential of these flights is only latent, Obama's primary contribution on tourism will be the fruition of direct flights. While in Kenya, Obama expressed support for the Category 1 rating that Kenya had lobbied hard for and his presidency was a boon to Kenya's pursuits for direct flights to the US. While the actual impact of direct flights between Kenya and the US will only be ascertained in the future, the possibility of such flights is in itself is one of Obama's more significant contributions. What is clear as far as tourism and Obama's role in it is concerned is that while President Obama resisted to be seen as personally lobbying for Kenya's category 1 rating, he was keenly alive to how important this rating was to Kenya and expressed subtle optimism that Kenya would achieve this rating.<sup>16</sup> The role of direct flights

between the two states constituted one of three major items—the other two being US travel advisories against Kenya, and the extension of AGOA and extension of US visas to five years for students and business people—that informed bilateral presidential discussions during the 2016 visit to Kenya.

Similarly, in line with the expectation of the Obama Bonus, quite late into his presidency Obama announced that the Visa validity duration of Kenyans visiting the US would be extended from one year to five years. In addition, visa fees would be waived for children under 16 years of age. Yet, by the time this policy was coming into effect, it was only an opportunistic footnote on the US's part since Kenyan nonimmigrant visas to the US had been rapidly growing since Obama's inauguration in 2008. By the time Obama left office in early 2017, Kenyan nonimmigrant visas had grown 60 percent from 17,002 people in 2008 to 27,079 people in 2016. Yet in spite of this seemingly remarkable growth in the number of Kenyans visiting the US, Kenya was not the highest gainer on visitors to the US during the Obama presidency. However, as Table 4.3 shows, this, however, was not unique to Kenya. The country was part of a trend of huge increases in African nonimmigrant visas during the Obama presidency. Of African nations, Kenya marked the fifth biggest percentage increase in the number of nonimmigrant visas among the top five states with highest absolute number of nonimmigrant visa travel to the US since 2008.

***On Foreign Direct Investment: Obama's Power Africa Initiative  
and a Sharp Increase in FDI***

Another element of the expected Obama Bonus effect for Kenya was that Obama's presidency would contribute significantly in increasing US investment in Kenya. Obama's visit to Kenya alone in 2016 was touted as having brought "100 billion Kenyan shilling worth of goodies,"<sup>17</sup> and was undoubtedly significant considering that it was on the sidelines of that trip that Obama unveiled his signature legacy idea for Africa—the *Power Africa* Initiative. The Initiative is intended to mobilize private funding for investing in energy and electricity production in Africa and already Kenya has become one of the biggest beneficiaries of the scheme. Significantly, in 2016, the US Trade and Development Agency (USTDA) not only revived its programs in Kenya but also made Kenya the biggest beneficiary of its energy investment portfolio in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>18</sup>

**Table 4.3** Percentage change in nonimmigrant visas over the period of the Obama presidency

<i>State</i>	<i>% change</i>				
	<i>2008</i>	<i>2009</i>	<i>2010</i>	<i>2011</i>	<i>2012</i>
Nigeria	59,748	55,581	64,279	63,503	83,944
Egypt	31,197	33,881	34,890	45,449	65,831
SA	61,801	49,960	51,052	60,152	62,516
Kenya	<b>18,939</b>	<b>16,827</b>	<b>6029</b>	<b>14,486</b>	<b>15,111</b>
Ethiopia	9951	9352	9114	10,950	12,674
Morocco	15,125	15,364	16,740	17,558	17,936

<i>State</i>	<i>% change</i>				
	<i>2013</i>	<i>2014</i>	<i>2015</i>	<i>2016</i>	<i>% change</i>
Nigeria	113,503	141,527	156,147	179,145	256
Egypt	49,489	56,456	55,317	68,639	116
SA	59,038	60,238	61,997	61,273	4
Kenya	<b>16,740</b>	<b>20,364</b>	<b>22,090</b>	<b>27,079</b>	<b>59</b>
Ethiopia	13,856	14,081	14,573	20,390	118
Morocco	16,177	19,805	20,320	19,897	91

Source: “Immigrant Visas Issued by Issuing Office” (All categories including Replaced Visas, Fiscal Years 2007–2016). Accessed May 9, 2017. <https://travel.state.gov/content/dam/visas/Statistics/AnnualReports/FY2016AnnualReport/FY16AnnualReport-TableXV.pdf>

In addition to a share of the US government’s original commitment of \$7 billion, Kenya has already benefitted from FDI project funding of up to \$4 billion relating to various commitments by US companies to partner in energy investments in Kenya. This includes: a \$1 billion grant from the USTDA, \$996,600 from Zarara Oil & Gas Limited, \$356,630 from US Solar Developer Sunpower, and other USTDA feasibility study grants totaling to \$2.5 billion. President Obama absolutely delivered in expanding investment in Kenya. Considering that Kenya’s overall FDI intake per year hovers around \$1 billion, an injection of up to \$5 billion in grants and loans and private FDI is a big deal. This will—if successful—mark the biggest contribution that Obama made in not only helping Kenya access US state and private capital, but also in leading American companies away from their seeming apathy to increasing energy investments in Africa.

Beyond, *Power Africa*, the US has also made significant inroads in raising its overall FDI stock in Kenya over the Obama years. In spite of its

**Table 4.4** US FDI into Kenya 2006–2016

<i>Trends of US FDI into Kenya</i>				
<i>Years</i>	<i>Amounts in million USD</i>	<i>Overall stock FDI by source country in Kenya in 2016, million USD</i>		
2016	109.2	1.	India	2640.8
2015	184.5	2.	US	2398.3
2014	1073.2	3.	UK	1345.2
2013	238.6	4.	Mauritius	887.3
2012	424.7	5.	Israel	857.7
2011	147.1	6.	Japan	793.8
2010	11.9	7.	China	737.1
2009	7.5			
<b>2008</b>	<b>65.7</b>			
2007	84.1			
2006	16.7			

Source: Kenya National Bureau of Statistics—Foreign Investment Survey Report 2016

being the largest economy for many decades, the volume of US investment in Kenya over the years has been dwarfed by that of many other smaller economies such the UK, India, China, the Netherlands, and even Mauritius, thus the feeling that the US has underperformed with regard to its FDI in Kenya. This is something that has changed significantly under the Obama presidency. US companies have taken Kenyan business opportunities more seriously with such US companies as Google, Uber, and Boeing, establishing offices in Nairobi and ratcheting up the volume of US investment. As can be seen in Table 4.4, US FDI into Kenya rose steeply from around 2011 to peak at above \$1 billion in 2014. Some of the US investments such as Google’s investment into the Lake Turkana Wind Power generation project are seen as driven partially by Obama’s quest to help African states procure investments in energy generation projects—particularly from renewable sources. Due to the rapid increase in US investment in the last five years of the Obama presidency, the overall amount of US stock FDI into the country has increased significantly and now stands above \$2.5 billion, placing the US at number two behind India in terms of overall stock FDI in Kenya. This is significant as the US has historically not been a major investor in Kenya owing to the investment patterns of US companies.

As the US Congressional Research Services observes, US investment in Africa has historically remained limited, with Africa accounting for a

meager 1.3 percent of total US direct investment abroad in 2015.<sup>19</sup> This is attributed to the patterns of US companies' disposition to invest in high end, technology and financial services as opposed to manufacturing or extractive industries.

Patterns in US direct investment abroad often reflect fundamental changes that occur in the US economy during the same period. As investment funds in the US economy shifted from extractive, processing, and manufacturing industries toward high technology services and financial industries, US investment abroad mirrored these changes. As a result, US direct investment abroad focused less on the extractive, processing, and basic manufacturing industries in developing countries and more on high technology, finance, and services industries located in highly developed countries with advanced infrastructure and communications systems. The total amount of US direct investment abroad, or the position, during the 2000–2015 period grew by five times, rising from \$920 billion to \$5.0 trillion. Annual investments in most sectors increased in 2015 over the amount invested in 2014, except for investment in the banking, finance, and insurance sectors. Generally, service-oriented sectors, particularly computer systems design and technical consulting, continued to grow through 2015.<sup>20</sup> The rise of US investment to Kenya to formidably rival traditional investors—UK, India and the Netherlands—is therefore a significant development, which in part is attributable to Obama's business-minded engagement with African states, particularly in highlighting the potential investing in the energy sector.

*On Military Trade: The Rise of Joint Military Operations  
and the Purchase of US Arms*

Finally, one of President Obama's more underexposed contributions to Kenya has been the institutionalization of stealthy joint security operations aimed at combatting terrorism in conjunction with Kenyan Security agencies. It is in shifting Kenya–US security cooperation that Obama has made what may be the most professorial of his contributions—radical changes aimed at shifting the counterterrorism strategy from the ground to the air through surveillance drones and special helicopters. In additional to recent military grants specific to Kenya which included six helicopters to aid in the fight against Al Shabaab. Similarly, in 2014 Kenya became one of the initial six states, along with Tunisia, Nigeria, Niger, Ghana and Mali, to benefit from the \$65 million funding of what is cryptically called the

Security Governance Initiative (SGI). SGI is intended to “enable partner countries to develop and enhance policies, institutional structures, systems, and processes that allow them to more efficiently, effectively, and responsibly deliver security and justice to their citizens. SGI is not a tactical-level training and equipping program, but rather focuses on supporting partner country efforts to improve the management, oversight, accountability, and sustainability of security sector institutions.”<sup>21</sup> The operationalization of the SGI is still rather obscure. But among other objectives, this seems intended to empower security agencies such as the Kenyan police and the judiciary to deal with issues relating to terrorism and border security. Joint security operations seems to be the glue that is used to cement what is expected to be a significant arms purchase by Kenya from the US as confirmed by Ambassador Godec in March 2017.<sup>22</sup> For Kenya, the US has already provided \$150 million worth of equipment in what is a two-pronged strategy of strengthening joint military/police cooperation between US and Kenyan agencies, while at the same time smoothing the path for Kenya to purchase US arms.

### CONCLUSION: A SHIFT FROM CHARITY

Two points can be made about Obama’s contributions to bilateral relations between Kenya and the US. One, Obama initiated a distinct but difficult model of business-for-development (the *Power Africa* Initiative) that shifts notions of US–Kenyan relations as primarily humanitarian. Two, while initiating this broad ideational shift, he has also delivered for Kenya in traditional expectations on investment, trade expansion and security cooperation.

By the time President George W. Bush left office in 2008, he was the PEPFAR (Presidential Emergency Plan for Aids Relief) man. His signature project in Africa had not only brought him immense adulation but the fact that the project’s success was framed in an unambiguous charity mantra of “lives saved” made it possible to assess Bush’s legacy both immediately and in perpetuity. No wonder the *Washington Post* could be unabashed in its headline: “PEPFAR saves Millions of Lives in Africa.”<sup>23</sup> President Bush’s legacy has been stamped and sealed in the immediacy of results, and the political will by successive administrations to support PEPFAR.

Such will not be Obama’s adulation. Obama’s legacy will be less publicly discernable and even less measurable in the short term. In the short

term, the impact of Power Africa will be felt mostly through outcomes of corporate linkages between Kenyan and American business. Obama has taken a decisive break from charity into a more business-for-development engagement. The Business-for-Development-Model is one that has to rely on sustainable private sector interest unlike initiatives such as PEPFAR which depend on state funding. Private sector interest will primarily be driven by profit incentives and hence something that Obama himself may not have much leverage on. Similarly, the significant impact of Obama's stealthy technological turn in the war against terrorism will likely remain apparent only among the security agencies. The Obama legacy will be marked not only by the degree of quantitative expansion in energy production in Kenya through US grants and investment, but also by the sustainability of the model which prioritizes funding to businesses rather than civil society and humanitarian organizations.

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# Egypt and Obama: Turbulent Times, Bouncy Relations

*Nael Shama*

## INTRODUCTION

When President Barack Obama left the White House in January 2017 after two presidential terms, members of Egypt's ruling elite will most probably breathe a sigh of relief. Under his leadership, US–Egyptian relations experienced what could be described as the worst crisis since their reinvigoration in the mid-1970s. Following the Egyptian military's ouster of President Morsi in the summer of 2013, US–Egyptian bilateral relations descended to an unprecedented nadir, a low point from which they have not fully recovered until the time of this writing.

This chapter argues that the US-espoused values of liberty, democracy and human rights had frequently come in the way of Washington's pursuit of a pure realist and pragmatic foreign policy. This irreconcilable conflict between interests and values poisoned US–Egyptian ties at two defining moments in Egypt's very recent history: the 2011 uprising against President Hosni Mubarak, who had ruled from 1981 to 2011, and the 2013 military's overthrow of Egypt's first democratically elected president, Mohamed Morsi. In both instances, an acute divergence occurred

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between the perceptions of senior Egyptian officials and those of their American counterparts. Obama's foreign policy at these two historical junctures was influenced, in varying degrees, by US values, while Egypt's official establishment was, from a security standpoint, striving to deal with internal threats and maintain the entrenched dominance of the Egyptian state over the opposition forces.

Following a brief introduction to the conflict between interests and values in the formulation of US foreign policy, this chapter will flesh out the different phases of US–Egyptian bilateral relations in the Obama years. The first of these phases took place in Obama's first two years in the White House, 2009–2011, coinciding with Mubarak's last two years in office. The second phase began with the eruption of the Egyptian revolution in 2011 and lasted for around two and a half years. The third phase began in the summer of 2013 with the ousting of President Morsi and continued until Obama left the White House. The chapter will then proceed to explain the reasons behind the rift in US–Egyptian relations, focusing on the disparate perceptions of political leaders in both countries about the course of tumultuous events Egyptian domestic politics has witnessed since 2011.

### US FOREIGN POLICY: INTERESTS VS. VALUES

A constant feature of US foreign policy over the past few decades is that it has been marred by the conflict between the pragmatic pursuit of national interests and the defense of democratic values such as freedom, equality and human rights. Theoretically rooted in the notion of “US exceptionalism,” the promotion of democratic values in other countries has been seen in recent decades as a goal of foreign policy, an expression of US core identity, but also a subject of national debate. When these values were in conflict with crucial strategic interests, power and self-interest considerations usually trumped the drive to promote democracy. In fact, America's foreign policy in the Middle East has a long record of propping up autocratic leaders in order to serve overarching foreign policy interests, such as containing communism or combating terrorism. Even dictators of the most brutish types, such as Saddam Hussein or Muammar Gaddafi, enjoyed US political and military support, at least at some points in time. Still, the drive to promote processes of democratic transition did not vanish altogether from the calculus of US policymakers. A passage from the memoirs of the former secretary of state Hillary Clinton sheds light on this dilemma. It is worth quoting at length:

*This was a dilemma that had confronted generations of American policymakers. It's easy to give speeches and write books about standing up for democratic values, even when it may conflict with our security interests, but when confronted with the actual, real-world trade-offs, choices get a lot harder. Inevitably, making policy is a balancing act. Hopefully we get it more right than wrong. But there are always choices we regret, consequences we do not foresee, and alternative paths we wish we had taken.<sup>1</sup>*

Overlooking the fact that the debate between political idealism and pragmatism has been at the heart of US foreign policy for decades, Egypt's ruling elite misinterpreted Washington's reactions to the 2011 revolution against Mubarak and the military's removal of Morsi in 2013. Like other well-established democracies, the US government is prone to immense pressure from opposition voices, the media and civil society groups. Even when the acts of the US government are driven by realpolitik, they have to appear ethically justifiable. As Vaughn Shannon and Joshua Cummins put it, "the distinction of American policy is not that it 'acts better' but that it has to be better and justify its actions in ethical frameworks."<sup>2</sup> Oscillating between the two ends of values and interests has resulted in a foreign policy that "can appear contradictory, inconsistent, almost at war with itself."<sup>3</sup> An equal contributor to the policy ambivalence were Obama's ideas and personal idiosyncrasies, which played a major part in the formulation of US foreign policy from 2009 to 2017. Foreign policy experts Martin Indyk, Kenneth Libberthal and Michael O'Hanlon explain in their book on Obama's foreign policy that there was an "inevitable tension between [Obama's] soaring rhetoric and desire to depart fundamentally from the policies of the Bush administration, on the one hand, and his instinct for governing pragmatically, on the other."<sup>4</sup> The result was what they described as a "hybrid president," a progressive pragmatist who was "progressive where possible but pragmatic when necessary."<sup>5</sup> Nowhere was this ambivalence more striking than in Obama's response to the 2011 uprisings of the Arab Spring. While he urged Egypt's despot Mubarak to immediately start the transition to democratic rule, and intervened militarily in Libya to change the regime, he remained coyly silent on the brutal quelling of protestors in Bahrain and showed great reluctance to offer more than moral support to Syrian protestors.

## OBAMA AND MUBARAK (2009–2011): BUSINESS AS USUAL

The promotion of democracy in the Middle East became deeply integrated into the foreign policy agenda of the US following the horrific 9/11 attacks. With all the terrorists involved in the attacks coming from entrenched Middle Eastern autocracies, the administration of George W. Bush considered international terrorism to be made and nurtured in the region. The theory advocated by Bush and top officials at the time was that authoritarianism breeds extremism and terrorism. Therefore, for the US, the political reform of autocratic Arab regimes, especially Egypt and Saudi Arabia, was not just an expression of long-held liberal US values. It was also, inescapably, a matter of national security. The US interest in reforming these regimes was manifested in the launch of a number of initiatives aimed at promoting democracy, good governance and the rule of law in the region, such as the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) and the Greater Middle East Initiative (GMEI). However, aside from seasonal rhetoric, the enthusiasm for democracy-promotion wore thin in just a few years. The unanticipated—and undesirable—electoral gains made by Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and Hamas, in 2005 and 2006, respectively, were discomfiting, bolstering the view that hastened reform may harm US strategic interests in the region and lead to strategically unwanted outcomes. As a result, pressure exerted on Mubarak's regime to reform decreased significantly in 2006 and by the beginning of 2007 it was "evident that the Bush push for Middle East democracy was effectively over."<sup>6</sup>

The advent of Barack Obama to the White House in 2009 came against the backdrop of strained US relations with key Arab states resulting from major differences over the democracy-promotion agenda, as well as Bush's unpopular policies in the region, especially the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the perpetual support of Israel. It soon became clear that distancing himself from the sour legacy of the Bush administration and mending the gap with the Islamic world loomed high in Obama's priorities. Although Obama's 2008 electoral campaign included lofty rhetoric about democracy and freedom, he made a scant reference to these notions in his much-anticipated 2009 Cairo speech which focused on other issues such as diplomacy, development, and defense.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the Obama administration downgraded the importance of democracy promotion in Egypt, opting instead for strategic cooperation in areas such as combating terrorism and promoting peace between Israel and the Palestinians. In 2009, his

administration introduced drastic cuts to the programs that foster democracy in Egypt: Funding for democracy-related programs was decreased from \$50 million to \$20 million and support provided to Egyptian civil society declined from \$32 million to a meager \$7 million. The US government, furthermore, agreed to fund only those non-government organizations (NGOs) that were approved by the Egyptian government. Also, the focus of US assistance to Egypt shied away from controversial issues like democracy and human rights, focusing instead on noncontroversial fields, such as women's health, science education and entrepreneurship.<sup>8</sup> During the waning years of Mubarak's presidency, Obama refrained from criticizing the Egyptian government in public, preferring to raise problematic issues in his private meetings with Egyptian officials instead.

The choice of Cairo as a venue for Obama's historic speech to the Islamic world was elating for the Egyptian leadership, which saw in it a robust affirmation of the leading Egyptian role in regional politics. The other conciliatory moves were also met with significant relief in Cairo. The Bush years took a great toll on Egyptian–American relations, which had remained, politically and economically, relatively stable since the late 1970s. Over more than 25 years at the helm of Egypt, Mubarak had gotten used to managing his differences with American leaders over bilateral and regional issues, but Washington's vocal interference in Egypt's internal affairs and its push for political reform in Egypt was new, and it left him deeply troubled. And so Mubarak harbored deep feelings of mistrust towards Bush, whom he perceived as an irrational politician with little experience in international relations and the dynamics of Middle East politics.<sup>9</sup> Not only that, but Mubarak also became skeptical about the continuation of Washington's backing for his rule. In a rare moment of frankness, he told his foreign minister, Ahmed Abu al-Gheit, in 2005 that he did not “rule out the possibility that the Americans may want to topple him from office.”<sup>10</sup>

### THE ARAB SPRING AND AFTER

Pitting US strategic interests and core values against each other, the earthquake-like popular revolt that erupted against Mubarak's rule in January 2011 posed a delicate challenge to the Obama administration. Taken by utter surprise and not anticipating the extent of change the uprising might spur in Egypt and beyond, the US administration responded by issuing rather anodyne statements. On the first day of the demonstrations,

25 January, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that the Egyptian government was “stable.”<sup>11</sup> Two days later, Vice President Joe Biden said he would not refer to Mubarak “as a dictator” and that he thought Mubarak “shouldn’t step down.”<sup>12</sup> However, with the growth and expansion of the protests, and the escalation of state violence, sharp differences among Obama’s foreign policy team arose in a 28 January national security meeting in the White House on how to best react to the revolution.<sup>13</sup>

On one hand, Biden, Clinton, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, and National Security Advisor Thomas Donilon counseled caution. They were concerned that an immature regime change in Egypt would impinge on major US strategic interests in the Middle East that had been well-served by Mubarak’s regime for many years. These interests included preserving Israel’s security, rolling back Iran’s attempts to develop nuclear capabilities, combatting international terrorism, as well as keeping the Suez Canal an open international sea route. In their view, Mubarak’s Egypt was a reliable partner on all these vital issues. It served, in the words of Clinton, “as a linchpin of peace in a volatile region.” She asked her colleagues: “Were we really ready to walk away from that relationship after thirty years of cooperation?”<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, a number of Obama’s aides, including deputy national security adviser Dennis McDonough, deputy national security adviser for strategic communications Benjamin Rhodes and human rights advocate Samantha Power had a different opinion. Enthralled by the poignant images coming from Tahrir Square, they argued that failing to support the protestors would be a grave mistake that would be bitterly remembered by people in Egypt and the Middle East. To be on the right side of history, they said, the US should make it clear that it stood with the legitimate demands of the protestors. President Obama was torn between pragmatism and idealism. He was not in total disagreement with the cautiously pragmatic position adopted by Biden, Clinton and Gates, but at the same time he was skittish about what was going on. As Clinton explained, he “wasn’t comfortable sitting by and doing nothing while peaceful protesters were beaten and killed in the streets.”<sup>15</sup> Obama grew particularly impatient after Mubarak gave a statement on 1 February, in which he showed no intent to relinquish any of his absolute powers before September 2011, the end of his presidential term. In response, Obama called Mubarak barely an hour later to urge him to immediately start the transition to a democratic regime. But Mubarak



remained defiant, claiming that the demonstrations were orchestrated by the MB and the agents of Iran. Increasingly frustrated and anxious, Obama ratcheted up his rhetoric. He gave a short statement on the evening of the same day stating that his belief “is that an orderly transition must be meaningful, it must be peaceful, and it must begin now.”<sup>16</sup> From that moment and over the remaining ten days of the uprising, the US not only distanced itself from Mubarak’s regime but also publicly advocated Egypt’s transition to a new political system. In fact, Obama’s special envoy to Egypt, Frank Wisner, infuriated the president when he told at Munich conference that he believed Mubarak was indispensable to Egypt’s transitional period to democracy. Obama had urged his aides to take a hard line and to make it clear that Egypt’s transition should begin “immediately.” Indeed, asked about what Obama meant by “now,” the White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs answered: “Now means yesterday.”<sup>17</sup>

It can therefore be argued that Obama’s approach to Egypt during the uprising was imbued with his inclination—along with a number of his advisors—towards political idealism wrapped with optimism about the future trajectory post-revolution Egypt would take. In Obama’s view, Egypt’s transition to some form of representative democracy was clearly fraught with apparent difficulties but was not impossible. Probably with the models of Turkey or Indonesia in mind, he seemed to envisage for Egypt’s future the rise of a democratic political order where a formidable military would safeguard a system of strong institutions run by civilians.

### *The Arab Spring in Egypt*

Although the US had little control over the course of events in Egypt during the eventful 18-day uprising, whose final outcome was primarily shaped by the protesters’ exceptional valiance and the Egyptian military’s decision not to shoot protestors, those in the upper echelons of the state in Egypt were suspicious of, and indignant at, the US. Teasing out the logic of these senior officials and bureaucrats requires taking a closer look at the nature of this state, which was created at the hands of Mohamed Ali Pasha in the first half of the nineteenth century. Benefitting from the hydraulic nature of the Egyptian society, which facilitates tax collecting and top-down control, and hinders rebellion, the state soon became

grossly centralized and dominant. The 1952 takeover of the Free Officers, led by Colonel Gamal Abdel-Nasser, expanded the state bureaucracy and added to it an element of oppression, even ruthlessness. Accordingly, under the leadership of Nasser and his successors, this state seemed, in the eyes of many people, to be invincible. It was not only a “deep state”—a term originally used to describe the statist, anti-democracy forces in Turkey’s political system—but also wide and resilient. A huge edifice built over the decades with arms stretching in all directions like a giant octopus, the Egyptian state presides over a vast network of entrenched interests and deep-rooted loyalties, and it owns a massive arsenal of guns. This state is made up of a bloated bureaucracy, a sizeable military that owns a huge economic empire, and in recent decades, it has been allied to the segments of the business class whose economic interests are closely tied to, and dependent on, state institutions.

Although inter-state rivalries between state institutions (especially in the security apparatus) are not uncommon, there has always been a considerable degree of consensus among state officials and representatives about the sanctity of the state, the need to maintain its autonomy from social forces, and the central role it ought to play in politics and society. The popular revolution that erupted in January 2011 came after three decades of quiet. Its potency threw the state into disarray and shook some of the fundamental pillars upon which it had survived. For the first time in recent history, political action began at the grassroots level and managed to sustain its momentum for three weeks, culminating in a major, hitherto unthinkable change, the overthrow of the state’s chief executive.

Not only were the state’s officials, who adamantly oppose change and have vested interests in the prevailing state structure, aghast at the revolution’s swift success, they were also largely distrustful of its intentions. From its first day, the “men of the state” accused the revolution of being planned, directed and funded by foreign powers. These unsubstantiated-by-evidence allegations were not just part of a propaganda campaign put into full gear to discredit the revolutionaries. In actuality, many within the state bureaucracy genuinely believed in their validity. To make matters worse, a narrow-minded worldview that considers all historical events to be shaped by plots, intrigues and secret dealings is particularly common in the corridors of Egypt’s security agencies.

It is within this context that one can understand why Washington’s response to Egypt’s uprising drew the ire of Egyptian officials. Seeing proof that Cairo’s main foreign backer could switch sides to protesters in

the case of social upheaval, they felt that they had been betrayed by the US. Quite interestingly, the deposed president Mubarak himself held a firm belief that the revolution was US-engineered. In leaked conversations he had with his physicians and wardens, which were published in the daily *al-Yaum al-Sabea* in 2013, he said that it was the US that “initiated the revolution in 2005.” With his remark he was clearly referring to the Bush administration efforts to promote democracy in the Middle East. And by 2010, Mubarak added, he felt that the US wanted to see him jettisoned from office “at any cost.”<sup>18</sup> The irony is that Mubarak, since becoming president in 1981 and for the totality of his three-decade tenure, had been a close ally of the US. And so his words cannot be solely seen as rantings of an octogenarian who feels bitter about his unceremonious ejection from power, but rather, as indicative of the deep mistrust of the US that had lived with him throughout his presidency. This is not uncommon among Middle Eastern autocrats, whose delicate calculations for political survival often drives them to pursue a close but cautious relationship with the US. Drawing from the fates of Iran’s Shah and the Philippine’s Marcos, both longstanding US allies at the time, these autocrats believe that the US is not a reliable backer at times of turmoil.

Contributing to Egyptian deep suspicions of US intentions was the fact that, as previously mentioned, the Obama administration did not adopt a unified set of policies towards the various Arab Spring uprisings that swept the region in 2011. While it supported the protesters in Egypt, its response to the quashing of peaceful protesters in Bahrain, home to the US Navy’s Fifth Fleet, was for the most part muted. In the same vein, while the US showed eagerness to form a UN-sanctioned international military coalition to protect civilians and ultimately pave the way for regime change in Libya, it exhibited great reluctance to undertake a similar operation in Syria, despite the horrific carnage resulting from its protracted civil war. This inconsistency was perceived in Cairo, as in other capitals in the region, as signs of political hypocrisy.

### *Obama and Egypt’s Transition Government*

It is against this background that Obama’s relationship with Egypt’s Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), which took control of Egypt’s transition following Mubarak’s departure, should be assessed. Although Obama commended the efforts of Egypt’s military in public, pledged to continue the annual \$1.3 military aid package doled out to Egypt since

Sadat's rule in the 1970s, and added a new program appropriated to support Egypt's ailing economy, he did not win over the new leaders. The top brass now in charge must have harbored feelings of mistrust of Obama who not only refrained from rescuing their longtime patron, with whom they had had an extended working relationship for decades, but also applauded his removal. Similar disappointments were voiced in several capitals of US allies in the region, particularly Riyadh and Tel Aviv, whose leaders felt that, by ditching Mubarak, Washington disregarded, rather foolishly and ungratefully, decades of close political and military cooperation with a reliable and pivotal Middle Eastern ally.

Only these ill feelings can explain the unanticipated, seemingly designed, US–Egypt standoff of 2011–2012. The crisis erupted on 29 December 2011, when the Egyptian police raided the offices of ten NGOs, including four American ones (the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, Freedom House, and the International Center for Journalists). Dozens of NGO workers (including 16 Americans) were charged with violating Egyptian law and a travel ban was imposed on them. Egypt's minister of international cooperation, Fayza Abu al-Naga, a hawkish former diplomat known for her close ties with the military, spearheaded the campaign against foreign NGOs. She accused the government of the US of using these NGOs to undermine the Egyptian state, incite sectarian tensions, hijack the revolution and serve US and Israeli interests. The trial of the NGO workers started in February of 2012. This was now threatening to damage US–Egypt ties beyond repair. Only an opaque, behind-the-curtains deal at the 11th hour, allowing the US defendants to leave Egypt, defused the crisis in US–Egypt relations.

It is highly unlikely that the ruling junta did not sanction the harsh measures against the foreign NGOs. In fact, these measures were, most probably, deliberately taken in response to internal political developments. Characterized by political dynamism and fluidity, post-revolution Egypt departed significantly from the politically stagnant and lifeless days of Mubarak. Authoritarianism was giving way to an era of electoral politics and freedom of assembly and expression. Dozens of new parties were established, demonstrations became a daily occurrence and a cascade of labor strikes swept industrial plants across the country. More importantly, the internal security institutions were melting down. This allowed the young revolutionaries, in a hitherto unthinkable move, to break into the headquarters of the notorious State Security Intelligence, grabbing classified documents as souvenirs and taking photographs of the personal

belongings of Habib al-Adly, Egypt's ruthless pre-revolution interior minister. These rapid developments sent shock waves through the upper layers of the state. The top brass and senior officials, most of whom served the *ancien regime* and became an integral part of it, felt they were quickly losing their grip over the country. A crisis with the US, fueled with nationalist rhetoric and inflammatory speech, was apparently their ticket to regain popularity and control.<sup>19</sup>

### THE CLASH OF PERCEPTIONS: THE MILITARY COUP OF 2013 AND ONWARDS

Egyptian politics took an extremely ugly turn in the summer of 2013. The year Morsi spent at the helm (June 2012–July 2013) was marred with political leadership inefficiency, worsening economic conditions, and relentless attempts by the MB to consolidate its power and exclude other political and social forces. The country was gripped for months by a wave of protests, which reached its zenith of intensity on 30 June, when massive demonstrations broke out across the country demanding Morsi's resignation, to which the military responded by removing Morsi on 3 July. This threw the country into a massive turmoil of protests, street violence and state repression. The state embarked on a huge crackdown on dissent, initially focusing on Muslim Brothers and Islamists of different strands. To make matters worse, the bloody dispersal in August 2013 of the encampments of Morsi's supporters in Cairo left hundreds dead and thousands injured, representing one of the worst days of violence in Egypt's modern history.

#### *Washington's View*

Obama was furious at Egypt's new leaders and disappointed at the hazardous trajectory Egypt's failed transition had taken. But again he was faced with the vexing problem of how to reconcile interests and ideals. He did not, on one hand, want to lose a vital ally whose cooperation on counter-terrorism efforts and Israel's security was indispensable to US geostrategic interests in the Middle East. But the pressure from Congress members, human rights organizations and the media was too vocal to be ignored. The Obama administration resorted again to balancing acts. Clearly, Morsi had been undemocratically removed from office. But the Obama administration refrained from labeling it a coup, to avoid a wholesale suspension

of aid to the Egyptian government.<sup>20</sup> However, in August, in a public show of displeasure over the atrocities committed by the Egyptian regime in the aftermath of the coup, Obama canceled Operation “Bright Star,” a joint US–Egyptian military exercise that was scheduled to take place in a month. In October, Washington announced a temporary freeze on military assistance to Egypt. This included withholding the delivery of Apache helicopters, F16s, Harpoon missiles and M1A1 tank parts.<sup>21</sup>

In a few months, it became clear that the balance of power in Egypt was tipping in favor of the state. With limited options at its disposal, Washington realized that it had little leverage over Egypt’s intractable new leader, General Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi, who was adamant on obliterating the MB and restoring the absolute powers of the state. Moreover, not only were Sisi’s oppressive policies backed by the majority of Egyptians, he was also surrounded with a cult of personality, and adored as “the savior of the nation.” In fact, perhaps unprecedentedly in Egypt’s modern history, the state’s repression under Sisi was both “populist and popular.”<sup>22</sup> Unsurprisingly, then, albeit ironically, Secretary John Kerry stated in a visit to Cairo in November that he saw signs that Egypt was moving back towards democracy.<sup>23</sup>

However, a full-circle return to the warmth of the Sadat and Mubarak days did not ensue, despite the resumption of US military aid in March 2015. Part of this could be attributed to Obama’s personal dislike of Sisi. It is interesting to notice that although presidential visits to Washington D.C. and Cairo nearly became an annual event under Sadat and Mubarak, no official visits were exchanged between the leaders of the two countries since Sisi’s ascent in 2013. President Obama met Sisi only once, on the sidelines of the 69th session of the UN General Assembly meeting in September 2014. It was even reported that Obama declined to meet with Sisi at the UN in the following year.<sup>24</sup> In contrast, since he became president in June 2014, Sisi met with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin five times. This included three visits to Russia. Both Obama and Sisi had obviously developed negative feelings of each other from the very start. Obama disapproved Sisi’s heavy-handed approach to domestic politics, which, he thought, would bring Egypt neither democracy nor stability. As Jeffrey Goldberg put it, Obama saw Sisi “as a Mubarak, but less clever and more brutal—a frightened general who is setting in motion” the same processes and cycles of repression promoted by Mubarak, but which ultimately led to his overthrow.<sup>25</sup> With the passage of time, and through witnessing Egypt’s quick descent into what could be branded as an ultra-authoritarian

state, Obama grew largely impatient of Sisi, whom he believed was largely intransigent and entirely unsusceptible to reform. Indeed, one administration official noticed that “if you want to put Obama in a bad mood, tell him he has to go to a Situation Room meeting about Egypt.”<sup>26</sup>

### *Cairo’s View*

Similar to the team in the White House, Sisi and numerous senior Egyptian officials were frustrated with the measures taken by Washington immediately following the coup and in response to the human rights abuses that followed it. Although Washington’s efforts were symbolic and lackluster, the new regime in Cairo was disappointed. In an interview with the *Washington Post* conducted in August, Sisi lashed out at the US government: “You left the Egyptians. You turned your back on the Egyptians, and they won’t forget that.”<sup>27</sup> In October, Egypt’s foreign minister, Nabil Fahmy, who had previously served as Egypt’s ambassador to Washington, responded to a question about Egyptian–American ties by saying: “We are now in a delicate state reflecting the turmoil in the relationship and anyone who says otherwise is not speaking honestly.”<sup>28</sup>

There is no reason to believe that the glacial personal relations between Obama and Sisi ever thawed. Instead, numerous indicators point to Egyptian political elites’ preference for a republican candidate in the White House, even if that candidate were as amateurish and unpredictable as Donald Trump. Certainly, knowing the value of a stable Egypt in a volatile region to the US, Sisi remained interested in cultivating the support of Washington. However, he demanded to be unmolested by any US interference with or chiding about, internal Egyptian affairs. He told the *Wall Street Journal*: “We are keen on a strategic relationship with the US above anything else. And we will never turn our backs on you—even if you turn your backs on us.”<sup>29</sup>

### *The Clash of Perceptions Comes to the Forefront*

It is conspicuous that a severe clash of perceptions occurred in the troubled period that followed the overthrow of President Morsi from office in the summer of 2013. Senior Egyptian officials in the military and civic bureaucracy saw Morsi’s ouster as a popular revolution that was not only necessary but unavoidable. If the destructive foray of the MB into Egyptian politics was to come to an end, Morsi had to be removed. They believed

that the Muslim Brothers had nefarious plans to alter the deep-rooted identity of the Egyptian state along religious lines, with their final goal being to turn it into a theocracy of sorts. For the state's representatives, democracy matters little. In fact, it should be kept at bay, for its alleged role in undermining the state and fostering instability. For them, preserving the state is the ultimate goal, if not the only one.

The view in Washington could not have been more different. The removal of a democratically elected head of state, who won a largely uncontested election, was nothing but a textbook example of a military coup. Such a move represented, beyond any doubt, a serious setback from the transition to democracy trajectory launched in 2011. In fact, following Mubarak's departure and the opening up of the political space in Egypt, many US politicians, legislators and diplomats believed that the MB was a moderate force whose integration in the political process should be encouraged. Even after the grave miscalculations the group made while in power, and its apparent self-serving attitude became apparent, Washington still perceived the group to be a necessary bulwark against the rising threat of Islamic extremism. It was a necessary counterweight against militant groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS, political Washington believed. Because the MB had from the outset proclaimed its full commitment to a democratic form of government, and Morsi was elected to office through democratic mechanisms, the mood in Washington was that the group deserved a chance.

This analysis was seen by senior Egyptian officials, and their allies among the non-Islamist intelligentsia, as "naïve, if not foolish" because the Muslim Brothers "are Leninists, not democrats, and the Brotherhood remained a secret organization."<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, not only can the Muslim Brothers not be beneficial in the war against terrorism, they have themselves become terrorists and murderers.<sup>31</sup> The struggle between the state and the MB nearly spiraled out of control. It reached its peak on the day of the Rabaa massacre, which has been described by Human Rights Watch's executive director as "one of the world's largest killings of demonstrators in a single day in recent history." It set in motion a stream of anti-state terrorist attacks. Since then, the struggle has been perceived by the "men of the state" as an existential battle. The "it's either us or them" idiom came to dominate the government stance, both explicitly and implicitly. As a result, the systematic demonization of Islamists, the unyielding belief in the sanctity of the state and its institutions, and the unequivocal rejection of any compromise with



opponents who do not toe the line became official policy. In fact, the government's hostility later turned towards the secular opposition parties, the revolutionary youth and human rights organizations, too. In the name of preserving the sovereignty of the "sacrosanct state" against internal and external threats, which Sisi has repeatedly claimed to be the overriding goal of his term, Egyptian authorities embarked on a severe crackdown on peaceful protestors and dissent, the harshest in decades.

However, rather than seeing events in the context of an existential battle, American policymakers thought that the military and the MB were embroiled in a struggle for power that should not be reduced to a zero-sum game. Instead, they believed that an inclusive political process should begin. This requires that differences among the various political actors and groupings be settled via peaceful and democratic means. In addition, they believed that after a brief interlude Egypt had returned to the ethos and dynamics of authoritarianism.

It is obvious that the US view of the evolving situation in Egypt was heavily influenced by democratic ideals and principles. According to these ideals, a military coup is an illegal method of regime change, unacceptable in democratic systems of government. In the same vein, combatting terrorism does not justify oppression, and the retreat to authoritarianism would bring about neither stability nor prosperity. Of course, after it became clear to Washington that its ability to influence Cairo's behavior was severely limited, realpolitik returned to guide US foreign policy towards Egypt. However, the White House's circling back to realpolitik remained mitigated by Obama's proclivity to keep Egypt's dictator at bay.

To be sure, Egyptian officials' misgivings about Obama come as a natural extension of their deep suspicions about every US administration they had dealt with since the end of the Second World War. Except during the brief honeymoon former President Anwar Sadat had had with US President Jimmy Carter in the late 1970s, Egyptian officials hardly trusted their American counterparts. Mubarak was known for not harboring feelings of warmth and trust towards his US benefactors. The same can be said about his attitude towards the US political establishment as a whole. Ostensibly, he viewed the alliance with the US as a strategic necessity. For Mubarak, there was no alternative to robust relations with the US, given Washington's unrivaled weight in the international system. This situation became especially acute with the end of the Cold War. In fact, he even questioned the official US narrative about the events of 9/11, suspecting that the attacks

were the works of some “internal conspiracy” designed to justify America’s subsequent military intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>32</sup>

This mistrust may be the natural consequence of the US’s undying support of Israel and its hegemonic Middle East policy. It may also be aroused by prevailing perceptions of international politics in Egypt, which are often clouded by stereotypes, rumors and wild myths. In the frantic times of post-2011 Egypt, preposterous allegations and ad hominem attacks became part of everyday politics, and popular fears and prejudices were not only held by ordinary people but also by intellectuals and senior officials. Particularly during the time immediately following Morsi’s overthrow, a steady diet of mass hysteria dominated Egypt’s media and public discourse. The Muslim Brothers were demonized on a systematic basis; conspiracy theories about the MB and its domestic and international allies were ubiquitous; voices of wisdom and moderation were either intimidated or sidelined.

In such heated atmosphere, false excerpts that were attributed to Hillary Clinton’s memoirs appeared in various Egyptian newspapers. These media reports claimed that the US had cut a secret arrangement with the MB. An Islamic Caliphate would be declared in the Sinai on 5 July, Egypt’s sovereignty over the border towns of Halayeb and Shalatin would be handed over to Sudan, and Egypt’s border with Libya would be effectively erased. Clinton retorted, saying she is “done with crazy Egyptian conspiracy theories.”<sup>33</sup> Yet, despite their glaring fabrication, these allegations were repeated over and over by scores of journalists and media commentators. In fact, the spokesperson of the Interior Ministry, Hany Abdel-Latif, echoed them in an interview with the *Middle East News Agency* in August.<sup>34</sup> Egypt’s minister of culture, Gaber Asfour, went as far as saying that he learned from Clinton’s book that the US had created the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in response to the success of Egypt’s 30 June revolution.<sup>35</sup>

Such misrepresentations and false attributions are indeed quite understandable. Egypt’s print and satellite media are either owned by the state or tied to it by means of intimidation or enticement. Moreover, most of the Egyptian satellite channels that mushroomed since the early 2000s are secular. They took an aggressive stand against Islamists during and following Morsi’s tenure while mouthing platitudes about the state and the army. The professionalism of Egypt’s media was further undermined by the intensity of the political struggle that shook the country in 2013 and onwards. Often it gave way for hysteria, fabrications and insane allegations.

Whether genuine or feigned, arguing that the MB was backed by the US would strengthen the case of the state, and depict it as defending the nation against a conspiracy of international proportions. For example, Al-Wafd daily newspaper, the mouthpiece of the liberal party Al-Wafd, claimed that Obama was a disguised member of the International Organization of the MB, the international arm of the MB. Intriguingly, the claim was made although the organization had been largely inoperative for years. It was also not entirely uncommon for commentators or columnists in Egyptian media to argue that the US was at war with Islam, or that ISIS was created and funded by the US, in a pernicious attempt to divide and then conquer the Muslim world. For the most part, the Egyptian public came largely under the influence of this type of coverage. A survey of global attitudes towards the US (conducted by Pew Research Center in 2014) showed that among 44 countries, anti-Americanism was the most prevalent in Egypt. Only 10% of Egyptians had a favorable opinion of the US (down from 30% in 2006), while 85% had an unfavorable view.<sup>36</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Under the leadership of Barack Obama, Egyptian–US relations experienced an acute crisis, unseen in many decades. At two critical junctures in the history of the Egyptian state—January 2011 and July 2013—the US stance was perceived by Cairo as unfavorable at best and as plainly hostile at worst. Being a rare and unprecedented moment that threatened to remold the state and restructure its relationship with society, the popular uprising in 2011 represented, from the state’s point of view, a threat that should be warded off and contained. On the other hand, the putsch in 2013 was its comeback. On these two moments, Cairo’s ruling elite saw everything through the parochial perspective of this *raison d’état*. There was little room for compromise or maneuver.

Common interests and threats will continue to align Egypt and the US together. They are likely to retain their strategic relationship that was launched in the 1970s as long as the regional and international configuration of power is not fundamentally changed. However, thinking that the departure of Barack Obama from the White House would automatically lead to significantly improved US–Egyptian relations is an illusion. Under Obama’s successor, liberal values will figure prominently in the conduct of

US foreign policy, even if they are eventually trumped by realist considerations. At the same time, wrangling about the content and direction of reforms in Egypt is likely to linger. Egyptian officials will continue to see US political support and military aid as entitlements, while US politicians will continue to oscillate between pursuing a purely pragmatic approach towards Egypt and another that adds democracy and human rights to the agenda.

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20. According to the Foreign Assistance Act, first enacted in 1961, aid must be stopped to "any country whose duly elected head of government is deposed

- by military coup d'état or decree" or is toppled in "a coup d'état or decree in which the military plays a decisive role."
21. Just like in January 2011, a simmering rift occurred among Obama's aides regarding how to deal with the developing situation in Egypt. It was motivated by where these aides stand on the question of interests and values, and resulted in an inconsistent approach towards Egypt. For instance, it was reported that Susan Rice, Obama's national security advisor, advised Secretary of State John Kerry to make "strong statements" about the trial of Morsi during his Cairo visit. Kerry instead "made a deliberate and conscious decision" not to follow her advice, and instead accused the MB of stealing the Egyptian Revolution [Higgins, Michael, "Tensions between John Kerry and Susan Rice may be at Core of 'Muddled' US Policy on Egypt," *National Post*, November 22, 2013. Accessed June 7, 2016. <http://news.nationalpost.com/news/tensions-between-john-kerry-and-susan-rice-may-be-at-core-of-muddled-u-s-policy-on-egypt>].
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## *A Bilan* of Eight Obama Years: Between Bush and Trump

*Ruchi Anand*

### INTRODUCTION: PERSONALITY OR GRAND STRATEGY?

Once every four years, the US, one of the most powerful countries in the world, holds its presidential elections. US elections have always drawn close attention not just from Americans but also from the rest of the world. The global dominance of the US in terms of its political, economic, structural, hard, soft, and smart power is unquestionable, which clearly implies that even the smallest shifts in leadership and their policies can have tremendous impact on global politics. Elections in the US, then, are not solely an American issue. The world watches the process and outcome of the election to predict continuity or change for themselves and the world they live in. Who fills the seat in the Oval Office starting 2017 will impact global strategies for tackling the Islamic State and terrorism, climate change, immigration, refugees, trade, health, education, income, equity, race relations, women's rights, as also may have a significant impact on US relations with Iran, Russia, China, Israel, Japan, Mexico, Cuba, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Shifts in US foreign policy and grand strategies with a change in president can cause ripples in international relations that have consequences on the essence of global order and justice.

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The world watches and cares about the US presidential election; that is undebatable. According to polls conducted by WIN/Gallup International,<sup>1</sup> including responses from over 44,000 respondents in 45 countries, 69 percent said that who gets elected as president of the US made a high or very high impact on their countries. A majority of 78 percent worldwide advised the next American president to focus on the interests of the entire world and not just local American interests. Vilma Scarpino, President of WIN/Gallup International, said: “Given that the world has become globalized and America leads it in economic and military matters, the American Presidential elections arouse a very interesting and meaningful global public policy debate.”<sup>2</sup>

In light of this backdrop, this chapter will discuss how France evaluates President Obama’s eight-year legacy as POTUS (president of the US). Barack Hussein Obama, the young and eloquent 47-year-old Illinois senator, was elected to the Oval Office on a historic 4 November 2008 election win as the 44th president of the US. As the first African American president, Barack Hussein Obama served a second term and bid farewell to the White House after two eventful terms. The world is standing by and watching the sweeping changes that an upcoming Donald Trump presidency heralds. At the same time, this is the moment to assess the Obama Report Card from 2008 to 2016.

The first section after this introductory remark section captures the pulse of France’s media reaction to President Obama over the years, giving the sense of the “Obamania” that started the Obama mandate in 2008. In the second major section, the Obama Doctrine will be discussed, which sets the philosophical and theoretical frame for Obama’s responses and actions on all his major foreign policy highs and lows with its transnational ally, France. In this section, the Obama years are separated into the Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande years, each of which saw differences of vision or strategy but not of ultimate goals. In the concluding part, remarks about what the overall Obama thermometer numbers look like will be considered, arguing that despite the ups and downs, President Obama is still a favorite in France and Europe. What the future holds under President Trump for Franco-American transatlantic ties is still in flux.

## THE FRENCH LOVE AFFAIR WITH OBAMA: A BACKGROUNDER

President Obama’s election in 2008 was applauded by the French media, and virtually every French newspaper hailed the historic Obama victory with hopes of change. *France Soir* called Barack Obama “la renaissance du

rêve Américain [the renaissance of the American Dream],”<sup>3</sup> *L’Express* had a feature entitled “Obama, L’homme qui peut changer le Monde [Obama, the man that can change the world]”<sup>4</sup> and another that was titled “La victoire d’Obama marque la réconciliation de l’Amérique avec le monde [Obama victory marks the reconciliation of America with the world],”<sup>5</sup> *Le Monde* had headlines that read, “L’homme qu’il faut [the man we need]”<sup>6</sup> in which the author compliments Obama with “*Quelle intelligence, quelle maestria, quel sang-froid* [what intelligence, what mastery, what cold blood],”<sup>7</sup> *Ouest France* chose to highlight “Obama incarne le rêve de Martin Luther King [Obama incarnates the dream of Martin Luther King].”<sup>8</sup> Although the majority of the French media reactions conveyed a sense of euphoria in response to his landslide first victory in 2008, there was also a more realistic and cautious side to the French reactions.

The landmark election of Barack Obama in 2008 and the hopes and expectations from his mandate were closely related to a strong rejection of President Bush’s policies. The notorious Bush Doctrine was particularly loathed, because it symbolized an unapologetic unilateralism when multilateralism could not work, unrivaled military supremacy, and preemptive and preventive warfare.<sup>9</sup> This foreign policy approach was criticized vociferously by the French and most Europeans alike. The Pew polls report for the Bush years (2001–2008) stated, “[i]n the view of much of the world, the United States has played the role of bully in the school yard, throwing its weight around with little regard for others’ interests.”<sup>10</sup> With the lowest support for President Bush, 87 percent of French people suggested little or no confidence in President Bush to do the “right thing” in world affairs. Although President Obama inherited from his predecessor two controversial wars that changed the geopolitics of the Middle East forever, a serious worldwide financial crisis, global climate change at staggering levels, and the threat of nuclear weapons in the hands of rogue states, there was “hope”<sup>11</sup> that came with Obama’s 2008 election slogan emphasizing “change.”

In the 2012 campaign, Obama proceeded with the slogan “forward,” highlighting healthcare reforms, the death of Osama bin Laden, and an economy that had begun to show slow but steady improvements.<sup>12</sup> Obama’s re-election in 2012 also had positive echoes in French media. Many French newspapers and magazines like *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*,<sup>13</sup> and *L’Express*<sup>14</sup> all used the same headline on their websites: “Obama Re-Elected: ‘The Best Is Yet to Come.’” The hysteria of “Obamania” continued. French President Hollande’s congratulatory note to President Obama read, “Your re-election is a clear choice in favor of an America that

is open, unified, completely engaged in the international scene and conscious of the challenges facing our planet: peace, the economy and the environment.”<sup>15</sup> In France, 78 percent of its people wanted an Obama victory, while Hollande called Obama’s re-election “an important moment for the US, but also for the world.”<sup>16</sup> The left newspaper *Liberation*’s special edition on its front page had a beaming Obama with the word: “Yes!” written large. The right-leaning *Le Figaro* had a less enthusiastic headline: “Obama: Season 2.”<sup>17</sup> In the Spring of 2015 Global Attitudes Survey conducted by Pew Research, 83 percent of French people had confidence in President Obama for doing the right thing in global affairs. Only the Philippines with 94 percent confidence and South Koreans with 88 percent<sup>18</sup> had better scores.

With the end of President Obama’s two-term mandate, the media and public worldwide are preoccupied with outgoing President Obama’s overall report card. The French press is flooded with similar questions about the Obama presidency. Titles such as “*Huit ans après son élection, quel est le bilan international de Barack Obama?* [Eight years after his election, what is the international assessment of Barack Obama?]”<sup>19</sup> in *Le Parisien*, “*Que restera-t-il des deux mandats de Barack Obama à la Présidence des Etats-Unis?* [What will stay from the two mandates of Barack Obama as the President of the United States]”<sup>20</sup> in *Direct Matin*, “*Barack Obama: Quel Bilan Diplomatique?* [Barack Obama: A Diplomatic assessment]”<sup>21</sup> in *La Croix*, and “*Ce qu’il restera du Monde d’Obama* [What will remain of Obama’s world]”<sup>22</sup> in *Le Temps*.

In contrast to the coverage that President Obama’s election got in the French press, President Trump’s election has had very opposite and negative reviews. *Le Figaro* referred to the Trump victory as “Hurricane Trump,” wondering if it was not the start of chaos: “*Victoire de Trump: Le début du chaos commence peut-être aujourd’hui* [Trump Victory: the beginning of chaos may start today—*Le Figaro*].”<sup>23</sup> *Les Echos* (a French financial paper) referred to his victory as a “*leap into the unknown*,”<sup>24</sup> while *La Croix* (a Catholic newspaper) had the header “*Inconnu* [Unknown]”<sup>25</sup> and *Liberation* (a left newspaper) “*American Psycho*.”<sup>26</sup> *Le Parisien*, referring to the Trump’s “Brexit plus, plus, plus” campaign agenda, asked “*ce que ça change pour nous*”<sup>28</sup> (could it affect presidential elections in France?).<sup>29</sup> Overall the French press and media had drastically different tones to the Obama versus the Trump presidency. It is in light of the overall French skepticism of the new President Trump’s foreign policy approach that the overall assessment of the Obama two-term mandate will be

conducted. How the French evaluate Obama's eight years in office cannot neglect the context in which the Obama presidency is positioned—that is, between President Bush whom he replaced and President Trump who is taking over, both not appreciated by the French people if polls and press were to be accepted as a barometer.

Many French sources attempt to evaluate Obama's eight years in office. Did his "yes we can" slogan be followed up with a "yes we did" response? French news media had a series of articles and TV shows on how President Obama fared. "*Les deux mandats de Barack Obama en 10 dates clés*" (Two Obama mandates in 10 key dates—*Le Figaro*),<sup>30</sup> "*L'échec du grand rêve d'Obama*" (Failure of Obama's big dream—*Le Figaro*),<sup>31</sup> "*Etats-Unis: Les Dossiers qu'Obama Laisse au Nouveau Président*" (The file that Obama is leaving to the new President—*Le Monde*),<sup>32</sup> "*Barack Obama: Quel Bilan Diplomatique?*" (Obama: A Diplomatic Assessment—*La Croix*),<sup>33</sup> "*Ce Qu'Il Restera du Monde d'Obama*" (What will stay from Obama's world—*Le Temps*),<sup>34</sup> "*Barack Obama à l'Heure du Bilan*" (Barack Obama time for an assessment—*Direct Matin*),<sup>35</sup> "*Les Espoirs déçus de la Communauté Noire, Après Huit ans de Président Obama*" (The Disappointed hopes of the black community after eight years of Obama—*Le Figaro*),<sup>36</sup> "*Emploi, Santé, Croissance, Inégalités ... Le Bilan Mitigé D'Obama*" (Employment, health, growth and inequalities—the mixed assessment of Obama—*Capital*).<sup>37</sup> Other assessments were more specific regarding Obamacare, the economy, race relations, and terrorism, among others. In general, it can be noted that sources from the right political parties were more critical of Obama than the left.

A good summary of Obama's foreign policy in broad strokes would be a piece in *L'Obs* entitled "*Barack Obama à l'Heure du Bilan: 5 Reussites et 5 échecs*" (Barack Obama at the time of assessment—five successes and five failures).<sup>38</sup> This article by Renaud Fevrier summarizes a preliminary assessment of Obama's eight years and uses several other French newspapers, right and left, to compile its overview. This "providential man's" *first* achievement is having made history and giving new hope to the American people and the world. As he said in his 2008 election speech, "If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible, who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time, who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer."<sup>39</sup> His *second* achievement is helping the country out of the global economic crisis and recession, leaving a better record than his predecessor. His *third* big achievement is undoubtedly Obamacare

health reforms. What could have been “political suicide” turned out to be one of the most important reforms of his two mandates while seven earlier presidents had failed before him. The author realizes that although it was viewed as a huge success from other countries of the world, American public opinion remains quite divided on this social reform, with the majority of Americans (49.2 percent) seeing Obamacare negatively compared to people with favorable opinions (45.7 percent). The majority of Americans are for modifications and not a complete repeal of the law.<sup>40</sup> *Fourth*, his Nobel Peace Prize for being the president who wanted to minimize wars that America is involved in. He showed this by withdrawing all troops from Iraq and minimizing troop presence in Afghanistan. *Fifth*, despite continued doubts about Iran’s reliability, the nuclear settlement with Teheran is, for Barack Obama, a real victory and a proof that diplomacy works and gives results. The same can be said about US relations with Cuba.<sup>41</sup>

In terms of his failures, *L’Obs* also summarizes President Obama’s top five. *First*, the painful racial question that President Obama was not able to change. In the words of Jean-Eric Branaa, maître de conférences, Specialist of American politics at the l’université Paris-2 Panthéon-Assas, “The problem is that Barack Obama has always presented himself as the president of all Americans and has in fact governed as a white president, paying particular attention not to be seen as the representative of a single community.”<sup>42</sup> *Second*, a rise in inequalities. Obama had said in 2008, “[i]nequalities have widened and the social lift is down.”<sup>43</sup> Despite all good intentions, President Obama faced an inflexible Congress on the subject. As a result, there was no increase in the minimum wage and no increase in taxes for the richest. Consequently, one in seven Americans lives in poverty, of which African Americans are the hardest hit with an unemployment rate of 8.3 percent as against a 4.8 percent for the rest of the population.<sup>44</sup> In fact, 13.5 percent of Americans lived below the poverty line in 2015, while the rate for African Americans is 24.1 percent. Historian Caroline Rolland-Diamond in “Liberation” wrote, “The African-American community has criticized him for not acting to reduce inequalities, which is undeniable, and some gaps between white and black have even worsened, while the white middle class is almost out of the crisis of 2008.”<sup>45</sup> *Third*, his failure to outlaw fire arms. An estimated 30,000 are killed each year due to fire arms. With tears in his eyes, President Obama had said, “Every time I think of these children, it makes me angry.”<sup>46</sup> However, President Obama was not able to change

the legislation for stricter control of firearms, including automatic weapons and weapons of war in the face of a Congress held by the Republicans and close to the powerful lobby, the National Rifle Association (NRA). Instead, all he could do was organizational modifications to improve firearms safety technology and to better apply the current law as it stands. *Fourth*, his foreign policy in certain areas was seen as a failure, namely, the failure to go into Syria when President Assad crossed the “red line,” a weak stand toward Russia, no advancement on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The *fifth* failure is President Obama’s inability to close Guantanamo Bay. The one swing issue that was not judged as *échec* (failure) ou *reussite* (success) was climate change as we are yet to wait and watch. In the following section, a *bilan* (balance sheet) of Obama’s eight years will be embarked on by explaining the Obama Doctrine as his grand strategy.

In the following section, a discussion on Obama’s Grand Strategy will be followed by Obama’s relations with Sarkozy and Hollande during his two mandates. Principal issues that led to divergent Franco-American positions will be reviewed.

### THE OBAMA DOCTRINE: SARKOZY TO HOLLANDE

A grand strategy is an integrated set of principles and concepts that guide foreign policy and offer direction. Obama’s grand strategy showed a combination of continuity and change from his predecessor, George Bush. The continuity was evident in the goal of US primacy and leadership and the maintenance of a liberal international order that reflected American values. The change was evident in the means that Obama chose to highlight in achieving his said goals. He employed restraint and diplomacy rather than direct use of military force. As Hal Brands puts it, “Obama’s grand strategy might thus be summarized—at least in the president’s own view—as preserving U.S. leadership of an eminently favorable international order, but doing so at reduced costs, via more supple and energetic diplomacy, and in ways that better reflected the shifting landscape of global power.”<sup>47</sup>

The Bush Doctrine, highly influenced by neoconservatives, emphasized a contrasting cowboyish unilateralism, preemptive strikes, democratic regime change, attacking countries that harbor terrorists in Bush’s speech at Westpoint in 2002. George W. Bush in his book, “Decision Points,”<sup>48</sup> identifies the four tenets of his doctrine as, first, “Make no distinction

between terrorists and the nations that harbor them – and hold both to account”; second, “Take the fight to the enemy overseas before they can attack us again here at home”; third, “Confront threats before they fully materialize”; and fourth, “Advance liberty and hope as an alternative to the enemy’s ideology of repression and fear.”<sup>49</sup>

In a similar context, the speech that President Obama delivered at West Point May 2014 asserted the essence of what can be called the Obama Doctrine:

*America must always lead on the world stage. If we don't, no one else will ... The United States will use military force, unilaterally if necessary, when our core interests demand it. On the other hand, when issues of global concern do not pose a direct threat to the United States, when such issues are at stake—when crises arise that stir our conscience or push the world in a more dangerous direction but do not directly threaten us—then the threshold for military action must be higher. In such circumstances, we should not go at it alone. Instead, we must mobilize allies and partners to take collective action. We have to broaden our tools to include diplomacy and development; sanctions and isolation; appeals to international law; and, if just, necessary and effective, multilateral military action.*<sup>50</sup>

This doctrine of “moral multilateralism” adopted by Obama in his foreign policy approach is said to reflect the influence by Reinhold Niebuhr,<sup>51</sup> who cautioned against hubris and moral miscalculations at the same time as supporting an interventionist foreign policy. Frédéric Koller of *Le Temps* writes, “The president has restored the image of the United States. By taking the risk of appearing weak, while the United States remains the foremost global military power, Barack Obama has given new meaning to American responsibility in a multipolar world.” He asks if this could be a legacy that could last.<sup>52</sup> President Obama is the first president who is not afraid to being perceived as weak in his reluctance to use force.

This changed discourse led to President Obama winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009 although many criticized his receipt of this honorable award and even claimed that he did not deserve it. The justification of the Norwegian Nobel Committee was quite straightforward. President Barack Obama was rewarded “for his extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation among peoples,” for his vision of a world without nuclear weapons<sup>53</sup> and his promotion of non-proliferation, a “new climate” in international relations and his efforts at reaching out to



the Muslim world.<sup>54</sup> President Obama followed his doctrine through both mandates.

The eight years of the Obama presidency saw two French presidents, namely, Nicolas Sarkozy (May 2007–May 2012) and François Hollande (May 2012–2017). Each of those periods, the Sarkozy–Obama and the Hollande–Obama period, came with their highlights for Franco-American relations. Throughout President Obama’s mandate, there have been light-hearted speculations about which president Obama preferred working with Sarkozy or Hollande. *Le Point* in 2014 eluded that perhaps President Obama prefers President Hollande to Sarkozy.<sup>55</sup> When asked point blank by a journalist, Laurence Haim, from *Liberation* what the main difference was between Sarkozy and Hollande, Obama light-heartedly responded, “Hollande wears glasses.” When prodded to respond more seriously, Obama said that between real allies, the leaders, the parties are not important. What is important is the relationship between the people and their cultures. He concluded by iterating that both French Presidents had a great relationship with the United States.<sup>56</sup> A Pew survey of 2016 shows that 63 percent of French people have favorable views of the US. French people associate optimistic (72 percent) and hardworking (81 percent) as the two adjectives that most describe Americans but see them as not so tolerant (only 42 percent).<sup>57</sup>

### *Obama and Sarkozy*

The Sarkozy period of Obama’s term saw two main events that brought Franco-American relations to test namely the killing of Bin Laden (August 2009) and the Libyan intervention (2011).

The killing of Al Qaeda’s leader Bin Laden in a US drone attack was hailed and applauded without any reservation by the French. Nicolas Sarkozy issued a statement stating the following:

*President Obama’s announcement of Osama bin Laden’s death in a remarkable U.S. commando operation in Pakistan is a milestone in the global fight against terrorism. France hails the tenacity of the United States, which had sought him for 10 years. The main person responsible for the attacks of September 11, 2001, Osama bin Laden promoted an ideology of hatred and led a terrorist organization that left thousands of victims worldwide, notably in the Muslim countries. For these victims, justice has been done. This morning, France is thinking of them and their families.*<sup>58</sup>



In a similar supportive tone, the French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé remarked:

*We understand and share the joy of the American people. We must remember the horrific tragedy they endured on September 11, 2001, which left 3,000 dead; those highly symbolic attacks on the Twin Towers in New York. And as President Obama said, the feeling today that justice has been done explains the American people's explosion of joy, which we can only share (...). We too are fighting terrorism, an abominable scourge, because it is sheer cowardice to attack innocent populations in barbarous conditions, as we just saw again in Marrakesh; it is something that rallies all democracies.<sup>59</sup>*

Both the US and France hold and cherish many similar values and freedoms that made both stand strong as allies in their war against terror. The goals are the same, the means may be debatable.

The Libyan intervention by French and British led forces under the NATO hat was more of a strenuous event for relations between the two countries. President Obama saw the intervention in Libya as his “worst mistake” and said clearly that the mission in Libya “didn’t work.”<sup>60</sup> The third attempt at recent regime change for the US, after Afghanistan and Iraq, Libya was his own failure, while the earlier two were those of the Bush administration that he severely criticized. Tierney states that “Obama was elected on a “no more Iraqs” platform, but he repeated the same mistake of winning the war and losing the peace.”<sup>61</sup> In an extensive interview with *The Atlantic*, Obama explained his move to intervene, in line with the Obama Doctrine. There, he said this:

*What I said at that point was, we should act as part of an international coalition. But because this is not at the core of our interests, we need to get a UN mandate; we need Europeans and Gulf countries to be actively involved in the coalition; we will apply the military capabilities that are unique to us, but we expect others to carry their weight. And we worked with our defense teams to ensure that we could execute a strategy without putting boots on the ground and without a long-term military commitment in Libya ... So we actually executed this plan as well as I could have expected: We got a UN mandate, we built a coalition, it cost us \$1 billion—which, when it comes to military operations, is very cheap. We averted large-scale civilian casualties, we prevented what almost surely would have been a prolonged and bloody civil conflict. And despite all that, Libya is a mess.<sup>62</sup>*

President Obama clearly and openly reproached the US’s European and Gulf allies for having been “free-riders”<sup>63</sup> and waiting for the US to take

the lead and also assume the risks involved with an intervention. Obama said that the US allowed the French president Sarkozy to take credit for the fall of Qaddafi in order to “purchase France’s involvement in a way that made it less expensive for us and less risky for us.”<sup>64</sup> He also told the UK, “You have to pay your fair share”<sup>65</sup> if it wanted to maintain a “special relationship”<sup>66</sup> with the US. President Obama blames his perceived failure in Libya on the lack of follow-up effort by US allies, France and UK, after the fall of Qaddafi, coupled with internal tribal reasons. Although the intervention in Libya was a success in overthrowing Qaddafi, it created a power vacuum that allowed the Islamic State to gain stronghold in Libya, like it did in Iraq after the 2003 intervention to overthrow Saddam Hussein.

Despite the highlighted differences above, Presidents Obama and Sarkozy honed a friendly relationship despite their contrasting personalities and foreign policy styles because their international policy intentions were very similar. President Sarkozy even gave President Obama an enthusiastic endorsement for re-election in 2008, saying, “I wish Barack Obama luck—if it’s him [who wins], France will be very happy.”<sup>67</sup>

### *Obama and Hollande*

May 2012 saw the transition to the presidency to François Hollande. Some of the Franco-American international ordeals that will be showcased in the following examples are Syria, the Iranian nuclear deal, climate change, Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the war on terror.

The Iranian nuclear deal was applauded by the French press and referred to as a justification of the Nobel Peace Prize that President Obama received in 2009. Despite the robust pressure and criticism exerted by the Republican hawks and Israel on President Obama, he stretched out his hand to one of the countries in what his predecessor had called the “axis of evil,”<sup>68</sup> namely, the Islamic Republic of Iran under both Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Hassan Rohani. The six negotiating powers and Iran were able to reach a historic agreement regarding Iran’s nuclear program that worked in favor of the Democratic president.<sup>69</sup>

If we trace the history of this legendary deal, it was initiated by France in 2003 under the Jacques Chirac presidency when the French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin expressed France’s willingness to cooperate with Iran in return for it agreeing to suspend uranium enrichment. Upon taking office in 2007, President Sarkozy adopted a tougher and

more punitive measure by sponsoring “new sanctions on an unprecedented scale.”<sup>70</sup>

Hollande adopted Sarkozy’s approach when he came to power in 2012. France became “second fiddle” and the US took the lead. As the agreement drew closer, President Hollande insisted on maintaining UN sanctions and limiting the Iranian R&D nuclear program, which eventually led to the rejection of the roadmap by French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius in 2013, who did not believe that it was adequately demanding. This disagreement led to elevated tensions between Washington and Paris. Although there were differences, Fabius agreed that the deal “includes some incontestably positive developments”<sup>71</sup> and ultimately agreed to compromise with Iran.

The resistance from the Hollande team also reflected over three decades of French–Iranian hostilities and France’s historically close ties with the Sunni monarchies in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>72</sup> TNS Sofres<sup>73</sup> carried out a survey on the French and the Iranian nuclear program. The results were as follows: (a) 2 French out of 3 believe that the Iranian nuclear program represents a real danger for France; (b) the nuclear program is considered a real danger for Israel (88 percent of the French), the US (72 percent of the French), the Arab countries (71 percent of the French), and Europe (70 percent French); (c) 80 percent of the French take the threat of the Iranian president to strip Israel of the map; (d) 81 percent of the French do not trust the Iranian leaders on the nature of their nuclear program; and (e) 79 percent of the French are in favor of the United Nations taking sanctions against Iran in order to prevent the country from making the atomic bomb, the majority of French are unfavorable to the exclusion of Iran from the UN (49 percent of the French are unfavorable to this exclusion and 37 percent are favorable).<sup>74</sup>

A 2012 Pew poll showed that the majority in France (74 percent), just as in the US (80 percent), approve of tougher economic sanctions against Iran. A majority (63 percent) of Americans accepted the use of military force to prevent a nuclear Iran, while 51 percent of French people did. There was strong agreement between Washington and Paris on the merits of the Iranian nuclear problem. Disagreements between the two allies faded away to a cautious wait and watch approach which may be the case for all the E3+3 members, namely, France, Germany, Britain, US, Russia, and China.<sup>75</sup>

The second major international issue that caused waves of dissent between the US and France was the crisis in Syria. Although a majority of

Europeans castigated, and continue to criticize Barack Obama for not bombing Damascus despite his ultimatum to the Assad government about not crossing the “red lines.” When chemical attacks against civilians in eastern Ghouta were reported in August 2013, Obama stayed away from military involvement. His decision came as a rational calculation of not embarking on a path that was from the start predestined to failure.<sup>76</sup> A joint military operation by the US, France, and the UK was shelved. In the documentary entitled “The Obama Years” by Norma Percy, Paul Mitchell, and Brian Lapping, and aired on *France 5*, the American president made the following statement: “In retrospect, this is one of the decisions I am most proud of.” The French President François Hollande who said in an interview in *L’Obs* “*Je suis Prêt* [I am ready]” did not take the cancellation well.<sup>77</sup>

President Hollande, in his harshest critique of Mr. Obama’s foreign policy, said, “This signal was interpreted as weakness from the international community ... That’s what provoked the crisis in Ukraine, the illegal annexation of Crimea, and what’s happening in Syria right now.”<sup>78</sup> When asked if he felt abandoned by President Obama, he replied in the negative and said that “[h]e wanted to stay faithful to his pledge to no longer involve the U.S. in external operations.”<sup>79</sup> To summarize his take on Syria in that interview with *L’Obs*, François Hollande said, “Aleppo is today a challenge for the international community. It will be his honor or his shame.”<sup>80</sup> The question remains as to what happens after Obama. In an article before the November election results were known, another piece from *L’Obs* remarked the following: “There is a risk of going in a few weeks, from a ‘soft power’ President who is reluctant to commit force, to one wishing to reaffirm American unipolar power again.”<sup>81</sup>

French opinion polls on Syria all tend to convey the same picture. An *Ifop* poll for *Le Figaro* indicates that 64 percent of French people were opposed to an “international military intervention in Syria.”<sup>82</sup> This survey confirms the results obtained by a *BVA* study for the TV channel *i-Télé*, according to which 64 percent of the French were opposed to a military intervention by a military coalition in Syria composed in particular of France, the UK, and the US against the forces of Bashar al-Assad. In both surveys, the percentage of French people who are in favor of an intervention is less than 40 (36 percent, according to *Ifop*, 34 percent according to *BVA*).<sup>83</sup> A *CSA* poll for *Atlantico*, released on August 28, found the French rate of 45 percent agreeing with the idea of military intervention and pointed to an increase in the share of opponents of the Syrian project

(40 percent).<sup>84</sup> *Ifo* highlights that the French were ready to accept a military action from February 2012 to August 2013—with a peak at 59 percent in May 2013.<sup>85</sup> Left-wing sympathizers are the only ones wanting military intervention in Syria (55 percent), sympathizers UMP (25 percent) and FN (23 percent) not showing enthusiasm for the project.<sup>86</sup>

Critics of Obama's decision to not overthrow the Assad regime à la Qaddafi's, despite the fact that Assad crossed the "red line," is partially responsible for the strengthening of the terrorist organization Islamic State (IS) and the rise in terrorism sponsored by that group. During President Obama's second mandate, France experienced three high-profile terrorist attacks in recent years. First, terrorists responsible for the 7 January 2015 massacre at the satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* killed 17 people over the course of three days. Second, terrorists killed 130 people across Paris on 13 November 2015. They killed 89 individuals inside the *Bataclan* theater alone. Third, a truck with a lone driver crashed into a crowd in Nice on 14 July 2016 during the Bastille Day fireworks, killing at least 84 people. Having experienced terrorism on its homeland not so long ago, the US knows the insecurities that come with terrorist attacks. After each attack, President Obama showed his support to France. Following the Paris attack, President Obama said:

*Once again we've seen an outrageous attempt to terrorize innocent civilians. This is an attack not just on Paris, it's an attack not just on the people of France, but this is an attack on all of humanity and the universal values that we share.*<sup>87</sup>

President Obama proclaimed "*nous sommes tous Français* [we are all French]." just as French newspaper headlines after the 9/11 attacks in 2001 had read, "*Nous sommes tous Américains* [We are all Americans]." Both French president Hollande and US president Obama promised to strengthen military attacks on ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Despite the universality of values, the two leaders had a number of differences, of which the most prominent were the following two:

The first difference was in terms of terminologies, more specifically the use of the terms "Islamic terrorists," "radical Islamist" or "Islamic fundamentalists." Following the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, French Prime Minister Manuel Valls said, "What I want to tell the French people is that we are at war."<sup>88</sup> Such a declaration resembled the infamous "Patriot Act" post-9/11 in the

US, something then senator Obama was skeptical and critical of. Valls said, “We must always say things clearly: yes, France is at war against terrorism, jihadism and radical Islamism.”<sup>89</sup> After the attacks on *Charlie Hebdo*, the Obama administration resisted to speak of a “war against radical Islam,” thus deliberately displaying itself in opposition to the speech of Valls. In a press conference, White House spokesman Josh Earnest said Muslims around the world had condemned such attacks, that terrorists were manipulating religion, and that the term was to be avoided. President Obama said, “[b]ut what I have been careful about when I describe these issues is to make sure that we do not lump these murderers into the billion Muslims that exist around the world, including in this country, who are peaceful, who are responsible, who, in this country, are fellow troops and police officers and fire fighters and teachers and neighbors and friends.”<sup>90</sup> The French press made a big deal of the differences in terminology; and made further headlines out of the omission of the word “Islamic terrorism” from President Hollande’s speech that was aired on US TV networks.

The second difference in the responses of France and the US was on strategy and how to respond to terror attacks. While Hollande and Valls reacted to the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks with an intensified air campaign, raids on suspected domestic terrorists, and changes to their country’s constitution with intention to make “France less hospitable to jihad,” Obama was more war-weary and concerned not to repeat the mistakes of the post 9/11 “War on Terror”<sup>91</sup> which led to stripping people of civil liberties in an arguably unconstitutional manner. Promises of cooperation and support between the two transatlantic allies in the war against terrorism remain strong and genuine.

What we can see through the Sarkozy and Hollande presidencies is that although there were differences of strategy, there was never a break in the harmony of values between the two countries which continue to show a common vision toward international political affairs and its conduct in the spirit of diplomacy and cooperation. None of the differences highlighted above took away from the essence of cordial and supportive Franco-American relations.

## CONCLUSION

Since Obama took office in 2009, predictions had been ample of Obama’s popularity dropping. They predicted that the exaggerated admiration of honeymoon period would culminate in a decline. Instead, the Obama admiration demonstrated surprising resilience.

*It survived various adversities, multiple criticisms, “red lines” that were not so red after all and ensuing humanitarian catastrophes, for which Europe had to take the brunt. It wasn’t affected by policies and choices—many Europeans denounced and criticized the escalation of drone use and the failure of closing Guantánamo. And it returned with a vengeance in the last two years. According to a June poll by the Pew Research Center, 80 percent of Europeans expressed their confidence in Obama “doing the right thing in world affairs.”<sup>92</sup>*

The same article by Maria del Pero states that in eight years, this key indicator, Europeans’ confidence in the US president, never dropped below 70 percent. In the same poll, candidate Hillary Clinton received 59 percent and President-elect Donald Trump 9 percent. In fact, a resounding 85 percent said they have “no confidence” in the President-elect.”<sup>93</sup>

The foremost answer lies in the fact that President Obama’s foreign policy discourse came across as consistently “humble, inclusive, restrained and postimperial,” Obama’s reluctance to overly depend on military power was, to France, positively “un-American” and defied the “militaristic, arrogant and interventionist stereotype many Europeans still have of the United States and its foreign policy.”<sup>94</sup> Under Obama, “the United States has seen its image polished if not transformed: To many European observers, the president has been truly exceptional in his “deexceptionalization” of the US at least as compared to his predecessor George W. Bush.<sup>95</sup>

As the two terms of President Obama came to an end, he continued to bask in the warmth of international popularity, with consistently high ratings in Europe for Obama, despite the ups and downs that this chapter discussed. In a Pew research survey conducted in ten EU nations in the Spring of 2016, with France included, 77 percent of respondents demonstrated confidence in Obama’s choices in world affairs, more than the 59 percent confidence shown for Hillary Clinton and the 9 percent for President Trump.<sup>96</sup>

The election of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the US has and will impact transatlantic ties including the US–France relations. The nature of this ‘impact’ will be influenced by how President Macron plays his political game with the Trump administration. It opens up as President Hollande said, “*une période d’incertitude* [a period of uncertainty].”<sup>97</sup> François Fillon, a presidential candidate of the right in France, said, “‘American democracy must be respected ... Allied with the United States, France will have to make its voice friendly but independent.’”<sup>98</sup> Alain Juppé, another candidate for French elections from the political right,

stated this: “The world needs a peaceful American democracy that contributes to the balance of the world, which is now threatened.”<sup>99</sup>

On the other hand, Marine Le Pen of the far-right political party National Front is one of the few French political representatives to support the victory of President Donald Trump. She tweeted that the victory of President Trump is a victory “of the free American people.” She added:

*I dare to repeat that the election of Donald Trump is good news for our country: refusal of the Tafta, and more generally of a wild globalization, pacification of the international relations in particular with Russia, disengagement of the bellicose expeditions at the origin of the great migratory waves of which we are the victims ... These commitments, if they are kept, are beneficial for France.*<sup>100</sup>

The victory of President Trump has been referred to as “the end of the end of history,”<sup>101</sup> and presented as falsification of the post-Cold War celebration of Liberalism by Francis Fukuyama.<sup>102</sup> It is the culmination of a Jacksonian-style populist, anti-intellectual tradition with an anti-establishment and anti-immigration spirit and an economic nationalist tone. It represents a sign of the final collapse of the traditional postwar liberal consensus. One has to wait and see how things develop and how the Trump presidency will impact Franco-American relations and the US relations with Europe. As Stephen Walt postured, the election of President Trump is “a social science experiment of historic proportions.”<sup>103</sup>

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# Russia's View on Obama's Presidency: From Hope to Disappointment

*Ivan Kurilla and Victoria I. Zhuravleva*

## INTRODUCTION

During Barack Obama's presidency, Russian–American relations changed dramatically from a *reset* to a *crisis*. Bilateral cooperation hit a standstill in most areas and anti-Americanism surged from 2014 to 2016, making it the deepest crisis since the end of the Cold War (Table 7.1 and Graph 7.1). Since the collapse of the Soviet Union there have been four outbursts of anti-American sentiments in Russia—1998, 2003, 2008, and 2014–2016. These episodes correlated with the diametrically opposed positions taken by the US and Russia over conflicts in Kosovo, Iraq, Georgia, and Ukraine. With the exception of the current crisis, each time anti-American sentiments grew rapidly in the course of one or two months and anticlimax has followed. This dynamic is easily explained by media (primarily television) propaganda in Russia. However, understanding why Russian public opinion of the US as a demonic “other” is so easily influenced by propaganda

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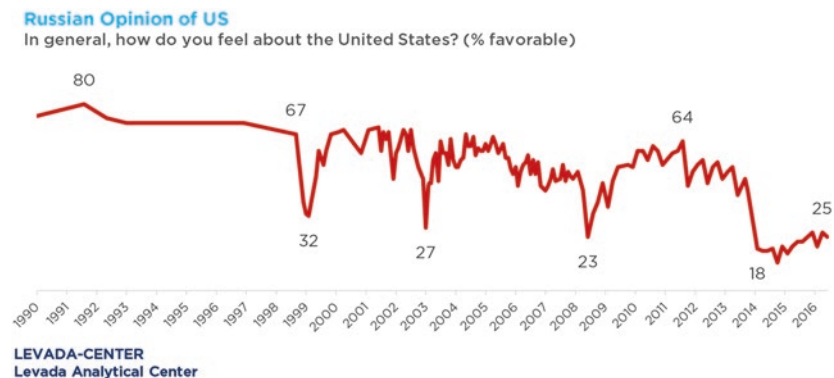
and why the current crisis demonstrates such a stable anti-American trend requires deeper analysis.

This chapter appeals to the social constructivist (socio-cultural) approach to carefully examine the role of the American “other” in Russian identity discourse. The conceptual framework of this chapter relies heavily on three types of context that engender the Russian discourse on the US. The first type of context is the socio-cultural context, which helps

**Table 7.1** What is your attitude toward President of the US Barack Obama?<sup>a</sup>

	<i>Jul.09</i>	<i>Sept.09</i>	<i>Apr.10</i>	<i>Jul.10</i>	<i>Oct.10</i>	<i>Feb.11</i>	<i>Aug.16</i>
Very positive	4	6	5	5	4	4	1
Mostly positive	52	54	56	55	51	51	6
Mostly negative	12	13	12	14	16	16	41
Very negative	3	3	4	3	3	5	42
It is difficult to say	29	24	23	24	26	23	10

<sup>a</sup>A table and a graph compiled by the largest independent public opinion research center named after Yuri Levada clearly demonstrate the abrupt drop of the Russians’ positive attitude toward both Barack Obama and the US by the end of his presidency. Levada Center polls, <http://www.levada.ru/en/2016/09/05/the-united-states-presidential-election-of-2016/>



**Graph 7.1** Russian Opinion of US: “In general, how do you feel about the United States?” Reprinted here with permission of: US and Russia: Insecurity and Mistrust Shape Mutual Perceptions. 4 November 2016. Joint research conducted by Levada Center and The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/publication/us-and-russia-insecurity-and-mistrust-shape-mutual-perceptions>

identify dominant identity markers that are characteristic for Russia over the long term. The second short-term context, closely related to the first one, is the political or agenda-setting context—the specific configuration of domestic and foreign policy issues that are important at any particular stage of Russian development—that explains the mechanisms through which the American “other” is being used. The third and final one is the auxiliary context of Russian–American bilateral relations.

The American “other” continues to be significant for the creation of post-Soviet Russian identity. The Russian sociologist Alexei Levinson accurately observed in 2007 that: “America is our only significant “other.” The rivalry with America does not unravel in the “real” world arena, but in its reflection that exists in the Russian mass consciousness. In this sphere, what matters is not to defeat the “other,” but to be completely certain that we “are not worse than them” ... In this worldview, examples of good relations with America are an acknowledgement that they are equal to us or similar to us, and we—to them as the only basis for mutual good feelings.”<sup>1</sup>

Angela Stent, director of the Center for Eurasian, Russian, and East European Studies at Georgetown University, argues: “The recognition of the reality that Russia is less important per se, that indirectly is a continuing source of irritation to Russian officials. In this sense, the various American resets have represented attempts to engage Russia productively by persuading it to acknowledge and accept the asymmetries in the relationship and move forward on that basis. Putin’s 2001 attempted reset, by contrast, was a bid to establish a strategic partnership of equals, acting as if these asymmetries did not exist.”<sup>2</sup>

This correlation between the identity construction process, on the one hand, and the image construction process, on the other, frames the different levels of knowledge about the US in Russia. There are three such levels: (1) “common” knowledge, which is maintained by the media, promulgated by mass culture and used for propaganda purposes; (2) academic knowledge, which is developed within traditional academic disciplines; (3) expert knowledge, which emerges as a result of a direct demand the government and the public make on the academic community which, in response, strives to render its knowledge usable as “applied” or practical recommendations.<sup>3</sup>

The history of Russian–American relations testifies that the rapprochement between Russia and the US and, accordingly, the rejection of simplified schemes of mutual understanding, has always happened during those

periods when Russia and the US have expanded the agenda of their relationship through the resistance to a common enemy, global challenges, and other threats (e.g., after the 9/11 terrorist attacks). This has also happened during times of political reform and/or economic modernization in the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and post-Soviet Russia, when the US exported goods, capital, and technologies and shared lessons of capitalism and reform.

On the opposite end of Russia's political cycle, during periods of stabilization when power structures are consolidated, authoritarianism grows, and reforms are rejected, the authorities promote the image of a hostile American "other" in Russia. This, in turn, leads to the rise of anti-Americanism and Russophobia, both of which can be actively deployed to achieve political goals and to revitalize nationalism. This trend was most evident during the Cold War, whose legacy influences the current crisis in Russian–American relations.

This chapter is divided into two main parts, each dealing with one of the two periods of Russia–US relations during Barack Obama's presidency. The first period was characterized by the policies of "reset"—active diplomatic collaboration that led to success in solving a number of important issues, along with high hopes and positive images of the US and Barack Obama among the majority of Russians. The second period was marked by a crisis in bilateral relations, the growth of tensions, and a "war of images." As such, diplomacy features prominently in the first half of our chapter, whereas image construction and identity battles do so in the latter half. The crisis of 2011–2012 in Russian domestic politics and the changing agenda of the Russian regime accelerated the deterioration of Russia–US relations and actualized not only the "war of the images" between Russia and the US but also the battle between conservative and liberal images of the US within Russian society. The debates over America's image became an important part of the domestic political struggle in Russia itself.

Naturally, not all the images of the US and its president that appeared in Russia over the last eight years can be discussed. Attention is focused only on the most important ones in order to trace the dynamics from "reset" to "Crisis" as a long-term trend in the history of mutual perceptions in general and Russia's perception of the US in particular. The authors' explanatory scheme draws on expert and academic publications, political and journalistic texts as well as on images of Obama's America in Russian visual discourse.

## RUSSIAN–AMERICAN RELATIONS ON THE EVE OF OBAMA'S PRESIDENCY

### *Diplomatic Landscape*

By 2008 relations between Russia and the US were locked in a stalemate. The optimism that once surrounded the relationship between Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President George W. Bush in 2001–2002 was long forgotten. The American war in Iraq that started in 2003, the proliferation of antimissile defenses near Russian borders, the series of so-called colored revolutions (regime changes following popular street protests) in the former Soviet republics that, Moscow believed, were supported by Washington, and finally, the war between Russia and Georgia in South Ossetia in August 2008 all contributed to the deterioration of bilateral relations.

The American reaction to the Russian-Georgian war was particularly damaging. The US media quickly accepted the official assessment of the event that was made by the Georgian government and supported by the White House—that is, that Russians started the attack. But by the time of the elections, more nuanced and less vindictive voices had gained an audience, with most of the blame directed toward Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili.

As a result, relations between Russia and the US reached a new low before the 2008 election, and the incoming president and administration were watched with much apprehension in Russia. President Dmitry Medvedev even managed to deliver an official address full of anti-American rhetoric on 5 November, the day after the US elections, without any mention of the president-elect.

Just 11 days later, however, Medvedev appeared in Washington for a meeting with the members of the Council of Foreign Relations, and made conciliatory remarks. The Russian president considered the election results as the American people's "choice for change" and expressed his hopes that President Obama would "take consistent steps towards overcoming the problems that have accumulated in Russian-American relations over recent years." Medvedev described the state of Russia–US relations at that moment to be in "a crisis of confidence."<sup>4</sup>

### *Russian Views of Obama*

The emergence of Barack Obama as a presidential candidate was initially met with mistrust, mostly due to Russian misperceptions that American society could not promote an African American to its highest political office. The race of the candidate indeed played an important role in shaping initial perceptions of Obama in Russia. Since the nineteenth century, Russians considered the US a racist country. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriett Beecher Stow was translated into Russian in the 1850s, immediately after its first publication in the US. Throughout the twentieth century, the segregation and mistreatment of American blacks was a constant issue in the Russian view—the Soviet way of looking at its main rival as an inferior was to highlight America's racial problem.

Even on the eve of Election Day in 2008, when all the polls demonstrated Obama's imminent victory, some of the leading Russian analysts remained in disbelief. During an interview on 22 October 2008, Anatoly Utkin, the director of the Center for International Research at the Institute of USA and Canada studies of the Russian Academy of Science, decisively ruled out the possibility of an Obama victory, reminding his audience that "there were Anglo-Saxons, former German and former Irish presidents. And nobody else for 225 years."<sup>5</sup> On 30 October, popular journalist Maxim Shevchenko told his audience on the "Echo Moskvy" radio show that he had "bet against many" who predicted John McCain would be the winner, because Americans were "very fundamental people."<sup>6</sup> Despite some of the progress made, such as abolishing segregation in the South, Russians continued to believe that American society was deeply racist.

Another aspect of the election involved the image of Barack Obama as a liberal reformer, an image popular among Russians in 2008. Obama's electoral campaign slogan "Change we can believe in" stirred Russian memories of perestroika. Two days after Election Day in 2008, popular political cartoonist Sergey Elkin pictured Obama sitting with Mikhail Gorbachev on a bench, with Gorbachev teaching the young American president how to make perestroika work in the US.<sup>7</sup>

Perestroika itself is an ambiguous symbol for Russians: for liberals, it was the time of Russia's surge to freedom, while for conservatives perestroika destroyed Russia's great power. Both those meanings were projected onto Barack Obama: as a potential "liberator" of the US, in contrast to George W. Bush's "war on terror" and its limitations on freedom and human rights (e.g., Guantanamo prison), and as a potential gravedigger for American world power.

The loftier expectations surrounding the newly elected president were found in the field of international affairs management. His predecessor's foreign policy was not just exceedingly hawkish; it was considered by the Russian leaders as unnecessarily belligerent and at times destructive. Moscow also enjoyed the virtual anti-American unity of Europe after the US attacked Iraq in 2003, joining the concert of European critics of President Bush.

Since George W. Bush's administration was unpopular in many European countries, Russia was simply part of a wider circle criticizing US foreign policy, and not a "cold war" type antagonist. Without any bilateral animosity, the arrival of Barack Obama seemed to offer the possibility of improving ties with the US. The Nobel Peace Prize awarded to Obama in 2009 provided further encouragement for a positive shift in Russia-US relations. But as Russian political columnist Fedor Lukyanov remarked, those attitudes held "expectations of a miracle."<sup>8</sup>

## RESET: AMERICA AS THE ROMANTIC "OTHER"

### *Diplomacy, State to State*

In March 2009, just a few weeks after Obama's inauguration, the Department of State came out with a new approach to Russia-US affairs. During a meeting between Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov, Americans brought a symbolic button with the word *peregruzka* on it that was supposed to mean "reset" in English. However, "reset" in Russian is *perezagruzka* while *peregruzka* means "overload." This error was quickly spread by the media and became the source of many jokes, but nonetheless, the word "reset" came to define Russian-American relations during the first years of Obama's presidency.

The first and most traditional set of tasks for Russia-US diplomatic relations was inherited from previous periods and based on decisions made years before Obama and Medvedev. It included the thorny problems of Russia joining the World Trade Organization (WTO), signing a new treaty on strategic arms reduction to replace the one that expired in December 2009, negotiating a northern supply route for the American forces deployed in Afghanistan, disagreements over NATO collaboration with Georgia and Ukraine, and the missile defense system that the US planned to deploy in Central Europe. The US explained that the missile systems

were targeted against Iran, but Russia insisted they would also diminish Russian capabilities for a counter-strike. While some of the other problems were resolved in subsequent meetings, the disagreements over missile defense remained.

Medvedev and Obama met for the first time in London in April 2009 at the G-20 summit, but their first bilateral talks took place in Moscow in July 2009. Several important decisions were made there: the presidents agreed to develop a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, adopted an intergovernmental agreement regarding US military transit to Afghanistan, and created a bilateral Presidential Commission to improve the structure of their relations by providing a new coordinating mechanism to replace the existing Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission.<sup>9</sup> During the presidents' next meeting in Prague on 8 April 2010, they signed a treaty on strategic arms limitations and reductions (New START). The talks about Russia's WTO accession continued until December 2011, when Russia finally became a member of the organization.

Thus, one can judge that the formal diplomatic agenda brought positive results and the reset policy was a fruitful one. However, most of the issues settled by diplomacy were suggested by the US side, and Russian leaders always stressed that it was the Americans who suggested the term "reset." What then were the Russian interests in a rapprochement with the US? They were closely tied to Medvedev's attempts to act as a reformer.

Hoping to distinguish himself from his predecessor, the key word of Medvedev's four years in the Kremlin was "Modernization." Such an agenda, however, was not a new one; in Russian and Soviet history, periods of regime consolidation were always interrupted by modernizing efforts made by the state. One can recall the reforms of Yeltsin and Gorbachev in the late twentieth century, Khrushchev in the 1950–1960s, the Bolshevik experiment in the late 1920s–early 1930s, or even the modernizing efforts of Nicholas II at the end of the nineteenth century and Nicholas I in the 1840s. The point here is that every Russian surge to modernize the economy was followed by a drive to cooperate with the US. The US was a model economy and an important source of innovation and technical expertise.

Setting modernization as the priority of his presidential term, Medvedev was destined to establish better relations with the US and tap into a crucial source of technological and economic innovation. Indeed, Medvedev is well-known for being a fan of information technology. As president, he started his videoblog, created an account on the Russian social network



Vkontakte, and opened his own twitter account—the latter event happened during Medvedev's visit to California. “[W]e have plenty to learn from you here, and I hope that these contacts will create new opportunities that will help us to carry out the modernization agenda we have proposed for Russia,” declared Medvedev during the joint press conference (with President Obama) on 24 June 2010, after a visit to Silicon Valley.<sup>10</sup> Medvedev frequently highlighted the fact that he and President Obama were people “not just of the same generation but also of a similar education,” meaning they had a better grasp on new technology and held modern worldviews.<sup>11</sup>

### *Russian Views of America*

Linking his reformist plans so openly to the American model, President Medvedev invited critics of his policies to use that connection in domestic politics. Soon it created a discursive situation when the pro-reformist part of Russian society (mostly those called “liberals” in the Russian context) praised President Obama, while those who felt insecure within this new environment started to condemn him for undermining Russian reformism. The situation was exacerbated by Obama's decision to support the reformist Medvedev while mostly ignoring Vladimir Putin in an obvious attempt to encourage Medvedev to keep power and eventually dissolve Putin's control, behavior clearly understood in Moscow as promoting the split.

After conservatives in Russia won their battle over the reformists, the more radical faction of the Russian opposition also started to criticize Obama for his indecision and weakness toward rearmed Russian authoritarianism. The most important concern and primary target of the conservatives' criticism was Obama's foreign policy that, they argued, inspired revolutions worldwide and ousted existing stable regimes. Starting in Tunisia, the Arab Spring in 2010–2011 ignited popular unrest in Arab countries and brought regime changes with varying degrees of violence on the streets. President Obama welcomed the events as part of the whole region's shift toward democracy.

Ever since the so-called color revolutions of post-Soviet states (i.e., Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan) during 2003–2004, Putin's foreign policy has been openly antirevolutionary. Medvedev, however, did not want to break his good personal relations with Obama. Thus, the attitude toward Obama's foreign policy became a domestic issue in Russia; violent events in Libya signaled the start of increasingly negative attitudes toward Obama's foreign policy.

In 2011, State Duma elections took place and Russia prepared for the March 2012 presidential elections. Rumors about the tensions between President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin circulated widely in Russian society. Visual proof of these tensions came in March 2011; when Prime Minister Putin stepped in to criticize coalition acts against Libya, the following day President Medvedev appeared before TV cameras wearing a jacket with the label “Commander-in-Chief” inscribed on his chest and a message of support for the international efforts. However, the violent death of Libyan leader Muammar el-Qaddafi left a decidedly negative impression on the Russian elite. Alexey Pushkov, professor of Moscow State University of International Relations and TV anchor, wrote in a newspaper column: “How can the ‘new bright page’ start with the brutal murder and desecration of a corpse? Nobel Peace Prize laureate Obama, it seems, thinks it is possible.”<sup>12</sup>

In September 2011, Dmitry Medvedev announced the decision that he would step down as president in the following March while Vladimir Putin would run for the presidency again. The decision produced a very negative effect on the reformist and liberal part of Russian society and mobilized the public in the run-up to the election. December 2011 in Russia was marked by mass protests in Moscow against fraudulent elections; Muscovites did not trust the official results announced by the electoral commissions, while thousands of election watchers reported various forms of fraud. Hundreds of thousands of people went to the streets in Moscow to protest, united by their unwillingness to accept the fraud, their dislike of Putin’s decision to return to power, and their hatred of the ruling party “United Russia” (the most popular meme about that party, propagated by opposition activist Alexey Navalny, was “Party of crooks and thieves”). In order to split the protesters and alienate them, the ruling party decided to link the protest to foreign (i.e., American) support and encouragement. Russian propaganda started to portray them as “American pawns,” rather than genuine patriots.

In December 2011, Prime Minister Putin directly accused the US of fomenting unrest: “We need to safeguard ourselves from this interference in our internal affairs and defend our sovereignty,” Putin said, calling protesters the people who “take orders from foreign states to influence internal political processes.” Putin’s main target, however, was not Barack Obama but Secretary of State Hillary Clinton; it was Clinton who had “set the tone for some opposition activists, gave them a signal ... and [they] started active work.”<sup>13</sup>

Such a propagandistic strategy needed to establish a link between protesters and the US, but it also needed to portray the US as an existential enemy of Russia. Arriving amid the winter protests in Moscow, US Ambassador Michael McFaul aided such propaganda in achieving the former by inviting protest leaders to his residence at Spaso House, feeding into all the speculation made by pro-Kremlin TV. To portray Obama's policies as anti-Russian, propagandists just needed to revive some of the old Cold War stereotypes. Although President Obama escaped personal attacks at that time, the whole official discourse toward the US had undoubtedly changed in a negative way.

After the return of Vladimir Putin to the Kremlin in May 2012, the Russian regime found a new base for its policies: the beginning of the so-called turn to traditional values that praised a conservative attitude toward social issues and condemned liberal values. Domestically, liberal values came to be associated with the anti-Putin opposition, and globally, with American influence. Moreover, by 2012 it seemed that the US president had also abandoned the ideals of the "reset" policy toward Russia. During the 2012 election campaign Obama still defended his rapprochement with Russia from a fervent attack by republican candidate Mitt Romney; Romney pinned Russia as the US' "number one geopolitical foe," but Obama countered that "the Cold War has been over for 20 years."<sup>14</sup> However, by the end of the year relations with Russia were only aggravated further.

The most insulting policy decision was made in December 2012. For many decades, the US had kept the Jackson-Vanik amendment to the trade law adopted in 1974 to punish the USSR for banning emigration from the country. The ban itself was lifted during perestroika, but Russia has unsuccessfully sought for the abolishment of the Jackson-Vanik amendment ever since. While the Clinton and Bush administrations were unable or unwilling to influence US Congress to act on that legislation, the Obama administration finally did so, but in a way that offended the Russian elite. Congress voted for the repeal of the amendment as a part of legislation imposing another set of sanctions on Russia. The essence of the new law was to punish Russian officials accused of human rights violations and the death of imprisoned lawyer Sergey Magnitsky, who purportedly exposed huge corruption schemes in the Russian state. The Russian government considered the act itself interference into its domestic affairs, and scoffed at its linkage to the abolishment of the Jackson-Vanik amendment. Obama went ahead and signed the Magnitsky Act on 14 December 2012,

and on 28 December 2012, President Putin signed a bill that banned US citizens from adopting children from Russia. Many observers understood this as a retaliatory step.

Bilateral relations continued to deteriorate in 2013. The last attempt to revive the spirit of “reset” was the Joint Statement on Enhanced Bilateral Engagement, adopted by Putin and Obama in June 2013 that reaffirmed the two countries’ “readiness to intensify bilateral cooperation based on the principles of mutual respect, equality, and genuine respect for each other’s interests.”<sup>15</sup> However, the Snowden affair would destroy the last traces of optimism from the “reset” era.

Edward Snowden was a US government contractor who copied and made public hundreds of thousands of secret government documents. The exposition of the internal correspondence of US diplomats and intelligence services created an ugly picture of global surveillance and damaged the US’ international reputation. Snowden was put on the list of traitors, but managed to escape arrest. He fled first to Hong Kong and then to Russia, where he was granted political asylum in July 2013. That decision led to the cancellation of a meeting between Obama and Putin scheduled for September of that year.

## CRISIS: AMERICA AS THE DEMONIC “OTHER”

### *The Crisis in Russia’s Interpretation: From the Ukrainian Euromaidan to Syria*

The year 2013 saw an escalating confrontation between Russia and the US, and in 2014, Russia–US relations were in the deepest crisis since the end of the Cold War—a crisis that has not yet been resolved. Russia and the West offer diametrically opposed explanatory models for the causes of this crisis, yet both agree that the Euromaidan in Ukraine served as the catalyst.

The open confrontation between Russia and the US began as a response to Ukraine’s Euromaidan in November 2013, which resulted in the installation of a new Ukrainian government in February 2014. While the US and Europe applauded the democratic revolution of the Ukrainian people, the Kremlin refused to acknowledge the Ukrainians’ right to make their own choice between Russia and the EU, since Russia’s political elite and Putin personally believed the entire former Soviet region to be within Russia’s sphere of national interest. The Euromaidan was declared a purely

American project. The Russian authorities wanted to discredit this public protest as quickly as possible; in its origins, the protest was similar to the 2011–2012 protest movement in Russia itself (when comparing Russian and Ukrainian public opinion surveys at the rallies). There should not have been any successful form of public protest in a neighboring country, especially since this protest was again backed by Washington. From then on, anti-Americanism was an official ideologeme and a means of national consolidation in Russia.

The annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and Russia's military support for the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk republics in eastern Ukraine led to the imposition of US-initiated sectoral and personal sanctions on Russia and, in turn, to Russia's counter-sanctions. Paradoxically, the Russian authorities justified the Crimean referendum on joining Russia by citing Kosovo's declaration of independence, although Russia itself did not recognize Kosovo. Subsequently, state-run media actively wrote about both the "Kosovo version" and the "Texas version." The latter involved justifying the annexation of Crimea by referring to the continental territorial expansion of the US in the nineteenth century, of which the annexation of Texas was a part.

Several factors were declared to be the causes of the crisis in Russia–US relations: NATO's eastward expansion, which threatened Russia's national interests; the US' destruction of the international security system; and the attempts to expand American hegemony throughout the world, bypassing the national interests of various countries. The breaches of international law in Russia's own foreign policy were explained by external challenges to the country's national greatness. In reality this policy was based on domestic political needs to shape national identity.

Since the extended Russia–US confrontation that began in 2014, bilateral cooperation has been shut down in various areas, including cultural and academic exchanges. A couple examples of continued cooperation include the Iranian nuclear deal signed in July 2015 due to the US and Russia's consolidated efforts and joint outer space exploration. But the deep crisis in confidence created obstacles for cooperation in those areas where there were real windows of opportunity, as, for instance, in Syria. Yet Syria was also fraught with unintended international conflicts, including conflict between the US and Russia.

In September 2013, Putin decided to teach Obama a lesson in international law in an article published by the *New York Times*.<sup>16</sup> He called upon the US president to refrain from bombing Damascus and proposed a

peaceful plan for eliminating Syria's chemical weapons. Putin had already presented his plan at the G20 Summit in St. Petersburg, and subsequently, this plan was put into practice through the efforts of Sergey Lavrov, Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, and John Kerry, the US Secretary of State. In regard to Russia–US relations, the war in Syria assumed the dimensions of both a conflict zone (due to different attitudes toward Bashar al-Assad's government and the opposition) and a cooperation zone (due to the need to fight ISIS). Putin took the initiative in resolving the Syrian crisis and enjoyed the spotlight as a global leader and image-maker. On 16 September 2013, *Time* magazine put him on its cover for the fifth time, accompanied by the caption: "America's weak and waffling, Russia's rich and resurgent—and its leader doesn't care what anybody thinks of him." Similarly, *Forbes* argued that Putin had replaced Obama as the world's most influential person.<sup>17</sup> In the US, Putin's enhanced international standing spurred increasing criticism of Obama as a weak political leader; Republicans were the first to level such critical remarks toward the president. Subsequently, the *Putin vs. Obama* dichotomy was integrated into Russia's anti-American discourse and blatantly reflected in political cartoons. The 2014 Sochi Winter Olympic games became another of Putin's personal triumphs and demonstrated Russia's growing international prestige, despite the pessimistic predictions and talk of a possible boycott in the US.

The crisis in Russian–American relations has thus become the indicator of the final destruction of the post-Cold War order in general and of the asymmetric relationship between Russia and the US in particular. Russia's actions in Ukraine and Syria have challenged American global leadership, and essentially the world order that the US leads. Currently, Putin's political class is absolutely confident that neither the US, nor the West as a whole has any instruments to stop the dissolution of the existing world order. This dissolution will result in a "new Yalta," a global alliance between the winners, and Russia wants to be among them together with the US and China.

Confrontation with the West—especially over economic sanctions and information warfare against Russia—has given a powerful boost to Russian patriotism. In public speeches and in politics Putin and high-ranking Russian officials demonstrate the destruction of the "American teacher—Russian student" scheme created in the 1990s. Russia pretends to play the role of a teacher itself by teaching the US about Russian national interests. As head of the State Duma committee on foreign affairs, Alexey Pushkov stated in 2014 that the obsession with Putin in the US results from its

inability to subjugate Russia, to accept the Russia that was accepted by Russians themselves who had rejected Boris Yeltsin with his constant concessions to the US. “Our liberals extolled Yeltsin, Western leaders clapped him on his shoulder in approval and they find it unbearably hard to deal with today’s Russia,”<sup>18</sup> Pushkov concludes. Pushkov does not care that Putin, despite his high approval ratings, is far from being accepted by the entire Russian society.

### *Anti-Americanism in Russia as Official and Public Discourse*

In 2014–2015, the work of constructing the image of the US as a hostile country—that views itself as the victor in the Cold War, that wants to impose its dictates on the whole world and discredit all Russian attempts to do something of international significance, and that has irresponsibly played with religious extremists and radicals to achieve political goals—reached an unprecedented level in Russia. President Putin himself encouraged the political discourse to follow these lines as evidenced by his Valdai speech given in Sochi on 25 October 2014.<sup>19</sup> The Russian federal television channels, the main source of news for more than 90 percent of Russians, feeds and propagates these sentiments and prejudices. On the one hand, anti-Americanism in Russian society is the function of propaganda. On the other hand, these attitudes came from the society itself, reflecting some elements of the actual state of affairs. In this case, we are dealing with popular anti-Americanism, correlated with the nationwide demand for greatness, which has emerged in the second half of Putin’s lengthy reign as the part of a new and unspoken social contract between the authorities and the people.<sup>20</sup>

In 2014 and early 2015 anti-American sentiments in Russia hit their highest level in almost 15 years. According to the Levada Center opinion poll, half of the Russian population was sure that the US impeded Russia’s development, and 31 percent of Russians feared a military intervention and occupation by the US. At the same time, 33 percent were sure that, in a hypothetical war against the US and its allies, Russia would be able to gain a victory.<sup>21</sup> According to Pew Research Center polls, only 15 percent of Russians had a favorable opinion of the US, down from 56 percent in 2011.<sup>22</sup> There was hardly another nation in the world that had such a high level of resentment and negativity toward the US.<sup>23</sup>

This anti-Americanism was being used by the Russian authorities to support a siege mentality and to construct a national consensus. They

explained any accusations of foul play leveled against Russia, from the seizure of Crimea to the widespread state-sponsored doping of Russian athletes, as American intrigues. Putin cranked up the volume of anti-Americanism after the protest movement of late 2011 and 2012, which he blamed on the US State Department. But it was not until the Ukrainian crisis that anti-Americanism had spread from ordinary street vendors all the way up to the Kremlin.

In the political and social discourse, the image of the US as the hostile “other” correlates with the dichotomy between *Russian conservative nationalism* and *American universal liberalism*. President Vladimir Putin loves to discuss Russia’s “genetic code” or to talk about the unique Russian soul and the specific mission of Russian civilization. By reminding the Russian people of their sacred civilizational roots, Putin explained the incorporation of Crimea in his Federal Assembly Address on 4 December 2014. In a broad sense, this has resulted in a return to the famous debates among *Westernizers* (*zapadniki*) and *Slavophiles* that took place more than a century ago and again at the beginning of the twenty-first century as Russia turned to the East.<sup>24</sup> Duma deputies, political and public figures, journalists and commentators dwelled on Russian civilization in the world, and the role of Russian traditions and history. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov made a personal contribution to this discussion about the unique Russian form of development and proposed a historical narrative corresponding to this task. He highlighted the fundamental differences between Russia and the West, developing Putin’s argument that the West threatened Russia’s national identity.<sup>25</sup>

The ranks of the Russian conservatives have started to dramatically increase during the latest crisis. They argue that in the 1990s, Modern Russia had its own destructive “revolution” that was driven by the desire to break with the country’s historical experience and to implement Western/American prescriptions for political and economic development, without taking into account the existing conditions. On the opposite side stood Russian liberals and representatives of the democratic opposition, supported by the West and the US in particular. These critics began to reproach Russian conservatives for various sins, including xenophobia, isolationism, obscurantism, and ignorance.

According to the actual propaganda, the Russian liberals are the ones who stole from the public coffers in the 1990s, joined the opposition ranks in the 2000s, and since 2010 have been simply hoping for the disintegration of their semi-mobilized country. “The fifth column,” “the



national-traitors,” and “the US State Department agents” have become popular epithets for them. Sergey Obukhov, a Duma deputy and the Communist Party’s Central Committee Secretary, has expressed both anti-American and antiliberal ideas with great clarity:

*The meaning of the word ‘liberal’ in the mass conscience has been completely changed, because the liberal project and its leaders have failed in Russia. To be more precise, what failed is what was carried out under the name and the banner of a liberal project, which was really the US global project that has all the markings of a geopolitical confrontation. This project imposes the US values on the entire world. Its understanding of human rights goes against our traditional cultural and mental values. In my opinion, these are the origins of the mass negative attitudes towards the word ‘liberal,’ which has become a swear-word in our country.<sup>26</sup>*

Thus, the dichotomy between Russian and American values has been actualized.

Vladimir Putin and Barack Obama’s speeches at the 70th UN General Assembly on 28 September 2015 clearly demonstrated this fundamental clash of values as well as the confrontation of opinions about the situation in Ukraine and Syria. For President Obama, the root of all evil was the absence of freedom and democracy, the seizing and holding of power by strong leaders who seek not only to suppress opposition within their own countries, but also to use the time-proven device of applying coercive pressure on their neighbors. Meanwhile, Putin voiced the well-known critique of “dominance by a single power and its disregard of UN institutions,” and reiterated that he does not believe in the “universal values of democracy” which Obama claimed to be “self-evident.” Putin agreed that freedom is needed to achieve development—but, in his opinion, the source of this freedom does not come from individual rights, but from state sovereignty.<sup>27</sup>

### *“War of Images”: Putin vs. Obama, Russian Values vs. American Values*

The information war has become one of the most important features of the latest crisis in Russia–US relations. In this case, we are dealing with Cold War discourse. Old stereotypes are often repeated in speeches by politicians and public figures, experts and journalists, and also visually in

political cartoons on both sides of the Atlantic. This practice is characterized by disregarding some facts for the sake of others and has led to simplistic explanatory sketches that “demonize” the enemy, allowing the use of the “American card” (or Russian card) in domestic political games.

This war of images is the war of ideas and values. That is why in 2014–2015, many American organizations in Russia became the victims of the general campaign against “foreign agents.” The Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX) Program—the largest educational exchange program between Russia and the US—was the first one to be shut down in September 2014. The MacArthur Foundation interrupted its activities in July 2015 after the publication of Russia’s “patriotic stop list.” In mid-September 2015, the Russian authorities closed the American Center at the Russian State Library of Foreign Literature in Moscow, which had worked to promote US history and culture since 1993. The intention to reduce American cultural influence on Russian society—especially among the youth and intelligentsia who participated in the exchange programs and were constant visitors of such organizations as the American Center—could be considered a symbol of a large-scale cultural war for minds, one of the main facets of the crisis in bilateral relations.

The rise of anti-Americanism revived interest in the US as an enemy of Russia. The Russian book market was flooded with translations of American books that espoused a critical view of US domestic and foreign policy, such as the new translation of Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States* under the title *The American Empire from 1492 till Our Days* (2014), Oliver Stone and Peter Kuznick’s *The Untold History of the United States* (2012), and Dinesh D’Souza’s *America: Imagine a World without Her* (2015). However, in contrast to the Soviet period, the state has decided to focus not on the emergence of conservative academic knowledge (preoccupied with criticizing and denouncing the US) but on the promotion of “anti-American populism.” The new crisis in Russia–US relations has not led to additional financing for studying the US in Russia. Academic *Amerikanistika* has had to back off under pressure from low-quality journalism and low-class social and political essays. Visiting Russian book shops, one finds the shelves full of anti-American pseudo-non-fiction.

Anti-American journalism, however, ran rampant mostly due to television. The image of the American hostile “other” invariably underlays a repertoire of meanings employed by the patriotic media discourse. A clear example can be found in the activities of the information group *Rossiia Segodnya*, established by the decree of Vladimir Putin in 2013 and headed

by propagandist Dmitry Kiselyov. The unbridled, disparaging criticism of the US and Obama in Kiselyov's speeches serves as a background for extolling Russia, Putin, and the traditional conservative cultural, family, and political values. The same devices were used by the authors of such tawdry documentaries as *Emperor Obama*. Created by journalists Olga Skabeeva and Evgeny Popov in 2016 and aired on Russia-1 TV as part of the "Special Reporter" program, it was Russia's response to the BBC's *Putin's Secret Riches*. The entire plot revolved around US political corruption and was intended to make Russia's corruption look like child's play. President Obama and his family were shown in the center of this corrupt political system; they used American taxpayers' money for their own purposes.

Two films with the highest ratings hold a special place in Russia's propagandistic documentary filmmaking. These are Andrey Kondrashov's *Crimea: The Way Home* (2015) and Vladimir Soloviev's *The President* (2015), where the American context was used to emphasize Russia's greatness and the purity of Putin's intentions. Incidentally, the first film made it known to the entire world that Putin was ready to use nuclear weapons should a third party (i.e., the US) interfere in the Ukrainian conflict. The quality of these two films is a cut above *Emperor Obama*. Their principal task was national consolidation around the idea of "Great Russia," which, as its president stated in the film of the same title, was no longer loved since Russia no longer wanted to be poor and beg for alms. American presidents were supporting actors, casting Putin in a favorable light as the national leader and world-class international politician.

In general, the anti-American discourse of Obama as a weak president and hypocritical politician was used for promoting Putin's brand; in the political sense, Putin is a very strong leader who returned Russia to the club of world powers, and in the personal sense, he is physically imposing and fearless, a kind of a "Hollywood action hero." This communicative strategy manifests itself clearly in the visual satirical discourse (political cartoons, posters, and various amateur forms of online visual media).

We can find various interpretations of this idea in the cartoons of Vitaly Podvitsky, the official cartoonist of the state-controlled Russian Information Agency. Podvitsky is a rather famous person in Russia's online community thanks to his patriotic, pro-Putin and anti-American cartoons. He likes to emphasize his role in the information war against the West, and particularly against the US, by drawing parallels between a cartoonist and a sniper (the visual shot can do much harm to the enemy in the current

war of images). The shadow of a mouse behind Obama and the shadow of superman behind Putin in one of Podvitsky's cartoons illustrated who the real superhero is. In another cartoon, Obama was depicted in the Black Overlord's costume, symbolizing his protection of the LGBT population in the US and marking those characteristics of the American model of development that are alien to the Russian model. Obama has also been portrayed in the likeness of Jabba the Hutt from the popular *Star Wars* films, with Putin in the likeness of Jedi Luke Skywalker, contrasting American cartoonists who typically applied the images of Darth Vader or Jabba the Hutt to depict Russia as the Evil Empire. The Russian anti-American discourse reverses the roles in the imagined reality of international relations; Obama wears the Evil colors and Putin the colors of Good.<sup>28</sup>

The image of the US as a singular "dark twin" to Russia has been used by media figures, cartoonists, politicians and deputies to highlight the serious problems in US domestic and foreign politics and condemn American attempts to teach Russia lessons of democracy and international law. Just as it was common for the Tsarist and Soviet propaganda to highlight American domestic and foreign issues, Russian state-controlled media has increasingly drawn public attention to current problems in the US. The upsurge of racial tensions and controversy in the US, the spy scandals and Edward Snowden's revelations, torture in secret CIA prisons, US foreign policy failures in Iraq and Syria, the dysfunctional party system during the presidential elections, and the crisis in Russian studies in the US are all highlighted as reasons for the current crisis in bilateral relations.

### *The Other America: Alternative Images of the US in Russia*

Although the latest large-scale information war did not reduce the personified and the collective images of Obama's America in Russia to a rigid dichotomy, it did dominate the state-run media, becoming deeply rooted in the minds of ordinary Russians and even penetrating academic circles. This once again proves the depth of the crisis in Russia-US relations.

Anti-Americanism dominates journalistic discourse but at the same time, there is no "Cold War" in films or books. Moreover, independent and semi-independent media, such as *Vedomosti*, *Novaya Gazeta*, *RBC*, *Republic* (formerly *Slon.ru*), *Dozhd'* TV channel, *Ekho Mosvky* radio station, web portals *Polit.ru* and *Meduza*, still provide opportunities to put forward different opinions and varying assessments of the events in the US

and of Russia–US relations. Social media remains a platform for vibrant discussions shaping a market of opinions.

The tendency to blame America's evil designs for the Russian failures at home and abroad has become an object of rather wide liberal satirical discourse. The liberal humor as a reaction to this anti-American rhetoric is spreading to the Russian online community. Jokes like "The Russian people have never lived worse than during Obama's administration" or "A bad president can never work well because of the Yankees" demonstrate a critical attitude toward the image of the US as the demonic "other" used by the Kremlin and state-controlled media in Russian politics. Sergey Elkin, who works for the "Svoboda" radio station, *The Moscow Times*, and the Polit.ru website, created cartoons that are a vivid illustration of this liberal alternative discourse. Elkin mocked the idea that the US should be blamed for all of Russia's problems. For example, one of his cartoons depicted Obama sitting at a control board of Russia, pushing different rows of buttons—roads, prices, pensions, educations, oil, the ruble—in order to create domestic problems for the Russian people. In another cartoon, Elkin depicted Russia's high-ranking officials expressing their thanks to Obama for giving them the opportunity to lay the blame for all of Russia's problems at his door.<sup>29</sup>

The real argument against anti-Americanism, however, became the number of Russians trying to emigrate to the US. This figure has never been higher than during the current crisis according to data from the State Department.<sup>30</sup> Those going to the US are part of a broader exodus of Russians, especially those in academia and high-tech, banking, and law sectors. Images of the US as a land of freedom, democracy, and opportunities have thus preserved their role in the Russian consciousness.

Today's information society makes it impossible to cut off the flow of information and the flow of people-to-people academic and cultural exchanges. Therefore, the space for shaping the images of another country and people will be preserved. Even though many American studies programs in regional universities were shut down, students continue to demonstrate an interest in studying the US academically, which destroys the simplified patterns of mutual perceptions.

However, real changes in the imagology climate can only occur if the entire climate of bilateral relations changes. In that regard, Russia pinned its principal hopes on the presidency of Donald Trump, who became immensely popular in Russia the moment he announced his readiness to cooperate

with Russian government; and began extolling the talents of Putin as a statesman and political leader, while disparaging Obama's talents.

### CONCLUSION: OBAMA'S LEGACY IN RUSSIA'S REPRESENTATIONS

The election of Donald Trump and the American campaign to unmask the Kremlin's interference in the US election led to increased criticism of the Obama administration in Russia. Though traditionally restrained, Obama started a harsh campaign that demonized Putin and imposed new sanctions in response to the cyberattacks. In late 2016–early 2017, both the state-run mass media and the expert and academic community in Russia openly propagated the image of Obama as a weak president, a failure in his office with no requisite grip on the nation, a sore loser annoyed by the Democrats' defeat, and a person who contradicts his own statements.<sup>31</sup> As an example, in reaction to Obama's farewell address on 10 January 2017, talking heads on state-run TV channels outdid each other with witticisms, denying the outgoing president's positive achievements as a political leader (even his undisputable ones) and his right to display any human emotions.

Before Trump's inauguration, the Prime Minister of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev, summarized Obama's presidency by posting on his Facebook account: "The Obama administration has destroyed relations between the United States and Russia, which are at their lowest point in decades. This is its key foreign policy mistake which will be remembered by history. We do not know yet how the new US administration will approach relations with our country. But we are hoping that reason will prevail. And we are ready to do our share of the work in order to improve the relationship."<sup>32</sup>

Liberal opposition in Russia, in its turn, criticized the Obama administration for being insufficiently harsh and prompt in opposing Putin, allowing him to use foreign policy for national consolidation and attacking rights and freedoms within Russia, and letting the Kremlin act in Ukraine and in Syria with impunity. Trump's election created serious concerns among both systemic and nonsystemic liberals, who were worried that the Russian authorities would take a hiatus from shaping the image of the hostile American "other" and begin looking for enemies within Russia.<sup>33</sup> The latter argument is rather unconvincing, since in the Russian state ideology, constructing the image of an external enemy has always been tied

to the search for internal enemies that gnaw at the political regime from the inside. Consequently, improving relations with the US could, on the contrary, decrease the authorities' pressure on the internal opposition.

Russians clearly view the US in various ways. Some, following patriotic propaganda, are prepared to continue stigmatizing the US if the administration in Washington does not change its policies toward Russia. Their attitude toward the US hinges on the anti-American hysteria produced by state-run media. Others criticize the US for its mistakes and blunders and ignore the positive aspects of US policies due to their own personal views (including a considerable amount of the intelligentsia and academic community). The young generation of Russians is partially involved with governmental youth organizations and movements and has patriotic and, therefore, anti-American sentiments, but the overwhelming majority of the young generation is politically indifferent. At the same time, despite the spread of anti-American sentiments, the student community is dominated by the interest in participating in educational exchanges and in studying in the US.

On the whole, Russian perceptions of the US during Obama's presidency were cyclical. Early hopes for cooperation and "partnership for modernization" during the "reset" gave way to disappointment and the demonization of Obama in the state-run media and visual culture (cartoons, posters, documentaries, etc.) during the crisis. Time will tell whether the hopes pinned on Trump are justified and whether Russia-US relations will stabilize. In any case, the history of Russian-American relations reveals that the positive, even if equivocal, experience of interaction and mutual perceptions (as, e.g. during the time of a "reset") never vanishes from the collective past of Russians and Americans, and so remains the desire of the former to learn from the latter's economic achievements, technological innovations, and democratic experience. And that applies not only to the liberal opposition, but also to those in Russia who are ready to give up on a one-dimensional perception of another country and another people and preserve their readiness for critical self-reflection on the things going on at home. Thus far, the attitude toward Trump in Russia has become a marker of sorts for patriotism, which once again proves that the American "other" retains its significant role in shaping Russian identity.

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# Turkish Perceptions of Turkey–US Relations During Obama’s Presidency: Dialectics of Expectations/Partnership and Disappointments/Estrangement

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## INTRODUCTION

The election of Barack Obama as the 44th president of the US in 2008 was greeted with most unprecedented enthusiasm and joy all over the world. The vast majority of world leaders portrayed his election to the presidency as a momentous event both for the US and for the wider world. Following an administration highly geared toward militarized and confrontational policies, and characterized by unilateralism, evangelical rhetoric, and arrogance, Obama represented among other things, not only change in domestic policies but also restraint and multilateralism in US foreign policy.

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Turkey was no exception to these reactions. Obama's emphasis on multilateral diplomacy relying on international law and peaceful means seemed particularly promising for the tarnished Turkish–American relations after the devastating impact of the US occupation of Iraq. Not only did Turkish leaders and political elites hail his victory as the triumph of desire for change, but Turkish society itself welcomed it with overwhelming optimism. Turkish newspaper headlines on Obama's election reflected the enthusiasm and euphoria regarding his election.<sup>1</sup> In a similar vein, leading commentators of the mainstream newspapers expressed their delight. For example, one well-known journalist and analyst of Turkish–American relations characterized Obama's election as “the victory of humanity.”<sup>2</sup> Another columnist congratulated the American people to have elected him and in doing so giving a lesson to everyone.<sup>3</sup> One other prominent journalist praised the US as “the land of dreamers who are also capable of making the dream come true.”<sup>4</sup> Yet another leading political analyst of Turkish–American relations maintained that Obama's election provided hope not only for the US but for the entire world to be a better place.<sup>5</sup>

At the political level, the then president Abdullah Gül congratulated Obama and said, “Your message of change and hope is one that meets the expectations of our day. It is a message that Turkey embraces.”<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan deemed Obama's victory as a manifestation of American democracy.<sup>7</sup> Thus, particularly due to Obama's promise to redirect US foreign policy, hopes were raised among the political elite that his presidency would reinvigorate Turkish–American relations as well. The Turkish public, on the other hand, seemed to have been convinced that Obama would end the George W. Bush administration's ostracizing policies. Moreover, having a Muslim father and names of Islamic origin—Barack Hussein Obama—was a factor that led the Turkish people to believe in the rumor that he was a “Muslim in heart.”<sup>8</sup> This conviction is evident in the examples of the Turkish people's overly cheerful gestures upon his election, which included among others an Adana (a province famous for its special *kebab*) restaurant owner sending him a five-meter Adana-kebab, the people of Van sacrificing 44 sheep to mark Obama's inauguration as the 44th president of the US, a Konya shoemaker making a special pair of shoes for him, housewives from Bartın sewing a traditional shawl for Michele Obama, and the people of Sivas—a province known for its special breed of dogs called “Kangal”—preparing one to be sent to Obama.<sup>9</sup> In short, from the very outset, Obama's presidency was largely

perceived to promise renewed hope for improving Turkish–American relations, which after March 2003 had deteriorated when the Turkish parliament denied a motion to allow US troops to use bases in Turkey to carry out operations to Iraq under President Bush.<sup>10</sup>

For his part, Obama seemed to respond to the high Turkish expectations of his presidency and show determination to meet that end. After he came into office, one of his official overseas visits was to Turkey. In his address to the Turkish Grand National Assembly, he stated: “Some people have asked me if I chose to continue my travels to Ankara and Istanbul to send a message to the world. And my answer is simple: Evet [yes]—yes. Turkey is a critical ally.”<sup>11</sup> He also underlined that Turkey and the US would work together to face the challenges of the time. In Turkey, his determined assertions were widely perceived as American acknowledgment of Turkey’s significance as an ally and partner, after relations had suffered substantially during the Bush presidency. Consequently, the expectation was that a new period of active partnership and close allied relations had commenced.

Against this background, this chapter aims to explore how Turkish perceptions of the US and bilateral relations during the two terms of the Obama administration were molded in relation to certain issues of contention. The primary focus is on the Turkish government’s policymaking, conceptions of and approach to its relations with the US under Obama’s leadership. Particular attention will be given to those figures of Turkish politics that are influential in foreign policymaking. The chapter then delves further into the Turkish public’s reactions and understandings of the US during the Obama administration. It mainly contends that throughout Obama’s two terms there has been a shift in Turkish perceptions of Turkey–US relations; the high hopes and expectations of both the political elites and the general public gave way to disillusionment and a major split in matters of utmost importance to Turkey. Analyzing the perceptions and the consequent relations by examining the rhetoric, discourse, and intersubjective understandings and the following policies, this chapter makes extensive use of the constructivist approach to international relations. Thus, an underlying argument here is that change in the perceptions of the US in Turkey has affected the ensuing policies and therefore Turkey’s relations with the US.

To this end, the chapter begins with a brief historical background of Turkey–US relations from the perspective of Turkish security thinking in order to assess relations since World War II and the ways in which Obama’s

election appeared as a moment of hope for Turkish political elites and society. It then analyzes how these Turkish perceptions and expectations turned into disappointments during Obama's first term. This part focuses on the main events that caused a rift between the two countries. In a similar vein, the following section assesses Turkish–American relations in regard to Turkish expectations under Obama's second term and explores instances of strategic cooperation and divergences. Finally, the concluding part provides a general assessment of the Obama period from the Turkish perspective. Within this context, the chapter contends that in general, Turkish–American relations have always been characterized by dialectics of hope and disappointment, of close alliance and major rift. By the same token, the chapter argues that the Turkish political elite and public perception of the two Obama administrations were shaped by the US policies toward particularly sensitive issues for Turkey and demonstrated similar traditional fluctuations in popularity of the US in Turkey despite the initial “Obama boost.” In that sense, it is fair to claim that overall, the Obama period did not produce a dramatic change in general Turkish perceptions of the US, despite the initial high expectations of US policies under his administration, and that Turkish perceptions of bilateral relations continue to be defined from a security lens, as has been all along.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE US IN TURKISH SECURITY THINKING

Although the origins of Turkish–American relations date back to 1831, it was not until after World War II when the Soviets chose not to renew the 1925 Soviet–Turkish Treaty of Friendship and Neutrality, claimed Eastern Anatolian territory, and demanded re-examination of the Montreux convention governing the Turkish straits (the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus)<sup>12</sup> that relations between the two countries started to acquire a new identity. In the immediate postwar period, alarmed by Soviet ambitions in Europe, the US formulated its containment strategy. Against formidable Soviet threats and within the framework of the following Truman Doctrine (1947 policy of providing economic and military aid to Greece and Turkey) and Marshall Plan (policy of providing economic aid to Europe to prevent the spread of communism and instead facilitate free trade, 1948–1952), Turkey received considerable American aid and reached a number of military agreements with the US, together which pointed to the significance the US attached to Turkey as a valuable asset for its containment policy.<sup>13</sup>

Notwithstanding the American aid, Turkey was concerned that exclusion from the newly founded military alliance, NATO (1949), would lead to increasing Soviet pressure, and shrinking American support. In other words, Turkey was worried that when prevented from expanding its domination in Western Europe, the Soviets would target more vulnerable areas in the region such as Turkey. Accordingly, the period from 1945 to 1952 was largely marked by the Turkish search for security through institutionalizing closer ties with the West in general and Washington in particular.

Along with these rational concerns and security interests, ideational factors played an important role in Turkey's desire for NATO membership and close ties with the US. As a Western alliance, NATO represented a setting whereby Turkey could realize its long-standing Republican goal and aspiration for Westernization since the time of Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey. In the context of Turkish domestic politics and foreign policy, Westernization had by and large come to be associated with modernization. In parallel to this understanding, Westernization, especially among the military, was considered to be "often almost synonymous with cooperation of any kind with the West"<sup>14</sup> and given the security concerns, primarily with the US. In this sense, ideationally, NATO membership signified admission to the civilized West, which in turn would make Turkey in effect one of the defenders of the "Western way of life" as a member of that particular security community.

The identification of the West and the Americans in particular with a civilization representing certain norms and values is reflected in the words of Turkish Prime Minister, Şükrü Saracoğlu:

*The Americans, who are the youngest and most esteemed child of this old world that we live on, are taking firm and undaunted steps in the path of creating a peaceful international order and a united world by upholding the flags of humanity, justice, freedom, and civilization.*<sup>15</sup>

Saracoğlu made these remarks after the American battleship USS *Missouri* brought to İstanbul the remains of Turkish ambassador Mehmet Münir Ertegün, who had died in Washington—an act which was largely viewed as a display of firm American support for Turkey against the Soviet demands.<sup>16</sup>

Relations with the West, particularly with the US, became closer after the Turkish dispatch of large numbers of troops following the Security Council call for support to South Korea in 1950. The Turkish participation in the Korean War was a means to demonstrate not only Turkey's



allegiance to the United Nations' (UN) founding purpose, namely, collective security, but also its reliability and usefulness as a potential ally of the West.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the Korean War is commonly regarded as the decisive moment for Turkey's NATO membership in 1952. From the American point of view, it should be noted that facing nuclear parity with the Soviet Union and the renewed strategic significance of conventional arms as a result, the 22 divisions that Turkey possessed were also seen as a valuable asset to the Alliance, and to American security and strategic interests.

As such, from the outset, Turkey–US relations were founded upon the convergence of security interests and based on extensive military cooperation, within which the political ties between the two countries were consolidated. Notwithstanding the seeming common strategic interests, Turkish–American relations have not been devoid of strains and setbacks. In the 1960s, major setbacks included the Jupiter missile crisis,<sup>18</sup> the Opium issue,<sup>19</sup> and the Johnson letter,<sup>20</sup> among others. The Cyprus issue in particular remained a constant irritant in Turkey–US bilateral relations. In this respect, the arms embargo imposed on Turkey by the US Congress following the 1974 Turkish intervention in Cyprus<sup>21</sup> constituted the most important crisis,<sup>22</sup> which caused considerable resentment and an increase in anti-American sentiment in Turkish society. Nonetheless, throughout the Cold War, Turkish–American relations were marked by the priority of strategic interests and largely shaped by the shared perceived urgency to contain the Soviet Union. Hence, the Turkish–American alliance was revitalized at the end of 1970s, when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan and when an Islamic revolution took place in Iran. These developments brought about increased defense cooperation between the two states.<sup>23</sup>

With the end of the Cold War and the elimination of the Soviet threat, Turkish–American relations entered into a new phase marked by a shift from an alliance based on a military threat and defense cooperation to an “enhanced partnership,” which was characterized as “extended cooperation in the political field, an increase in diplomatic consultations and an emphasis on enhanced economic partnership in compensation for the decreasing emphasis on security and defense-related matters.”<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, in the wake of the eradication of the Soviet threat and the following reduction in US military aid, Turkey was increasingly concerned with a possible loss of its geostrategic significance. Viewing the 1991 Gulf War as an opportunity to reiterate its geostrategic and geopolitical salience, Turkey joined the American-led coalition forces against Iraq, despite the high opposition to the war in Turkish society. Turkey's staunch support of

and involvement in the Gulf War proved to be instrumental in securing US support for several Turkish foreign policy priorities, such as Turkish membership in the EU and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline project. In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, which was characterized by American hegemony, bilateral relations did not encounter any major disagreements or crises. As such, during the Clinton years, the relations between the two states came to be defined as a “strategic partnership,” which pointed to the US acknowledgment and endorsement of the importance of Turkey’s regional responsibilities in its troubled neighborhood, and support for Turkish integration into the global economy and the EU.<sup>25</sup> Turkey, for its part, also participated extensively in the US-led crisis management operations in Somalia, Bosnia, and Kosovo. Thus, it can be stated that during the Clinton administration years, Turkish–American relations within the framework of “strategic partnership” matched cordial and cooperative relations in the 1950s.

In the wake of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, this rosy picture was tainted by the unexpected failure of the motion in Turkish parliament that would have allowed the US to strike Iraq from Turkish territory. As a result, the rhetoric of “strategic partnership” was largely dropped from the Bush administration’s (2000–2008) jargon in relation to Turkey. Mark Harris, the then Ambassador of the US in Turkey, described the situation as follows:

*The rejection of the bill, which would permit the deployment of USA to Iraq through Turkish border, on 1st of March 2003, is the failure point of the relations. Though it loses its effect, “strategic partnership” is not uttered any more ... it would be unrealistic to say that March 1st rejection was forgotten totally ... That situation affected the views about Turkey negatively.<sup>26</sup>*

In this context, it is not an exaggeration to claim that the American shock and the consequent resentment corresponded to the Turkish disappointment and bitterness caused by the “Johnson letter” in the 1960s and the “arms embargo” in the 1970s. Consequently, the March First motion marked a major breaking point for bilateral relations defined within the terms of “strategic partnership.” According to a PEW Global Public Attitudes project report, the popularity of the US in Turkish society declined to nine percent in 2007 and 12 percent in 2008,<sup>27</sup> much less than countries which generally have little public support for the US, such as

Palestinian territories and Pakistan, where according to an earlier study, the US popularity was 13 percent and 15 percent, respectively, in 2007.<sup>28</sup>

The Obama moment came against this troubled and strained background in Turkish–American relations. Moreover, it arrived in a world which had increasingly acquired a multipolar outlook with the rise and consolidation of other powers, such as China, Russia, India, and Brazil. From the Turkish point of view, it further began when major transformations were under way in Turkish domestic politics and foreign policy under AKP (Justice and Development Party) rule,<sup>29</sup> which first came to power in 2002. All these factors together with the Turkish perceptions of Obama’s America had a major impact on the ensuing period of Turkish–American relations.

## TURKISH UNDERSTANDINGS OF TURKEY–US RELATIONS DURING THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION

### *The First Term: From Model Partnership to Disillusionment*

Insofar as Turkish–American relations were largely built around security concerns, the main reason behind the raised hopes for and expectations of close Turkish–American relations was Obama’s messages—both during his campaign and after his election—regarding a change in the US security policy, such as the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq by 2012, ending CIA operations abroad and interrogation techniques in Guantanamo, and pursuing friendly relations with Iran. More specifically, Obama’s remarks during his visit to Turkey regarding Turkey’s role and significance for the US, NATO, and the region boosted Turkish confidence in the improvement of its relations with the US during the Obama administration. At the press conference held together with the Turkish president Gül, Obama stated that:

*I have now spent a week traveling through Europe. And I’ve been asked, “Are you trying to make a statement by ending this weeklong trip in Turkey?” And the answer is, yes, I am trying to make a statement. I’m trying to make a statement about the importance of Turkey not just to the United States but to the world. This is a country that has been often said lies at the crossroads between East and West. It’s a country that possesses an extraordinarily rich heritage, but also represents a blend of those ancient traditions with a modern nation state that respects democracy, respects rule of law, and is striving towards a modern economy. It is a member of NATO, and it is also a majority Muslim nation,*

*unique in that position, and so, as a consequence, has insights into a whole host of regional and strategic challenges that we may face. And I've been extraordinarily impressed with President Gul and the quality of his leadership, as well as Prime Minister Erdogan, and so as a consequence, I am excited about the prospects of us working together.*<sup>30</sup>

On this occasion, President Obama also outlined the framework of the new relationship between the two countries:

*I think that where there's the most promise of building stronger US-Turkish relations is in the recognition that Turkey and the United States can build a model partnership in which a predominantly Christian nation and a predominantly Muslim nation, a Western nation and a nation that straddles two continents—that we can create a modern international community that is respectful, that is secure, that is prosperous; that there are not tensions—inevitable tensions between cultures, which I think is extraordinarily important.*<sup>31</sup>

Turkish authorities highly welcomed these remarks. For example, İbrahim Kalın, the then foreign policy advisor of the prime minister Erdoğan (now the press secretary of the Turkish presidency), maintained that Obama was promising to “project a new concept of American power and turn a new page in US relations with its key allies.” He further asserted that:

*By calling Turkey a “central state” and redefining US-Turkish relations as a “model partnership”, President Obama has reiterated Turkey’s importance for his administration. The sentiment was reciprocated by Turkish officials and the Turkish public.*<sup>32</sup>

For the Turkish political elites, despite the ambiguity of the concept of a “model partnership,” a new framework for relations whereby Turkey’s regional importance was underlined, along with the change in the discourse of “you are either with us or against us” in the context of “war on terror,” were the most positive developments that would set the main contours of future bilateral relations. Turkey perceived this novel conceptualization of relations as signifying even a further step beyond the “strategic partnership” of the immediate post-Cold War years. To this effect, the Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu stated that Obama’s new doctrine is “changing the psychological atmosphere of what was before seen as a military relationship.”<sup>33</sup> He also held that his understanding of model partnership was “one in which a majority Christian and a majority

Muslim nation, a Western nation and a nation that straddles two continents can come together” and one that “can create a modern international community that is respectful, secure and prosperous.”<sup>34</sup>

However, the concept of model partnership was not elaborated on by the Obama administration in detail and thus remained vague. Speaking before the House Committee of Foreign Affairs’ Subcommittee of European Affairs in the US Congress, Stephen Flanagan of Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) implied that model partnership referred to first convergent strategic interests, such as “stability in the Middle East, countering terrorism and extremism, sustaining an open global economy, securing energy flows, advancing the stability and sovereignty of the states in the Caucasus and Central Asia, and maintaining productive relations with Europe.”<sup>35</sup> To these ends, model partnership would be the basis for “effective cooperation on mutual regional and global interests.”<sup>36</sup>

Several Turkish scholars emphasized different aspects of this framework. Ramazan Gözen, for example, defined it as “extensive and intensive collaboration between Turkey and the USA to set up a new regional order in the countries and regions around Turkey. Thus, during 2009, Turkey and the USA actively cooperated for the resolution of crises pertaining to Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Armenia, and the Arab-Israeli conflict.”<sup>37</sup> Nuh Yılmaz argued that model partnership did not specify a mutually agreed-upon framework; as such it was not “a well-defined and all-encompassing type of relationship.” The main underlying premise of the concept, he maintained, was “the recognition that Turkish-American relations are very valuable and that the old framework ... threatens the bilateral relationship itself.”<sup>38</sup> Ahmet K. Han on the other hand, contended that model partnership was “a flexible concept of a fluid nature, re-shapeable according to the circumstances and needs of the parties” and that it basically intended to build on the existing features of cooperation “with added flexibility when the circumstances demanded.”<sup>39</sup> In this sense, it implied the maintenance of relations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

It appears that the above formulations of the concept were more or less in parallel to the Turkish government’s conceptualization of the term. During his visit to Washington DC in 2009, Davutoğlu asserted that:

*If we are asked about the priorities of each country’s foreign agenda, a great part of the list will be the same; Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Palestine-Israeli issue, Lebanon, Caucasus, Armenia and Cyprus ... Model partnership is not a matter of choice, it is a matter of necessity.*<sup>40</sup>

Davutoğlu stressed that Turkish relations with the US had “a solid foundation, a strong historical background and an institutional framework.” In this respect, he also underlined the comprehensive character of the model partnership and expressed his satisfaction and high hopes for this new form of relations.

Reflecting the perceived significance of positive relations and keenness to go beyond strategic partnership with the US, Davutoğlu further maintained that:

*After the Cold War, the situation has changed and now there must be a new substance, there must be a new paradigm in our relations. Therefore, when President Obama used this term “model partnership” I said yes, this is a change of paradigm. Not just a strategic partnership, but a more comprehensive model partnership. That is what we need.<sup>41</sup>*

Along with the foreign minister, Prime Minister Erdoğan also eagerly espoused the idea of model partnership. When he visited the US in December 2009, at the press conference following his meeting with Obama, Erdoğan underlined that Turkish–American relations based on a model partnership was politically significant for Turkey. Notwithstanding, he also expressed that the term needed to be ascribed greater meaning and extended to include economic, political, and military areas as well as science, art, and technology fields.<sup>42</sup>

It was within this ideational formulation that Turkish–American relations were hoped to take shape under the new US administration. From the Turkish perspective, model partnership was expected to generate extensive cooperation and US backing in Turkey’s sensitive foreign policy issues. Nevertheless, this over-optimism soon proved to be misplaced as bilateral relations considerably deteriorated during the first two years of Obama’s term, mainly due to Turkey’s engagement with Iran, the so-called genocide allegations by Armenians, and the worsening of Turkish–Israeli relations.

Although concern with and opposition to Iranian nuclear ambitions was common to both the US and Turkey, Prime Minister Erdoğan was dismissive of the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) reports that had evidence for Iran’s nuclear aspirations as “speculation.” In October 2009, he rejected Western accusations that Iran was determined to build a nuclear weapons program, arguing that “Iran does not accept it is building a weapon. They are working on nuclear power for the purposes of energy only.”<sup>43</sup> The Turkish leader’s conviction was soon reflected in the

Tehran Joint Declaration signed by Turkey, Iran, and Brazil in 2010, which asserted that nuclear fuel exchange could lead to broader cooperation to use nuclear technology for peaceful purposes.<sup>44</sup> According to the agreement, Iran would swap its low-enriched uranium in return for nuclear fuel rods for a medical research reactor.<sup>45</sup> This deal was brokered at a time when a new round of sanctions against Iran was being discussed in the UN Security Council, where both Turkey and Brazil were nonpermanent members at the time. Praising the agreement, Prime Minister Erdoğan stated that there was no need for new UN sanctions against Iran.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, despite the Turkish government's opposition, dismissing the agreement between Turkey, Brazil, and Iran, and Turkey's mediation, the US managed to pass a resolution in the UN Security Council imposing severe sanctions on Iran,<sup>47</sup> which both Turkey and Brazil voted against. The divergence on this issue put the "model partnership" to the test early on and caused a major crisis between Ankara and Washington. During the G20 summit in Toronto in June 2010, President Obama reportedly told Erdoğan that "the Turks had failed to act as an ally in the UN vote."<sup>48</sup>

Although the Iranian nuclear issue created a serious rift between Washington and Ankara, Turkish–American relations swiftly improved when Ankara agreed in September 2011 to host a NATO missile shield radar system in Kürecik, Malatya, given the deployment of the missile defense system was an American backed plan to prevent a possible Iranian missile attack.<sup>49</sup> A senior White House official stated that it was "probably the biggest strategic decision between the US and Turkey in the past 15 or 20 years."<sup>50</sup> In a similar vein, after Obama and Erdoğan met before a UN summit in New York in 2011, Obama stated that "Turkey is a NATO ally, a great friend and a partner on a whole host of issues ... most recently symbolized by the agreement of Turkey to host a missile defense radar."<sup>51</sup> In the press conference, Erdoğan asserted that, "As you have described the relationship between Turkey and the US, we have a model partnership. And this is a process which is ongoing."<sup>52</sup> Hence, to the extent that Turkey tuned and reoriented its broader Middle Eastern policies and strategies with its senior ally, namely its decision regarding the early warning radars, model partnership provided a framework for bilateral relations. The momentum produced by the agreement on this issue did also generate parallel policies in the wake of the so-called Arab Spring.

Although Erdoğan initially opposed the NATO military campaign against Libya, Turkey contributed to *Operation Unified Protector* by providing four frigates, one replenishment tank force, and one submarine. In

addition, the NATO air base in Izmir was provided as one of the operational centers for the NATO mission. Turkey's eventual approval of NATO's engagement and its aims in Libya further contributed to the warming of bilateral relations.<sup>53</sup> While the prompt change in the policy demonstrated the Turkish leadership's concern to stay in line with the Allies, in the final analysis in the Turkish elite perception, it was important to restore good relations with the US and demonstrate Turkey's strategic importance as a partner, despite any differences. Hence, Alexander Vershbow, US Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, praising Turkey's role in this respect, stated that Turkey continued to exercise its leadership throughout the region and was a source of inspiration for those who aspired to free-market, secular democracy.<sup>54</sup>

Within the context of the Arab Spring, the conflict in Syria was another area of policy convergence. Terminating its close relations with Syria, Turkey together with the US provided diplomatic and logistical support to the Syrian opposition with the aim of ousting Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria. With regard to the Syrian crisis both countries clearly shared similar interests and similar objectives.<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, the initial agreement on the need for regime change started to diverge as the Syrian conflict continued and the expected end of Assad's rule did not come about. While the Turkish leadership was pushing for radical policies such as buffer zones on the ground and no-fly zones in the air to oust the Assad regime, the US support for the opposition forces remained as only logistical and intelligence-related,<sup>56</sup> which in turn caused much disappointment in the Turkish government. The irony was that not so long ago before the Syrian conflict, the Turkish leadership had been expressing its approval of the US's retreat from the region, but now Erdoğan was lamenting the American refusal to take the lead in the Syrian conflict.

Although cooperation in the region had increased at the outset of the Arab Spring, Turkey's worsening relations with Israel proved to have a cooling effect on Turkish-American relations. The close military ties developed between Israel and Turkey in the 1990s, which had changed the strategic balance in the region, was a welcome development by the Clinton administration. A decade after, however, Turkish-Israeli relations deteriorated during the period of AKP rule which began in 2002. Prime Minister Erdoğan especially harshly criticized Israeli policies toward the Palestinians. The tension culminated in the incident of Mavi Marmara in 2010, namely, the Israeli raid on a Turkish flotilla carrying humanitarian



aid to Gaza, which resulted in the death of nine Turkish activists and virtually brought relations to a breaking point.<sup>57</sup> Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Davutoğlu demonstrated a strong reaction both to the raid and the response of the US and Western nations. The ensuing UN investigation of the Mavi Marmara flotilla incident resulted in the Palmer Report, which condemned Israeli action.<sup>58</sup> In terms of Turkish–American relations, one negative impact of the political fallout with Israel was the loss of the Jewish lobby’s support to Turkey in the US Congress, which had proved to be effective over the years, especially in preventing congressional resolutions regarding recognition of the so-called Armenian genocide. On the other hand, Turkish leaders perceived the tone of the American reaction to the Mavi Marmara incident to be disappointingly soft—not as strong as a model partnership would require. Indeed, Davutoğlu expressed disappointment with Washington’s “cautious reaction to the events.”<sup>59</sup> He further stated that “[w]e expect full solidarity with us. It should not seem like a choice between Turkey and Israel. It should be a choice between right and wrong, between legal and illegal.”<sup>60</sup>

One other recurring problem—the Armenian issue—once again appeared as a major crisis between the two states, when the House Foreign Affairs Committee passed a resolution asking the president to recognize the so-called Armenian genocide. Perceiving the resolution as opposed to the spirit of model partnership, Turkey recalled its ambassador from Washington in protest. On Armenian Remembrance Day, President Obama, however, refrained from using the word “genocide” and referred the Armenian events as “one of the worst atrocities of the twentieth century.” Although the president did not use the term “genocide” it nevertheless provoked a sour reaction from the Turkish Foreign Ministry, which defined the language as reflective of a one-sided political perception and asserted “Third countries neither have a right nor authority to judge the history of Turkish-Armenian relations with political motives.”<sup>61</sup> Davutoğlu himself expressed his disappointment in the US administration and maintained that “the picture shows that the US administration did not put enough weight behind the issue.”<sup>62</sup>

Despite these differences and the following difficulties in bilateral relations, the first term of the Obama administration marked a vague intersubjective understanding of “model partnership.” For example, emphasizing the economic aspect of the partnership, Assistant Secretary of State Jose Fernandez asserted that “Turkey and the US share a very unique and special relationship, which is truly a ‘model partnership.’”<sup>63</sup> He also stressed that “[t]his is not some vague and idealistic vision of unity and harmony.

It is in fact a realistic assessment based on the substantive steps we have already taken.”<sup>64</sup> In the perception of Turkish elites, *model partnership* signified a more comprehensive relationship embracing not only military and strategic elements but also economic cooperation. As Turkey’s ambassador to the US, Namik Tan wrote:

*This vision requires deepening and widening bilateral relations in fields other than military and strategic initiatives, notably in economic, commercial and cultural spheres. Indeed, the depth of our relations in economic and commercial fields is not yet reflecting the nature of model partnership.*<sup>65</sup>

In the context of the developments in the Middle East and North Africa, model partnership also seemed to refer to the larger question of Turkey as a Muslim-dominated secular country being the “role model” for the Muslim countries in the region, akin to the idea of being a model for the former Soviet republics in Central Asia in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. This idea of Turkey as a model nation became important rhetoric both in Obama’s and the Turkish elite’s discourse after the Arab Spring. The new Turkish political elite, having defined their movement as a “Muslim democratic party” and having committed to an active foreign policy, largely assumed they had a special role to play in the former Ottoman territories.<sup>66</sup>

Despite efforts to define a broader relationship in relation to a model partnership, it is not wrong to argue that during the first term of the Obama administration, the Turkish political elite perceived relations with the US by and large within security terms and continued to interpret them in pragmatic terms. Turkish public perceptions regarding Obama and the US support this finding. On the whole, anti-American sentiments lingered in Turkish society, despite the initial exaggerated joy of the Turkish people over the election of Obama and the efforts toward rapprochement. It is also interesting to note that Turkey remained one of the most anti-American countries at a time overall ratings for the US were on the rise throughout the world. In 2009, only 14 percent of the Turkish people had a positive opinion of the US. However, confidence in the US president initially increased considerably in comparison to the Bush presidency. Among the respondents to the survey carried out by Pew Research Center, 33 percent had confidence in Barack Obama. This stands in stark contrast to the two percent for George W. Bush, which demonstrates the impact of Obama on Turkish public perception. Nonetheless, such high levels of

confidence decreased as tensions increased in Turkish–American relations. Accordingly, Obama’s popularity fell to 23 percent in 2010, then dropped as low as 12 percent in 2011, before increasing once again to 24 percent at the end of his first term.<sup>67</sup>

Parallel to the initial rise in confidence in Obama himself, the Turkish public perception of the US initially improved. While in 2008, only 8 percent of Turks regarded the US as a partner, this figure was raised to 18 percent in 2009.<sup>68</sup> The reason why confidence in the US as a partner increased was directly linked to the Obama effect. However, despite the overall rise in US popularity and confidence in the Obama presidency, Turkey remained one of the most anti-American countries in the world. By the end of Obama’s first term, the popularity of the US in Turkish society dropped to 15 percent.<sup>69</sup>

To conclude, it is fair to say that during Obama’s first term, Turkish people came to lose faith that Obama would change unilateralist American policies and follow policies that took into account the interests of all the parties concerned. The drastic reversal from the initial high level of confidence in Obama had much to do with the disappointment in his policies regarding Iran and the Armenian issue, but also with his general dismissal of Turkey’s fight against its own terrorism; all of which have high priority in Turkish security thinking. Overall, Obama could not meet the expectations he himself conveyed to Turkish people under the label of *model partnership*. From the perspective of both the political elites and the general public alike, in relation to major foreign policy issues, if there was any partnership at all, it appeared to be rather selective and ignorant of Turkey’s security interests.

### *The Second Term: From Model Partnership to à la Carte Cooperation in a Pragmatic Partnership*

Turkish–American relations deteriorated even more during Obama’s second term. Interestingly, Erdoğan and Obama had started off extremely well. Even after troubled relations in 2011, in an interview with *Time* magazine in 2012, Obama counted Erdoğan among five world leaders with whom he had been able to build “friendships and the bonds of trust.” However, two developments at the end of his first term had already reduced optimism in Turkey for President Obama’s second term: the conflict between Hamas and Israel,<sup>70</sup> and the US opposition to the Palestinian appeal for statehood with nonmember status in the UN. Regarding the

plight of the Palestinians, Prime Minister Erdoğan criticized President Obama for his lack of concern with their suffering. Expressing his dissatisfaction, he noted that President Obama had ignored the report Turkey gave him regarding Israel's atrocities.<sup>71</sup>

Nevertheless, despite all the disagreements the Turkish government had with the Obama administration during Obama's first term, in the US presidential elections in 2012 Turkish people still preferred Obama over the Republican candidate Mitt Romney. In that respect, Suat Kınıklıoğlu, an AKP deputy and foreign affairs spokesman for AKP stated, for example, that "both Turkey and Europe might have to grapple with another president from the Republican, Tea Party strain and that would be very hard to deal with, for many of us."<sup>72</sup> When Obama won the elections, Turkish media reflected the contentment with his re-election.<sup>73</sup> One well-known journalist noted that Turkey was "satisfied with the continuity in Washington."<sup>74</sup> He added that the dialogue between Erdoğan and Obama would guarantee the stability and security in the region. Prime Minister Erdoğan himself expressed a similar view and asserted that:

*We have experienced an era with Obama where our strategic relations have risen to a model partnership. Because we know one another so well, we can now take positive steps together. I want to define this era we are entering as being the 'golden age' of relations.*<sup>75</sup>

It was not only Turkey's political elites but also the Turkish public that desired to see President Obama stay in office. A majority of Turks wished that "Obama win the presidential election."<sup>76</sup> According to a poll by Barem, 94 percent of Turks said they would have voted for Obama if they were American citizens. For a number of analysts, this support was not a surprise, since Obama was perceived "as a leader who has confronted the perceived controversial policies of former US president George W. Bush, especially during the Iraq war."<sup>77</sup> Contrasting this support to the 82 percent of Turkish opposition to Bush's re-election in 2004, one prominent scholar contended that Turkish-American relations were "traumatized during the Bush era," and that during Obama's first term the "US and Turkey got over this trauma, maintained very close relations and further expanded their ties."<sup>78</sup>

During Obama's second term, the dynamics of bilateral relations remained closely related to the regional developments, the most important of which has been the Syrian conflict and its repercussions for Turkey, namely terrorism, as well as internal developments in Turkey.

In terms of internal developments, the relation between Obama and Erdoğan had soured when the Gezi Park protests broke out in Turkey in May 2013.<sup>79</sup> After the Turkish police violently crushed peaceful protesters in 2013, a number of US officials expressed their concern regarding the excessive use of force by police which resulted in large numbers of injured protestors as well as deaths. These criticisms did not, however, extend beyond the police brutality and did not touch upon general authoritarian tendencies in the Turkish government. Nonetheless, Obama reportedly stopped taking calls from Erdoğan after the Gezi event and their intense relationship deteriorated.<sup>80</sup> Obama's restrained approach arguably stemmed from the perceived US reliance on Turkey for the management of crises in the Middle East.

Diverging perceptions and visions for the future of Syria emerged perhaps as the most controversial policy area in bilateral relations during Obama's second term. Shortly before the Gezi protests, when Erdoğan visited the US in May 2013, the Syrian issue was the top item of the talks between the two leaders. While Erdoğan wished to see a more vigorous action by the Obama administration to topple the Assad regime, President Obama underlined the importance of maintaining pressure on the regime and supporting the opposition.<sup>81</sup> In this respect, leading commentator Kadri Gürsel argued that Turkey was not a strategic ally of the US. According to him, as the situation in Syria did not threaten American national interests, the US policy in Syria would be to keep the situation at a manageable level and to avoid involvement on the ground.<sup>82</sup> In a similar vein, influential columnist Sami Kohen suggested that President Obama would not pursue Bush-style interventions.<sup>83</sup> Thus, from the Turkish perspective in general, there was no expectation that Obama in his second term would agree to provide leadership to a multilateral intervention in Syria.

Yet for the Turkish leadership, the pressing issue was to solve the Syrian crisis by removing the Assad regime. Although during Obama's term the two countries appeared to have shared interests and common policy objectives in the Middle East, to the extent that convergence of interests and policy objectives did not lend to joint action, bilateral relations drifted apart. More specifically, while Turkey had been pressing for a multilateral intervention in Syria akin to the operation against Libya and its leader Gaddafi, the Obama administration consistently remained aloof to the idea of direct US involvement.

In addition, fearing creation of an autonomous Kurdish region in Syria similar to Northern Iraq, Turkey has perceived the rise of power of the Kurds in Syria as the main security threat. For the US, on the other

hand, the priority in the region has been eliminating ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria). To this effect, the US was and still is keen on maintaining its ties with the Syrian Kurdish forces, despite fierce Turkish opposition. Consequently, Turkish frustration with the US's reluctance to intervene in Syria for regime change was further exacerbated when the US administration appeared set on supporting the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Syrian Kurdish Peoples' Protection Units (YPG) in Syria, and labeling them as their main ally in the fight against ISIS. For Turkey, these groups are nothing but an organic part of the PKK, the separatist terrorist organization Turkey has been fighting for over 30 years—an organization which is officially listed as a terrorist organization by the US as well.<sup>84</sup> Turkish perception of the US reflected tense relations regarding terrorism. In 2014, only 19 percent in Turkey were fond of the US, while almost three-quarters (73 percent) shared a distaste for their NATO ally.<sup>85</sup>

Especially after violent PKK attacks once again resumed in the aftermath of the June 7, 2015 elections in Turkey, the Turkish government has voiced its vital security concerns over allying with the PYD and YPG in northern Syria against ISIS. Turkish officials have persistently conveyed their opposition to the PYD and YPG, and their links to the PKK.<sup>86</sup> On countless occasions, they have requested that the US administration cease to give training and arms to the PYD and YPG. More specifically, (current) President Erdoğan repeatedly underlined that Turkey considered these groups as terrorist organizations and objected to any US dependency on them regarding the fight against ISIS. Despite these calls, the underlying perception of the Turkish political elite that the US continues to support the PYD and YPG has remained to date. Following the onset of Turkish operations in northern Syria,<sup>87</sup> for example, Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu also claimed that “the US also supports this ... I am saying very clearly that we will do what is necessary.”<sup>88</sup> In a similar vein, on various occasions, President Erdoğan stated he had evidence that the US-led coalition forces in Syria gave support to terrorist groups including the Islamic State and Kurdish militant groups YPG and PYD.<sup>89</sup> On the other hand, US officials have confirmed that they were “supplying arms to a Kurdish-led coalition in Syria ... in the war against Islamic State extremists.”<sup>90</sup> Consequently, Obama's support to the PYD and YPG was persistently criticized in Turkish newspapers.<sup>91</sup>

Most recently, one other domestic development that strained Turkish-American relations was the coup attempt by a small section of the Turkish

Armed Forces in Turkey in July 2015. The delayed US response in support of the democratically elected government produced a sour reaction from Turkey. Moreover, Turkey blamed the followers of the self-exiled, US-based cleric Fethullah Gülen for the failed coup and requested his extradition from the US so he could be put on trial in Turkey for treason.<sup>92</sup> It was also implied by many government officials that the US was involved in the attempted coup. This perception was largely shared by the Turkish people as well. For example, when a pro-government newspaper asked Turks in a recent poll conducted on Twitter “which governmental department of the US had supported the coup plotters, the CIA came in first, with 69 percent, and the White House was a distant second, with 20 percent.”<sup>93</sup> As a result, the coup attempt further weakened trust in US–Turkish relations and the issue of Gülen’s extradition remained a point of contention up until the end of Obama’s second term. By the time the US voted for its new president in November 2016, the Turkish political elite felt they were let down by the Obama administration in the fight against terrorism in the region (PYD, YPG) and inside Turkey (PKK).<sup>94</sup>

To sum up, during the second Obama administration, relations worsened and divergences increased—particularly regarding regional security issues. Turkey and the US failed to develop a common approach with regard to shared interests in the Middle East. In part due to negative perceptions, Turkey sank into constant accusations of the US failing to provide support to Turkey in its fight against terrorism and its military engagement with the PYD and YPG in Syria, as well as for not extraditing Gülen, who was considered to be the leader of a terrorist group—FETÖ—that led a coup against the civilian government. Thus, relations during Obama’s second term were characterized by strategic cooperation *à la carte*.

### CONCLUSION: BACK TO SQUARE ONE

After two terms of the Obama administration, the current state of Turkish–American relations is far from the model partnership once hoped for. The policy differences in the Middle East especially, namely, the Iranian nuclear issue, Turkey’s rejection of the UN Security Council resolution for new sanctions, the deterioration of Turkish–Israeli issues,

and the US alliance with Kurdish forces in Syria, together with certain Turkish internal developments, caused a major rift in bilateral relations. Moreover, the Obama administration essentially dropped Turkey as a role model for rest of the Muslim countries in the region. On the other hand, instead of filling the vague notion of *model partnership* with concrete areas of cooperation, policy objectives and institutional structures, bilateral relations have remained largely linked to national security concerns. This is mainly related to mutual perceptions of the strategic value of one another.

From the Turkish perspective, its relations with the US have always been perceived from a security angle. In other words, NATO membership and an alliance with the US have been considered essential for Turkey's security. Similarly, for the US, the strategic İncirlik base that provides the US with a military presence in the region has had utmost importance in US strategic thinking. In this context, it is fair to argue that the Turkish psyche regarding its relations with the US is not determined by certain principles of alliance or partnership, but rather has been a function of domestic developments in Turkey and regional security issues. Thus, despite the prevailing strategic alliance and partnership narratives, in the final analysis perceptions of security have been the main determinant of bilateral relations, which have produced both rifts and cooperation at different times. By the same token, the Obama period was a brilliant example of the dynamics of the dialectics between partnerships and estrangement. At the end of Obama's rule, Turkey has once again fallen back to square one insofar as it confronts similar troubled relations with the US as at the end of the Bush administration. And once again, as one analysis of Turkey-US relations under the Trump administration points out: "Turkey is expecting a restart with the US."<sup>95</sup>

## NOTES

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19. When the Johnson administration held that the majority of the drugs that American youth were addicted to were coming from Turkey, the US pressured Turkey to limit its opium production and later to ban it completely during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Although the issue turned out to be a major controversy, it was eventually dropped from the US agenda after the Turkish intervention in Cyprus in 1974 and the following US arms embargo on Turkey.
20. Turkey indicated its intention to intervene in Cyprus on the basis of the 1960 Treaty of Guarantee when the conditions of the Turkish Cypriots worsened as a result of a communal rift between the Turkish and the Greek Cypriots. President Johnson, however, warned Turkey that neither NATO nor the US would defend Turkey if the Soviets attacked Turkey as a result of possible Turkish intervention in Cyprus. In his letter, Johnson also stated that no American-supplied military equipment could be used in such an intervention. The infamous Johnson letter represents a breaking point in the Turkish psyche regarding the reliability of the US as an ally.
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## Israeli View of the Obama Era: A Relationship Reexamined

*Ronnie Olesker*

### INTRODUCTION

“I have no doubt we’ll get along very well.”<sup>1</sup> Those words, spoken by Prime Minister Netanyahu in fall 2008 about then newly elected Obama, could not have been farther from the reality that transpired in the following eight years. Early indications of a relationship gone wrong were present from the start. In subsequent years, but especially in Obama’s second term, US–Israeli relations deteriorated to their lowest point perhaps since the Eisenhower administration and the Suez Canal Crisis in 1956. During Obama’s second term, Israelis and Americans bitterly disagreed on the Israeli–Palestinian peace process and the Arab Spring, and directly clashed over what to do about the Iranian nuclear program.

In this chapter, I argue that there are both short-term and long-term explanations for this deterioration. In the short term, personality clashes and Obama’s pivot away from the Middle East can explain the rise in tensions. Changes in the American political landscape, however, may serve to fundamentally alter the relationship in the long run. While Israel still enjoys high favorability rates among Americans, a breakdown of the data reflects a demographic shift, with Democrats more critical of Israel than Republicans, Millennials more critical than baby boomers, and with

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non-whites highly critical of Israel compared to white Americans. In addition, American Jews, a majority of whom vote Democrat, are becoming more critical of Israel, while becoming less religious. They increasingly view Israel as less critical to their identification as Jews. Interreligious marriages are also on the rise. All this results in a changing demographic landscape, which is less likely to support Israeli actions.

I begin by briefly describing the “special relationship” that Israel has enjoyed with the US since the Kennedy administration, outlining the core explanations for that relationship, which include shared values and common historical narratives based on Judeo-Christian traditions, the pro-Israel lobby, and strategic military interests, especially in thwarting the spread of Soviet influence in the region. I then highlight the deterioration of the relationship under Obama, noting important low points and including public opinion data from Israel and the US on Obama’s relationship with Israel. In the last section of this chapter, I analyze the short- and long-term reasons for this deterioration and the implications for future US–Israeli relations.

### A SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP

The US–Israeli “special” relationship was not inevitable. In its inception, US Secretary of State George Marshall and Secretary of Defense James Forrestal viewed Israel as a political liability because they believed it would likely become a Soviet client state during a time when the British were arming its Arab enemies, and when its political leadership was comprised of socialists.<sup>2</sup> Even after the Soviets began arming the Arabs in the 1950s, the Eisenhower administration refused to sell heavy arms to Israel, fearing that such sales would fuel tensions between Israel and its Arab neighbors.<sup>3</sup> During the Suez Crisis in 1956, the US pressured Israel, along with Britain and France, to retreat, condemning their collaborated attack on Egypt and threatening to support UN sanctions against Israel. It was not until the Kennedy administration, that the US began to arm Israel, first sending Hawk antiaircraft missiles.<sup>4</sup> The Johnson administration, however, did not respond to Israel’s request for arms in the lead up to the 1967 war. It was only after that war, and Israel’s overwhelming military success, that the US finally hedged its bets on the state.<sup>5</sup> During the Nixon administration, the security cooperation between the two countries hit its zenith.<sup>6</sup> The 1970s set the stage for strong cooperation between Israel and the US to offset the Soviet sphere of influence in Syria and Egypt and their support for nationalist liberation movements, not

dissimilar from those which the US was fighting in Vietnam. Indeed, had it not been for the emergency airlift of military supplies to Israel during the October 1973 war, the results of that conflict might have been different. Calculating that it could not afford to have a client state lose to a Soviet proxy, the US intervened on Israel's behalf to help it defeat the Arab forces. Subsequent shuttle diplomacy by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in 1974–1975 set the groundwork for Israeli–Egyptian peace and removed Egypt from the Soviet orbit. Since then, Israel has become the largest recipient of US foreign aid, approximately 3 billion dollars a year, largely in military assistance.<sup>7</sup>

Significant strains, however, are not new in the US–Israeli relationship. Most notably, under the George H. W. Bush administration (1989–1993), the US withheld loan guarantees from Israel, until the latter halted its settlement building in the West Bank. Nevertheless, even during this time, Israel agreed to abstain from retaliating against Saddam Hussein's attacks on it during the Gulf War, thereby allowing the Americans to establish a coalition with Arab partners. In exchange, US Marines were sent to Israel along with Patriot missiles to counter the Iraqi Scud missile attacks. As Robert Freedman notes, “the Patriot missiles proved to be ineffective, [but] the symbolism of the US action—deploying its troops to help protect Israel—was the key factor.”<sup>8</sup>

The new political reality after the Gulf War, which at once saw the US emerge as the sole hegemon and directly involved in the Middle East, provided an opportunity to pressure all actors into a peace process, which began in the Madrid peace conference in 1991. Though Israel only reluctantly came to the peace talks initiated by the Americans, and the relationship experienced some strain over settlement building, overall the Bush White House demonstrated its commitment to Israel's security and the strong cooperation the two shared. During this time, Israel also demonstrated sensitivity to US regional needs, by refraining from responding to Iraqi attacks during the Gulf War.

Clinton's commitment to resolving the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, along with the special chemistry he enjoyed with his Israeli counterpart, Itzhak Rabin, ushered in a new stage in US–Israeli diplomatic and strategic cooperation. With the help of the White House, the Israelis and Palestinians signed the Declaration of Principles, also known as the Oslo I Agreement, on the lawn of the White House in 1993. The agreement was the first step in direct negotiations between the parties, which lasted the entirety of the Clinton administration. After Rabin's assassination, the

relationships somewhat soured between Clinton and the far more hawkish new Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. Clinton did not hide his preference for Netanyahu's adversary, Shimon Peres, in the 1996 Israeli election.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, under US pressure, Netanyahu in his first term in office signed the Hebron Agreement in 1997, splitting the city of Hebron between Israeli and Palestinian sovereignty, and the 1998 Wye River Memorandum, which called for further Israeli withdrawal from West Bank land, though neither side lived up to its commitments in the agreement. Despite strained relations between Clinton and Netanyahu, and Netanyahu's appeal to a Republican Congress at a time when Clinton was embattled from home during the Monica Lewinsky scandal, strategic cooperation between the two states remained strong.

Under George W. Bush's administration (2001–2009), Israel reemerged as a critical ally in the “war on terror.” Israel was fighting against another Palestinian uprising, which was the most violent chapter in its conflict with the Palestinians to date. During this time, the Bush administration condemned Israeli settlement activity, but it was clear they predominantly blamed the Palestinians for the violence that raged in the area during the second intifada.<sup>10</sup> Dennis Ross describes an administration divided between the White House, which was highly critical and skeptical of Palestinian commitment to the peace process, and a State Department that was willing to engage the Palestinians while pressuring Israel.<sup>11</sup>

Although the administration attempted to push for Middle East peace, most notably with the introduction of the Road Map in 2003 and the Annapolis conference in 2007, it emerged as far less active on this front than its predecessor. Perhaps because after the terrorist attacks of 11 September (9/11) its focus was elsewhere, perhaps because the Israeli and American administrations under Sharon and Bush, respectively, shared a similar worldview, the fact remained that George Bush was less engaged in the peace process than Clinton had been.<sup>12</sup>

Though it seemed the administration would take a more balanced approach to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, this posture quickly changed after 9/11 when the White House viewed Israel's fight against Palestinian terrorism in similar ways to its own fight against al-Qaeda. Moreover, 9/11 reaffirmed Israel's importance as a strategic ally, providing vital intelligence to its American counterparts. By 2007, Bush stated that there would be “no daylight” between Israel and the US when it came to policymaking in the region,<sup>13</sup> and declared Sharon “a man of peace.”<sup>14</sup> By the end of the intifada during Bush's second term, the Americans had come to

accept the Israeli narrative and had sidelined the Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat—no longer seeing him as a credible partner for peace.<sup>15</sup>

During the 2008 presidential campaign, Israelis demonstrated a clear preference for the Republican candidate John McCain over the Democrat Barack Obama.<sup>16</sup> First, McCain's military background and focus on security appealed to Israelis, whose prime ministers often have a military background themselves. Israelis believed that McCain shared their worldview and would act more favorably to their interests.<sup>17</sup> Obama's foreign policy positions, on the other hand, were mostly unknown. His foreign policy credentials largely relied on his objection to the 2003 Iraq war. Moreover, Israelis focused on Obama's identity, and suspected that he would identify with the Palestinian cause more than theirs. With a middle name of Hussein, and a Muslim father, Israelis feared Obama might be a threat to their interests. Moreover, McCain's hawkish view on Iran aligned with the Israeli preference for a more forceful response to its nuclear program. Obama was seen as someone who would be more supportive of multilateral diplomatic action (a perception that proved to be true) and therefore less likely to take military action against Iran.<sup>18</sup>

After the election of Obama, it was clear that the administration's position toward Israel would change. It is not surprising, then, that most Israelis did not favor Obama as a candidate. It was hard to anticipate, however, the extent to which the relationship would be strained in the coming years.

## OBAMA AND ISRAEL

While the Israeli public was one of few around the world that did not prefer Obama over McCain in the 2008 election, there was quite an elation, especially in the Israeli media, after Obama's election and the change it symbolized. Among the political elites there was also an acceptance of the new reality in the White House. As I note elsewhere: "by the end of the campaign there was an increased sense of resolution and acceptance of his victory."<sup>19</sup> Ehud Olmert, the Israeli prime minister at the time, was quick to highlight the shared values and deep cooperation between the US and Israel.<sup>20</sup> As political commentator Shmuel Rosner noted, soon after the election, the Israeli administration began to spin the results as one that was good for Israel.<sup>21</sup>

In the early months of 2009, 60% of Israelis had a favorable view of Obama, while only 14% had an unfavorable view of the president.

However, by the end of his second term, 49.3% thought Obama had been moderately or not at all friendly toward Israel. Among Israeli Jews, the number was even higher, at 56.9%.<sup>22</sup> What brought this change? And how did the relationship between two close allies deteriorate?

Less than nine months into his presidency, Obama was selected to receive a Nobel Peace Prize in October 2009 “for his extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples.” The selection committee went on to justify the decision by stating that it had “attached special importance to Obama’s vision of and work for a world without nuclear weapons.”<sup>23</sup> It is hard to argue, however, that Obama had done much in his first eight months in office to earn a Nobel Peace Prize. What he did signal, however, was a sharp shift from the Bush administration’s foreign policy. In other words, Obama was rewarded a Nobel Peace Prize for not being Bush.

When Obama first came into office, he was determined to reverse course on Bush’s policies in the Middle East and this meant rectifying the relationship with the Muslim world and distancing himself from Israel. Perhaps because of this goal, Obama called the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Chairman Mahmoud Abbas on his first day in office before calling then Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.<sup>24</sup> In the summer of 2009, Obama traveled to the Middle East and gave a speech in Egypt, at Cairo University, outlining the new administration’s approach to the Muslim and Arab world. On the same trip, he visited Saudi Arabia but did not stop in Israel, despite the advice of close aides. Obama believed that he needed to send a message that things were different now, and visiting Israel on a trip to the Middle East would have signaled that things are as they had always been. This turned out to be a mistake since it was perceived as an offense to a close ally and soured Israeli officials’ perception of Obama. The move may have gained favor with the Nobel Peace Prize selection committee, but Israelis viewed the outreach to the Muslim world as one coming at their expense.<sup>25</sup> It did not help the relationship when Obama accepted General David Petraeus’s assessment that Israeli settlement building was not only an impediment to peace but also a growing threat of anti-Americanism in the region. Others, however, provide a more nuanced explanation for anti-Americanism.<sup>26</sup> Finally, Israelis were alarmed when Obama refused to come to the aid of Egypt’s president, and indeed turned against Hosni Mubarak during the Arab Spring, despite him being a long-time ally.<sup>27</sup>

Unlike his predecessor, Obama sought to create “daylight” between the administration and Israel. At the same time, he was pushing for a

renewed peace process. These policies, it turned out, worked against one another as the Israelis lost confidence in the administration, making it difficult to extract concessions from them in the peace process. In 2011, the president's approval rating among Israelis was only 49%.

Realizing perhaps that his approach was backfiring, Obama finally visited Israel in 2013, and his favorability polls there jumped back to 71% by 2014. Nevertheless, polls show that 63% of Israelis rank Obama as the "worst for Israel in the last 30 years." This was not a partisan Republican-Democrat issue since Israelis also ranked Clinton as the best for Israel in the past 30 years.<sup>28</sup> According to the 2015 Global Attitudes survey, Obama experienced the sharpest decline in worldwide confidence rates in Israel. While in 2014, 71% of Israelis had confidence that he would do the right thing regarding world affairs, by 2015, that number dropped to 49%. Among Israelis who identify with the center-right Likud party, the number is even lower, at 40%, and 8 in 10 Israelis disapprove of Obama's handling of the Iran nuclear crisis.<sup>29</sup>

The focus of Israeli ire was not the US itself, but rather Obama, as 81% still held favorable views of the US by spring 2015.<sup>30</sup> By summer of 2015, Israelis viewed Obama in extremely negative terms. The Israeli Factor,<sup>31</sup> which surveys Israeli experts on US-Israeli relations, found that all panelists defined the relationship as the worst since the Eisenhower administration.<sup>32</sup> In a poll conducted in June 2015, only 9% of Israelis defined Obama as pro-Israeli, compared with 60% who defined him as pro-Palestinians.<sup>33</sup> But a few years earlier, in March 2013, 21% of Israelis saw Obama as pro-Israeli, not much different than the 24% who saw him as pro-Palestinian. Forty-one percent viewed him as neutral. Despite the deterioration in the relationship between the two allies, 7 in 10 Americans still view Israel favorably<sup>34</sup> and as previously noted, Israelis overwhelmingly view the US in favorable terms.<sup>35</sup> Palestinians, on the other hand, receive a very low approval rating from Americans. As of 2015, only 17% see them in favorable terms.<sup>36</sup>

What brought the US-Israeli relations to such a low point, especially in the last period of Obama's administration? Clearly, Obama was able to correct his previous mistake of distancing himself from Israel in his first term. Data shows that Israelis regained confidence in him after his visit to the country in 2013, despite the fact that he also laid his terms for the two-state solution, stating that it would require Israel to return to the lines of 1967 with "mutually agreed upon land swaps." Nevertheless, it was not the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that deteriorated the relations, but rather

the personal relationship between the leaders and the US policy on Iran's nuclear program that put the two administrations on a collision course.

### A SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP NO LONGER?

While the US and Israel never formalized their alliance, Israel enjoyed the status of having a “special relationship” with the US. The close relationship is anchored by four factors: Shared strategic interests, shared Judeo-Christian values, shared democratic values, and finally, the role of the pro-Israel lobby in US domestic politics. In the following section, I will outline how those shared values and the role of pro-Israel lobby have changed over time, opening the freedom of action for the US administration to distance itself, and at time even collide with, Israeli policies. However, I begin the analysis here at the individual level by outlining the difficult relationship between Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Obama, who have fundamentally different worldviews on the challenges facing their respective countries in the Middle East region.

Despite his efforts, Secretary of State John Kerry was unable to re-launch the peace process in 2014, as Israel and the US were at a major impasse with regard to the Israeli–Palestinian peace process. The lowest point in the relationship, however, came as a result of the disagreement over Iran's nuclear program. Obama indicated early that he would be willing to negotiate directly with the Iranian regime and, in 2015, managed to reach an agreement between Iran and six world powers to halt, if temporarily, Iran's path to a nuclear weapon. In March 2015, two weeks before Israeli elections, Netanyahu, at the invitation of House leader John Boehner,<sup>37</sup> came to Washington to speak to Congress against the negotiation, characterizing it as a “very bad deal” and that “we're better off without it”.<sup>38</sup> Though he began his speech by thanking the president for all he had done for Israel during the administration, Netanyahu nevertheless highlighted his disagreement with the administration's position on the Iran deal.

But well before Netanyahu's speech to Congress, in the fall of 2014, reports indicated that Netanyahu and his cabinet had “written off” the Obama administration,<sup>39</sup> especially when the latter decided to directly negotiate with Iran over its nuclear program. It was at that point that Netanyahu devised a plan to come and speak directly to Congress, without notifying or coordinating the visit with the White House, an unprecedented move and a personal offense against Obama, earning him the title



of “chicken shit” among American officials.<sup>40</sup> A few months earlier, Moshe Ya’alon, Israel’s then Defense Minister, had referred to Secretary of State John Kerry as “obsessive and messianic,” and stated that he hoped Kerry “gets a Nobel Prize and leaves us alone.”<sup>41</sup> Subsequently, national security advisor Susan Rice, refused to meet with Ya’alon on his trip to Washington soon after.<sup>42</sup>

As a last note to their soured relationship, Obama let a UN resolution pass just weeks before the end of his second term, which condemned Israeli settlements. As Seth Frantzman notes, there have been 226 UN Security Council resolutions on Israel since 1948, and the US had abstained from less than two-dozen of them.<sup>43</sup> In fact, Obama and the second Bush administration had abstained only once, while the Regan administration had done so seven times.<sup>44</sup> Still, the abstention from a vote on a UN Security Council Resolution condemning Israeli settlements was a sharp break from previous US practices to shield Israel from such criticism in the International body. Netanyahu on his part condemned the move on the social networking site *Twitter*, stating that “over decades American administrations and Israeli govts disagree about settlements but we agreed the UNSC was not the place to resolve this.”<sup>45</sup> As if speaking about Israel’s enemies, he went even further to state that “[t]he Obama administration carried out a shameful anti-Israel ploy at the UN.”<sup>46</sup>

It is unclear whether the actions of the Obama administration reflect a new long-term shift in US foreign policy vis-à-vis Israel. What is clear is that Obama reflects the changes in US demographics and attitudes that in the future will make Israel less vital for US interests and as a result, Israel will not be able to rely on the status it currently enjoys in Washington.

## US DEMOGRAPHIC AND VALUE SHIFTS

The personal and difficult relationship between Obama and Netanyahu may explain the deterioration of the US–Israeli relationship in the short term. In the long run, however, the change may signal a much deeper shift in US interests and attitudes toward the state.

There are four factors that underscore the “special relationship” between the US and Israel. First, as described above, Israel became a strategic ally of the US in the Cold War when the majority of the Arab countries aligned with the USSR. Later, when the US became a target of

terrorism, Israel again emerged as a critical ally in the fight against Islamist violent non-state actors. Second, the shared Judeo-Christian values of the countries create an affinity between both political elites and populations. In large part, US President Harry S. Truman was moved by his Christian faith to support the nascent Jewish state, starting in 1948, despite the advice of his cabinet members. Truman was also motivated, however, by electoral politics and the need to court the Jewish vote in swing states such as New York, Pennsylvania, and Illinois.<sup>47</sup> Third, the pro-Israel lobby has long been influential in the US support for Israel, often criticized for the US's missteps in the Middle East.<sup>48</sup> Fourth and finally, the shared democratic values between Israel and the US can explain the strong ties between the two. Israel's western political culture stands in contrast to the consistent patterns of resistance to democratization in the rest of the region.

While the sympathies of the American public are overwhelmingly with the Israelis,<sup>49</sup> Republicans are much more sympathetic to Israel than Democrats or Independents.<sup>50</sup> Millennials, however, are far less likely to support Israel (52%) than those older than 55 (74%). Only 25% of Millennials see Israeli actions in the region as justified, compared with 55% of baby boomers. The racial divide is equally pronounced; while 50% of whites see Israeli actions justified, only 25% of non-whites agree. Gender also plays a role; men are much more likely to see Israeli actions as justified (51%) than women (33%). Interestingly, the more educated respondents were, the more likely to support Israel; 53% of Americans with post graduate degrees see Israeli actions as justified, compared with only 34% of Americans with a high school education or less.<sup>51</sup>

There are also changes among the American Jewry. While the Jewish vote for Obama dropped from 78% in 2008 to 69% in 2012,<sup>52</sup> his approval rating among Jews remained higher than the rest of the population in 2015 (54% approval from Jews, compared to 46% among the general public),<sup>53</sup> despite his strained relationship with Israel's prime minister. This is perhaps not surprising since a majority of Jews, 89%, believe that being Jewish is compatible with being strongly critical of Israel.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, 54% of baby boomers say being Jewish is very important to their identity, compared with only 33% of Millennials. Thus, 58% of those who married after 2000, intermarried, compared to only 17% of Jews who married before 1970.<sup>55</sup> Millennial American Jews see themselves much less defined by their religious identity than boomers. For example, 68% of Millennials define their identity by their religion while 32% see themselves as Jews of no religion,

compared with 81% of boomers and 93% of those born between 1914 and 1927, who define themselves by their religion.<sup>56</sup>

But do American and Israeli Jews actually share common values? A recent Pew poll of the two communities reveals some interesting disparities. Israeli Jews are more religious than American Jews, while American Jews are more educated. When asked whether the US is supportive enough of Israel, 52% of Jews in Israel disagreed, while only 31% of American Jews did. Moreover, while 42% of Israeli Jews believe settlements in the West Bank help Israeli security, only 17% of American Jews agree. The disparities are even more interesting when looking at the divide between political right and left in each country. Only 29% of right-wing Israelis believe that the two-state solution is possible, but 43% of conservative American Jews do support the two-state solution. When it comes to settlements, the disparity is even wider: 62% of right-wing Israelis believe settlements advance Israeli security; only 29% of American conservatives agree. American and Israeli Jews agree that the Palestinian leadership is not doing much to bring about peace; however, US Jews are far less likely to say the Israeli government is doing all it can to pursue peace (38%) than Israeli Jews (56%).<sup>57</sup> Thus, along with his personal beliefs, Obama was on safe political grounds to criticize Israel for its actions in the peace process and settlement policies since he was unlikely to pay an electoral price with his wide Jewish and democratic base of support.

It is arguable whether Israel and the US indeed share a strong support for democratic values as those have increasingly been deteriorating in Israel. In a survey of Israelis in 2013, a slight majority of Israeli Jews, 48.9% compared with 47.3% believed that Jews should have more rights than non-Jews in Israel. In other words, almost half of the population supported overt discrimination of the non-Jewish minority.<sup>58</sup> Unlike trends in the US, younger Israelis are far less tolerant than older ones. Among Israelis aged 18–24, 65.4% believe that Jewish citizens of Israel should have more rights than non-Jewish citizens, compared with 42.8% of those aged 65 and above who believe the same.<sup>59</sup> A majority of Israelis present highly discriminatory attitudes toward non-Jews as 51.5% agree totally or somewhat that the government should encourage only Jews to establish new communities in Israel, 41.1% totally or somewhat disagree. Nearly half of Israeli Jews surveyed (49.9%) agreed totally or somewhat that the Israeli judicial interpretation and legislation should be based on the Jewish legal system, 39.5% disagreed totally or somewhat.<sup>60</sup> More recently, 52.5% of Jewish Israelis agreed that those who are not willing to affirm that Israel is the

nation-state of the Jewish people should be stripped of their right to vote.<sup>61</sup> These are certain values that directly contradict American liberal values.

The changes in demographics are also reflected in the rise of alternative lobby groups in Washington, most notably the rise of the lobby group J Street, a “pro-Israel, pro-peace”<sup>62</sup> lobby group that seeks to advance the two-state solution rather than provide diplomatic cover for Israeli actions regardless of their consequences.

Israel’s support in Washington is due in no small part to the pro-Israel lobby led by the American–Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), which is by far the largest and most dominant pro-lobby group.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, the lobbies are not monolithic, as Dov Waxman notes, and they rarely speak in one voice.<sup>64</sup> While AIPAC has dominated the pro-Israel lobby camp, as a result of shifting attitudes among US Jewry as well as Israeli policies which undermined the peace process, it is not a coincidence that in 2008, shortly before Obama came into office, a new lobby was formed. J Street endorsed Obama in the 2008 election campaign and soon after, Obama sent his national security advisor, General James Jones, to speak at the first J Street annual conference, lending it immediate credibility. In the most recent conference in 2017, speakers included Senators Tim Kane and Bernie Sanders, as well as former secretary of state Madeleine Albright, former US ambassador to Israel Martin Indyk, and *New York Times* columnists Roger Cohen and Thomas Friedman.<sup>65</sup> In other words, J Street has become mainstream, a real alternative to the much more conservative AIPAC, despite a vast disparity in the two’s budgets.

AIPAC’s vulnerability and perhaps the changing tenor of politics on Capitol Hill, was demonstrated in the battle between the two lobby groups over the Iran nuclear deal. Both organizations spent millions lobbying Congress in favor and against the deal, but despite the vast differences in spending, with AIPAC raising an estimated 20–40 million dollars to thwart the deal while J Street spending between 2.5 and 5 million,<sup>66</sup> the deal was passed by Congress in 2015. As Ilai Z. Saltzman notes: “[T]he fragmentation of the pro-Israel lobby and the erosion in the hegemonic status of AIPAC after the creation of J Street allowed the Obama administration to exhibit a more critical and progressive public approach towards Israel.”<sup>67</sup> In other words, the rise of J Street provided Obama with the political space to exert more pressure on Israel, especially when it came to the Israeli–Palestinian issue and the Iranian nuclear program.

The last anchor that traditionally explains the close relationship Israel enjoys with the US is that Israel has always provided a strategic advantage

for the US in the region. It became a strategic ally early in the Cold War when the USSR aligned itself with Nasser in Egypt by selling him arms through Czechoslovakia in 1955. It was not until after the 1967 war, however, that the military and strategic cooperation was consolidated. Israel became an important strategic ally for the US against the regional influence of the USSR, and after the attacks of 9/11, Israel emerged as an invaluable partner in the global War on Terror. Israel became even more of a reliable regional partner in the face of growing regional instability as a result of the war in Iraq, the Arab uprisings, the subsequent civil war in Syria and the rise of ISIS.

Despite the political tensions between Israel and the US during the Obama administration, military cooperation remains very strong, almost seamless. As Dennis Ross notes, “the scope of the security collaboration went beyond any previous administration had put in place.”<sup>68</sup> Speaking in Tel Aviv, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates stated in 2011:

*I cannot recall a time during [my] public life when our two countries have had a closer defense relationship. The US and Israel are cooperating closely in areas such as missile defense technology, the Joint Strike Fighter, and in training exercises such as Juniper Stallion—cooperation and support that ensures that Israel will continue to maintain its qualitative military edge.<sup>69</sup>*

This sentiment was echoed again by the then minister of defense Ehud Barak in 2012. Speaking to the National Defense College, Barak stated: “[T]he security ties between us and the current administration are at the highest level they have ever been.”<sup>70</sup>

Since 2011, the White House had approved USD 1.3 billion in aid to Israel to support Iron Dome, the missile defense system used against Palestinian rockets.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, while Washington and Jerusalem were sparring over what to do about Iran’s nuclear program, the US and Israel collaborated on the Stuxnet computer worm, which targeted the computerized control of the centrifuges in Iran’s Natanz nuclear plant, setting the program back and buying the US more time to resolve the crisis. According to the *New York Times*, the joint operation, code name “Olympic Games,” was started under the Bush administration but expanded once Obama came into office.<sup>72</sup>

In 2012, Israel and the US participated in the largest joint military exercise ever conducted between the two states, “Austere Challenge 12,” and Obama also approved Israel’s request for so-called bunker buster

bombs, a request that was previously denied by the Bush administration.<sup>73</sup> Finally, just days before the US abstained from the UN Security Council resolution condemning Israeli settlements, Obama signed into law the US–Israel Advanced Research Partnership Act of 2016, a bipartisan law strengthening joint US–Israeli cybersecurity research.<sup>74</sup> In addition, Obama approved a 38-million-dollar military aid package for Israel over the next ten years.<sup>75</sup>

Whatever tensions may have existed between Netanyahu and Obama, it does not appear to have had any impact on the US commitment to Israeli security or on its view of Israel as an important strategic ally. On the contrary, under Obama, US–Israeli military and strategic cooperation rose to their highest levels.

In sum, in the face of worsening relations between Jerusalem and Washington in the Obama era, strategic military cooperation remained strong, and even increased. Though Israel remains a strong and reliable partner for the US, the changing demographics, increasing critical voices within the American Jewish community, and Israel’s own policies, especially with regard to settlement expansions, may serve to alter the US’s strategic interests and the relationship in the long run.

## CONCLUSION

What can explain the changes in US–Israeli relations under the Obama administration? On the individual level of analysis, Obama and Netanyahu come from completely, and in many cases diametrically opposed, world-views. While Obama for the most part was an internationalist, Netanyahu was a strong nationalist. When the two met in the Oval Office in 2011, Netanyahu went on to lecture the president on the realities of the Middle East, much to Obama’s chagrin. Netanyahu’s unprecedented move to speak to Congress without notifying the White House of the visit deteriorated the relationship even further. But one should be careful not to attribute too much to the individual relationship, as it clearly did not affect the strategic military cooperation between the two countries.

At the domestic level of analysis, demographic changes in public attitudes give Democrats increasingly more political space to be critical of Israel. Census data reveals that the US is becoming more diverse than ever before. It is expected that by 2055, there will no longer be a single racial majority in the country. As a result, there is a shift in electoral politics, largely due to Hispanic voter growth.<sup>76</sup> This will likely translate to shifts in

the interstate relationship between the US and Israel as non-whites tend to be more critical of Israel than white Americans. Moreover, Millennials tend to hold more liberal views than older voters, including on the topic of Israel–Palestine. Jews, too, are increasingly more critical of Israeli policies, especially with regard to settlements. All this has afforded Obama, and will likely afford other Democratic presidents, with the political space to create some “daylight” between Washington and Jerusalem, especially if the current trends in Israeli politics of shifting to the far-right continue. Under Netanyahu’s three terms in office, Israel has severely curtailed its democratic practices, often legislating discriminatory laws that specifically target Palestinians based on their ethnic identity. As a result, it is becoming more difficult for Americans to justify their strong relationship with Israel based on shared democratic values.

At the interstate level, Obama has made some critical mistakes when he first came into office by trying to both shun Israel and push it on the issue of the peace process—the two objectives were contradictory. Obama had calculated that by distancing himself from Israel, he would be able to exert more pressure on Jerusalem, but in fact, the opposite transpired: As Israelis lost confidence in him, they were less willing to cooperate with the Palestinians and the international community on the peace process.

Obama’s major foreign policy accomplishment in the Middle East was to sign the agreement with Iran and resolve, albeit temporarily, the crisis surrounding it. However, this accomplishment directly contradicted the Israeli government’s position on the Iranian nuclear program, which they view as an existential threat to Israel. In other words, Obama’s major foreign policy accomplishment was Israel’s major failure. The Iran issue pitted the two allies in a zero-sum game, which, in the future, may result in contradictory foreign policy objectives.

It is important to refrain, however, from making too generalizable predictions for the future. Though domestic factors lay the foundation for shifts in the US foreign policy, it is difficult to predict whether those will transpire. Republicans are overwhelmingly supportive of Israel and the strategic military cooperation remains strong. But Israel’s own policies with regard to the Palestinian issue may make US support for it unsustainable in the long run.

On the issue of the Israeli–Palestinian peace process, Obama had achieved very little. Kerry’s ten-month peace initiative never gained momentum, Israeli settlement expansion accelerated in the Obama years, and Netanyahu’s right-wing coalition strengthened. Obama’s last attempt

to curtail Israeli expansion in the West Bank by abstaining from the UN Security Council Resolution condemning Israeli settlements might have been a political win for Israel's critics, but will have very little effect on the ground. As Trump entered office, Israel had declared its intention to build 5500 new housing units in the West Bank.<sup>77</sup>

In sum then, the Obama era symbolized an unprecedented downward spiral in US–Israeli relations. In the short term, one can attribute the deterioration to the difficult, at times impossible, relationship between the two leaders. In the long run, however, the Obama era also signals a shift in US demographics that is likely to have electoral consequences in the future. If current trends remain the same, Americans are less likely to support Israel to the same extent that they do now as the electorate becomes more diverse, Jews become less attached to their religious identity, and Democrats, especially Millennials, become more critical of Israel. As a result, the “special” relationship may be “special” no more.

## NOTES

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2. Robert Freedman, “Introduction,” in *Israel and the United States*, ed. Robert O. Freedman, 1–21 (Boulder: Westview Press, 2012), 2.
3. Douglas Little, “The Making of a Special Relationship: The United States and Israel, 1957–1968,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 25, no. 4 (1993): 567.
4. The Eisenhower administration approved the sale of small arms to Israel in 1958 in the form of recoilless rifles but refused to sell hardware. However, as Douglas Little notes, Kennedy, in an attempt to persuade Israel away from developing nuclear weapons and throwing the region into a nuclear arms race, approved the sale of conventional sophisticated hardware, hoping that this would allay Israel security concerns. See Douglas Little, *ibid.*, 566.
5. *Ibid.*, 580. Douglas Little notes, however, that Eisenhower, fearing the spread of Soviet influence in the region, and Kennedy, fearing nuclear proliferation, had already established the special relationship between the US and Israel by then.
6. *Ibid.*, 4.



7. According to Haim Malka, this aid represents 1.5% of Israel's GDP and approximately 21% of its defense budget. See Haim Malka, *Crossroads: The Future of US-Israel Strategic Partnership* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2011), 1.
8. Freedman, "Introduction," 6.
9. Dennis Ross, *Doomed to Succeed: The US-Israeli Relationship From Truman to Obama* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 279. Clinton's relationship with Netanyahu soured after Netanyahu attended a pro-Israel rally hosted by Christian fundamentalist Jerry Falwell, who at the time was accusing Clinton of being a drug dealer and involved in murder.
10. Robert Freedman, "George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and the Arab-Israeli Conflict from 2001 to 2011," in *Israel and the United States*, ed. Robert O. Freedman, 36–78 (Boulder: Westview Press, 2012), 44.
11. Ross, *Doomed to Succeed*, 313–318.
12. Freedman, "George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and the Arab-Israeli Conflict from 2001 to 2011," 37, 72.
13. Ross, *Doomed to Succeed*, 301. Obama was later criticized, including during the foreign policy presidential debate with Romney, for his adoption of a posture that created some daylight between the US and Israel to improve relations with the Arab world. See Molly Moorhead, "Romney Says Obama Wants 'Daylight' in US-Israel Relationship," *Politifact*, October 22, 1012. Accessed January 5, 2017. <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2012/oct/22/mitt-romney/romney-says-obama-wants-daylight-us-israel-relatio/>
14. David E. Sanger, "President Praises Effort by Powell in The Middle East," *New York Times*, April 19, 2002. Accessed January 5, 2017. <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/04/19/world/mideast-turmoil-diplomacy-president-praises-effort-by-powell-in-the-middle-east.html> President. Identifying Sharon as a man of peace was received with a mixture of amusement and disbelief in the region, given Sharon's reputation as a hawk, his involvement in leading Israel into what was perceived as its first "war of choice" in Lebanon in 1982, and his repeated denial of Palestinian nationhood. Sharon was also blamed, perhaps unfairly, for igniting the second intifada when it erupted after he decided to walk along with hundreds of Israeli police, on Temple Mount while he was campaigning for elections in 2000.
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16. Ronnie Olesker, "Israeli Views on the US Presidential Election: Between Perception and Reality," in *The World Views of the US Presidential Election*, ed. Mathias Maass, 133–150 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 137.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*, 138.
19. *Ibid.*

20. Roni Sofer, "Olmert: Obama Proved His Leadership," *Ynetnews.com*, November 5, 2008. Accessed February 17, 2017. <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3617987,00.html>
21. Shmuel Rosner, personal communication with the author, November 18, 2008 Tel Aviv. Cited in Ronnie Olesker, "Israeli Views on the US Presidential Election," 139.
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25. Dennis Ross, *Doomed to Succeed*, 346.
26. *Ibid.*, 349. Ross points out that Arab regimes might have had their own domestic interests in mind when they highlighted the Palestinian issues as a source for Arab rage and regional violence.
27. The Israelis, along with the Saudis and Emirates, were fearful of the changes in Egypt, which up until then, was seen as a status quo power and a reliable partner. The Israelis in particular were fearful of what would come next and whether the Muslim Brotherhood would maintain the peace with it. See Ross, *Doomed to Succeed*, 355.
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30. Richard Wike, Bruce Stokes, Jacob Poushter, "America's Global Image," *Pew Research Center*, June 23, 2015. Accessed January 5, 2017. <http://www.pewglobal.org/2015/06/23/1-americas-global-image/>
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## Obama's Legacy: The View from Persia

*Barbara Ann Rieffer-Flanagan*

### INTRODUCTION

Tehran and Washington have had a complicated relationship for decades. During the 1960s and 1970s, the United States had an ally in the king of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. In the aftermath of the 1979 revolution, all of this changed, and relationships between the two countries grew increasingly hostile. With the exception of a few short periods of rapprochement, the United States and Iran have spent much of the last three decades hurling verbal attacks against each other.<sup>1</sup> President Obama came into office offering an olive branch and improved relations with Iran. In addition to a Nowruz (Persian New Year) greeting in March of 2009, the president also sent two letters to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in 2009 offering to engage with Tehran to address bilateral issues. Despite these diplomatic efforts, there was little change in diplomatic relations during Obama's first term in office.

Relations thawed slightly after Hassan Rouhani was elected president in 2013 because he was more pragmatic and less confrontational than his predecessor, President Ahmadinejad. This outreach by President Obama eventually resulted in numerous meetings and drawn-out negotiations

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over Iran's nuclear program. Ultimately, a nuclear deal was signed in which Tehran agreed to reduce its nuclear capabilities in return for sanctions relief. Some have argued that this was a major success for President Obama and will be one of his lasting legacies. Others have criticized the deal and expressed concerns that Tehran will cheat. The true impact of the nuclear agreement will not be known for many years.

In Iran, views of Obama's foreign policy initiatives, from the nuclear deal to the Syrian Civil War and ISIL, have received mixed reviews. Within Iran, as with many other countries, there are political divisions that shape foreign policy perspectives. There are ideological divisions within the country between conservatives (sometimes referred to as pragmatic conservatives) and neoconservatives (or hardline conservatives or principlists). Many of the political leaders within the reformist camp, such as former president Mohammad Khatami or former presidential candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi, have been silenced, jailed, or have fled and are in exile.

Neoconservatives have been very critical of President Obama's foreign policy initiatives, including the nuclear deal. They have sought to impede any further cooperation or rapprochement between the two countries as cooperation with the Great Satan is antithetical to their revolutionary worldview. Some pragmatic conservatives, on the other hand, have welcomed the nuclear deal and its potential to improve the economic situation in the country. They have tended to see the value of some limited cooperation with Washington. The most important figure in Iran, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has tried to walk a fine line between pragmatic conservatives and neoconservatives. He has the final say in most foreign policy matters and gave his tacit approval to the nuclear deal primarily due to the daunting economic problems facing the country.<sup>2</sup> This did not stop him from criticizing President Obama on various issues, and warning Iranians not to be seduced by false promises from Washington or improved relationships between the two states.

This chapter explores various Iranian views on Obama's foreign policy and analyzes how Obama's initiatives on foreign policy impacted bilateral relationships between Washington and Tehran. In many areas, the relationship between these two countries did not change over Obama's eight years in office. Obama's policies and initiatives did not alter Tehran's foreign policy or its efforts to be a regional power. Nor did Obama fundamentally change the situation of human rights in the country. President Obama did soften the language and approach to Tehran. His decision to abandon George W Bush's confrontational language (Axis of Evil) may



have contributed to an improved climate that allowed the nuclear talks to make progress. However, aside from the nuclear agreement—which should not be underestimated—much of the bilateral relationship between Washington and Tehran remained the same.

### THE VIEW FROM IRAN

Iran has a unique political system that combines elements of the clerical rule with democratic institutions and regular elections. The Islamic Republic of Iran presents itself as a theocracy guided by Shia Islam. In practice, how religious tenets are implemented in the political system vary policy to policy. In some cases, this is due to ambiguities in Shia Islam (no clear guidance on dealing with elements of modern life such as the use of Facebook or Twitter); in other cases, it is a result of pragmatic decision-making (e.g., *realpolitik* in foreign policy).<sup>3</sup>

Regardless of what is written in the constitution, ultimate political power resides with the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei. The Supreme Leader either controls or has significant power over numerous individuals and offices in Iran. The president of Iran has many responsibilities within the political system and has a hand in foreign policy decision-making; however, the president does not enjoy the freedom to act unilaterally in foreign policy. A president who strays too far from the wishes of the Supreme Leader will be reined in various subtle and not-so-subtle ways. Other political institutions, such as the Majles (parliament) and security forces, such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) can also influence aspects of foreign policy but usually do not challenge the direction set by the Supreme Leader in foreign policy.

#### *Khamenei*

The current Supreme Leader's distrust of the United States developed long before the revolution. Khamenei was an ally of Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the revolution that overthrew the Shah in 1979 and the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Khomeini often criticized the Shah's subservient relationship to the United States and often referred to the US as the Great Satan.<sup>4</sup> Khamenei, one of Khomeini's devoted supporters, also adopted this anti-American perspective which is one of the central tenets of the philosophy of the revolution. He has repeatedly criticized the US for its destabilizing actions throughout the world:

*It is natural that our Islamic system should be viewed as an enemy and an intolerable rival by such an oppressive power as the United States, which is trying to establish a global dictatorship and further its own interests by dominating other nations and trampling on their rights. It is also clear that the conflict and confrontation between the two is something natural and unavoidable.<sup>5</sup>*

This harsh rhetoric continued throughout the Obama years. Khamenei has warned against trusting the Great Satan.<sup>6</sup> Despite the unforgiving language, Khamenei was willing to hedge his bets on the nuclear question. He was prepared to allow President Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif to engage in numerous negotiations with the United States and other members of the United Nations Security Council that resulted in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015. This demonstrated that the Supreme Leader was willing at times to adopt pragmatic policies even if it meant working with Washington. Obama noted Khamenei's periodic pragmatism in an interview in 2015:

*"He's a pretty tough read," the president said. "I haven't spoken to him directly. In the letters that he sends, there [are] typically a lot of reminders of what he perceives as past grievances against Iran, but what is, I think, telling is that he did give his negotiators in this deal the leeway, the capability to make important concessions, that would allow this framework agreement to come to fruition. So what that tells me is that—although he is deeply suspicious of the West [and] very insular in how he thinks about international issues as well as domestic issues, and deeply conservative—he does realize that the sanctions regime that we put together was weakening Iran over the long term, and that if in fact he wanted to see Iran re-enter the community of nations, then there were going to have to be changes."<sup>7</sup>*

Obama's willingness to test Khamenei's pragmatism on the nuclear issue contributed to one of the few breakthroughs in the bilateral relationship. The president is also a significant figure when dealing with foreign policy. While he cannot stray too far from the Supreme Leader's wishes, he does have the ability to influence relations with other states. The president selects ministers for his cabinet including the foreign minister and ambassadors who serve abroad. The president is also the public face of Iran, speaking at the United Nations and traveling abroad. The Supreme Leader is less well known and rarely leaves the country. When President Obama assumed office, Ahmadinejad was president in Iran.

*Ahmadinejad*

When Barak Obama took the oath of office in January 2009 Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had been president of Iran for three and a half years. Ahmadinejad often employed confrontational rhetoric against the West and specifically the United States. In addition to comments that Israel should be wiped off the map, Ahmadinejad criticized what he saw as Washington's attempt to bully other countries: "Now, even elementary school kids throughout the world have understood that the United States government is following an international policy of bullying and this is amply clear." Ahmadinejad went on to say, "They command from behind the microphone. They command and impose their will on how things should be done and I don't believe that this behavior and this comportment is sustainable and will be continuing."<sup>8</sup> His attitude toward the United States did not bode well for Obama's efforts at outreach to the Islamic Republic. The disputed presidential election in Iran in June 2009 further complicated these efforts.

Ahmadinejad was declared the winner over the Green Movement candidate Mousavi by the Interior Ministry which led to protests, allegations of fraud, and much violence in cities across Iran.<sup>9</sup> Obama's response sought to maintain the possibility of working with the government to improve bilateral relations while upholding the principles of human rights, including freedom of expression and peaceful protest. In the end, Obama's balanced approach satisfied neither side. The reformists and the Green Movement supporters felt that President Obama did not go far enough in forcefully defending their legitimate democratic demands. The Iranian government, in the midst of civil unrest and millions of people protesting in the streets of Iran, did not appreciate anything that they perceived to be meddling in domestic affairs including statements about support of human rights and peaceful protests.

The aftermath of Ahmadinejad's reelection did not lead to improved relationships between Tehran and Washington. The Obama administration concerned with the continuing progress of Iran's nuclear program (especially growing stockpiles of enriched uranium) opted to strengthen the sanctions regime against Tehran. In June 2010, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1929. The Comprehensive Iran Sanctions Accountability and Divestment Act became law in July 2010. These international and domestic efforts aimed at limiting Iran's proliferation efforts and its access to the international financial system.<sup>10</sup> US

Undersecretary for Political Affairs, William Burns described these sanctions as “the strongest and most comprehensive set of sanctions that the Islamic Republic of Iran has ever faced.”<sup>11</sup> These additional sanctions, in conjunction with low oil prices put pressure on Iran’s economy and limited economic growth.<sup>12</sup> However, Tehran’s willingness to fully engage with the United States and other countries on the nuclear issue did not happen until Rouhani became president.<sup>13</sup>

### *Rouhani*

In 2013, Hassan Rouhani became president. Rouhani, a long time insider, who has held numerous political positions and has a positive relationship with the Supreme Leader, won presidential elections in 2013 on a platform which promised to improve the economy and roll back some of the social and personal restrictions of the previous administration.<sup>14</sup> President Rouhani, while less abrasive and hostile to the West and the United States, did not represent a significant shift from other pragmatic conservatives.

President Rouhani criticized the sanctions against Iran on numerous occasions, arguing that sanctions harm Iranians and created resentment among the people: “Although sanctions have caused problems for people’s everyday life, these pressures only deepen people’s age-old hatred for those countries which practice these sanctions, [e]specially the West.” He went on to add his desire to see a change in the international environment: “The government has declared to the world in a straightforward manner that the language of respect should replace the language of sanctions in dealing with the Iranian nation.”<sup>15</sup>

Rouhani, while articulating familiar criticisms of the West and the sanctions regime and promising to defend Iran against hostile foreign powers, did demonstrate a willingness to engage with the United States. In addition to accepting a phone call from President Obama—the first direct contact between presidents since the revolution, Rouhani sent Foreign Minister Zarif and his team to various meetings to engage with the United States and the P5+1 to work on finding a solution to the nuclear impasse.

### *Political Divisions in Iran: Reformists, Pragmatists, and Hardline Conservatives*

Understanding how Iranians view the Obama administration requires an understanding of the political divisions in Iran. Beyond the branches of government and personalities that occupy those offices, there is an ideological

divide within Iran that helps to explain the view from Iran.<sup>16</sup> The ideological differences in Iran revolve mainly around different types of conservatives, as reformists have largely been silenced during Obama's years in office.

Hardline conservatives or principlists occupy the far right of the Iranian political spectrum. When it comes to foreign policy, hardline conservatives often articulate an anti-Western and anti-American perspective. They are opposed to compromising with other actors in the international community. They are adamant nationalists who prefer confrontation to any policies that appear to give in or appease other states. As Hadi Ghaemi, the executive director of the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, noted, hardliners "prefer international isolation and vilification of the West—all the better to maintain control over the country's narrative, legitimize their repression, and sustain their dominance at home."<sup>17</sup> Some hardline conservatives include former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, cleric Mohammad-Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi and Qassem Soleimani, the commander of the Qods Force.

Many current and former members of the IRGC are in the hardline camp. Statements calling the United States the Great Satan and blaming Washington for various problems in the Middle East are often released by the IRGC. In November 2014 statement, the IRGC again articulated its hostility to the United States:

*The US is still the great Satan and the number one enemy of the (Islamic) revolution and the Islamic Republic and the Iranian nation inspired by the lessons of the great uprising of Ashoura, the eternal guidelines of the late Imam Khomeini as well as the wise and vigilant guidelines of Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei as the roadmap and compass of its movement will never allow the dignity and independence of the Islamic homeland to be threatened and harmed by the will of the enemies.*<sup>18</sup>

The statement went on to challenge the good will of the Washington:

*Contemplation on the bitter realities of today, especially the ISIL and Takfiri plots in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon more than any time before shows that the US is the house of the world's plots and corruption that never intends to compromise and have real friendship with a popular and independent system that manifests the powerful existence of the beloved Islam.*<sup>19</sup>

Pragmatic conservatives have adopted a less confrontational approach to foreign policy. They are willing to work with the international community, especially concerning economic cooperation. They have sought to

end Iran's isolation from the rest of the world. They reject the vitriolic language of Ahmadinejad, Soliemani, and others in the hardline camp. Thus, many pragmatic conservatives were in favor of the nuclear agreement because it could lead to economic revitalization. Pragmatic conservatives, such as former president Rafsanjani, criticized Ahmadinejad for his antagonistic approach to West and his inflammatory rhetoric that created diplomatic and economic problems.

Reformists, such as former president Khatami, and others associated with the Green Movement, such as Mousavi, argued not only for improved ties with the international community but for diplomatic relations based on shared values and mutual respect. They believed Iran's national interests are best served by working with partners in the international community. Reducing tensions with other countries would allow Iran to re-integrate itself into global affairs after decades of isolation with some states. Improved diplomatic relations included relations with Saudi Arabia and the United States. Reformists and individuals associated with the Green Movement have also supported greater protection for human rights. Many of these reformist/Green Movement supporters have been silenced since the 2009 election.

These political divisions can be summarized as:

*[Reformists] seek to stabilize the system, in contrast, by redefining and reorienting Iran through evolutionary change focusing on public accountability and a more open, normal interaction with a globalized world. For them, this is the path to renewing the legitimacy of the Iranian system that has eroded dangerously. The hardliners in Iran see this approach as doubly dangerous, for ejecting 'revolutionary values' risks losing control and power. Regime survival, equated with their primacy, depends on embattlement. Legitimacy for them comes not from the citizenry, many of whom advocate accommodation, but from resistance. Advocates of moderation, therefore, threaten the control of the hardliners and their definitions of regime.<sup>20</sup>*

### *Iranian Public Opinion*

Despite the anti-American murals in Tehran and periodic chants of death to America, some Iranians have held positive views of Americans. A World Public Opinion poll in 2009 showed that 51% of Iranians held a favorable view of Americans. This did not always translate to positive views of American policy makers. A Gallup poll taken at the end of 2011 and the

beginning of 2012 showed that only 8% of Iranians approved of the leadership of the United States.<sup>21</sup>

These numbers did not substantively improve over the course of the Obama years. Polls taken in July of 2014 reported that 84% of Iranians have an unfavorable view of the US government (somewhat unfavorable—14% and very unfavorable 70%) with 13% offering favorable views (very favorable—4% and somewhat favorable 9%). About 45% of Iranians held unfavorable views of the American people (somewhat unfavorable 16%; very unfavorable—29%), while 50% hold favorable views (very favorable—12%; somewhat favorable 38%).

Two years later in June of 2016 Iranian views of the United States government had decline further: unfavorable views of the US government were 87.4% (very unfavorable: 72.6%; somewhat unfavorable 14.8%). Views of the American people had not changed significantly: unfavorable 45.8% (very unfavorable—28.7%; somewhat unfavorable—17.1%) and favorable views 51.1% (very favorable—11.5%; somewhat favorable—39.6%).<sup>22</sup>

Iranians's support of the JCPOA has also decreased over time. In August 2015, 43% of Iranians said they strongly supported the agreement and 33% saying that they somewhat approved (overall 76% approved). By March 2016, 72% approved of the agreement. (Strongly approve—27% and somewhat approve—45%). Within a short period of time, Iranians were beginning to lose faith in the JCPOA. This is not surprising as many Iranians had not seen the economic benefits of the easing of sanctions. Their limited trust in Washington was also declining. In September 2015, 45% believed the United States would live up to its obligations under the nuclear agreement. Six months later by March 2016, only 29% believed the United States would uphold its obligations.<sup>23</sup>

## THE OBAMA IMPACT

Obama improved one aspect of bilateral relations with the nuclear deal and sanctions relief that accompanied it. In doing so Obama opened up a channel for diplomacy that had been closed since the 1979 revolution. The nuclear agreement between Iran and the United States, EU, and P5+1 was concluded in 2015 after years of negotiations. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or JCPOA required Iran to reduce its stockpile of enriched uranium from 12,000 kilograms of UF<sub>6</sub> to approximately 300 kilograms. In addition, the number of centrifuges, used to enrich uranium, was reduced by two-thirds.<sup>24</sup> The International Atomic

Energy Agency will monitor Iran's nuclear sites 24 hours a day/7 days a week to ensure no nuclear material is being used in a weapons capacity and will verify that Iran is complying with the terms of JCPOA. In return, international sanctions relating to Iran's nuclear activities were lifted.<sup>25</sup> The Obama administration in coordination with Russia, China, France, Germany, and the UK agreed to sanctions relief in return for limitations on Iran's nuclear program, enrichment capacity and greater transparency of nuclear activities.

The nuclear agreement did not alter the fundamental approach or rhetoric of the Supreme Leader. In January 2016 Khamenei said, "the deceptions and breaches of promises by arrogant governments, in particular America, on this issue and other issues, should not be neglected."<sup>26</sup> A year after the JCPOA was signed, Khamenei was still condemning the United States and warning Iranians not to trust the Obama administration. He said "Nuclear talks experience shows even if we compromise, US won't stop its destructive role. Iran fulfilled its obligations but US is disloyal."<sup>27</sup> He also clearly rejected any further negotiations or cooperation with the United States.<sup>28</sup>

Hardline conservatives such as Hamidreza Taraghi, a political commentator, have also criticized the Obama administration and President Rouhani's efforts on the nuclear agreement: "Rouhani has proven that trusting America is useless and a waste of time, energy and money."<sup>29</sup> Criticisms by hardline conservatives have focused on the lack of economic improvement since the nuclear agreement went into effect. Other sanctions concerning Iran's support for terrorism and some multinational corporations concerns about possible financial penalties by the US government have continued to limit foreign investment in Iran. Thus, Iran's economy has not seen significant growth since the nuclear agreement went into effect.

### *Syria*

The bilateral relationship did not change with regard to Syria or President Assad. Iran offered much material support to Bashar al-Assad to defend his regime.<sup>30</sup> Tehran made the strategic calculation that were Assad to fall, the potential for a Sunni-led regime hostile to Iran's interests might emerge since many of the opposition groups including ISIL and al Nusra were led by and largely constituted by Sunni Arabs. Afshon Ostovar noted the strategic imperative for Iran:



*Iran's enemies and rivals have backed Syria's largely Sunni rebels. This has raised the stakes for Tehran. Iran has concluded that if Assad were to be defeated, his replacement would be the client of the United States or Gulf Arab rivals, and therefore inimical to Iranian interests. For Iran, backing Assad has not been simply a means of preserving strategic interests. It has been a necessity to prevent a virulently anti-Shia movement, patronized by Iran's enemies, from taking root in the region.<sup>31</sup>*

Iran, under the direction of Qassem Soleimani, the head of the IRGC's foreign operations and Qods Forces, gave Syria financial aid and advisors.<sup>32</sup> On 4 September 2013, General Qassem Soleimani expressed Iran's commitment to Assad's government when he said that "we will support Syria to the end."<sup>33</sup> The Supreme Leader did not work with the Obama Administration to try to resolve the brutal civil war that has resulted in over 500,000 deaths. Khamenei in 3 June 2016 speech said, "we refused to be in US led coalition in regional issues and Syria."<sup>34</sup> Iran's position on Syria and Assad was unaffected by the nuclear agreement or any personal relationships that had developed between the two administrations.

These policies to defend Assad and his regime were directly counter to the Obama administration's efforts. On more than one occasion President Obama said that Assad had lost all moral legitimacy and had to go. At a press conference on 20 March 2013 President Obama said, "the United States continues to work with its allies and friends and the Syrian opposition to hasten the end of Assad's rule, to stop the violence against the Syrian people, and begin a transition towards a new government that respects the rights of all its people. Assad has lost his legitimacy to lead by attacking the Syrian people with almost every conventional weapon in his arsenal, including Scud missiles."<sup>35</sup>

Negotiations and cooperation on the nuclear impasse did not result in a willingness on the part of Tehran to work with the Obama administration on other issues, especially issues deemed essential to Iran's national interests.

### *Obama's Impact on Human Rights*

There was little change in terms of human rights during the Obama years. Iran's record on protecting human rights has been criticized by individuals and organizations both in Iran and in the international community. Whether it was Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the United

Nations or Iranian human rights activists, all have faulted the government for violating the basic rights of its citizens. Akbar Ganji, an Iranian journalist, summarized the concerns about the lack of protection of human rights in Iran as follows:

*We strongly oppose the current laws and policies in Iran, because they do not recognize freedom of thought, freedom of expression, or freedom of religion and assembly. We oppose them because they still sanction the death penalty for an infidel; because they imprison dissidents and those who live differently; because in the last eight years, they have closed more than a hundred magazines and newspapers. We oppose them because according to their version of Islamic law, they have allowed individuals to kill others deemed mabhdour-al dam, or deserving of death. We oppose them because they have denied the citizens of Iran the right to determine their own fate. They deny the people the right to replace the current rulers in a peaceful manner. They have blocked all democratic methods of reform, and they have deprived our women of many of their civic and political rights.<sup>36</sup>*

The Obama Administration criticized Tehran's violations of human rights in numerous press conferences and reports.<sup>37</sup> US sanctions targeted specific individuals responsible for human rights violations. This did not result in any appreciable improvement in the protection of fundamental human rights in Iran. Programs to support human rights activists within civil society were rather limited. Between FY2010 and FY 2014 Iran democracy promotion funding under Near East Regional Democracy programming was under 200 million dollars. Not a significant amount by Washington standards. There were also efforts by the State Department to help Iranians get around Tehran's efforts to censor or block the internet.<sup>38</sup> These limited efforts did not result in significant changes inside of the Islamic Republic. In the State Department's Human Rights Report for 2015 (released in 2016), it noted continuing violations. It deserves to be cited here at length:

*The most significant human rights problems were severe restrictions on civil liberties, including the freedoms of assembly, association, speech (including via the internet), religion, and press; limitations on citizens' ability to choose the government peacefully through free and fair elections; and abuse of due process combined with escalating use of capital punishment for crimes that do not meet the threshold of most serious crime or are committed by juvenile offenders.*

*Other reported human rights problems included disregard for the physical integrity of persons, whom authorities arbitrarily and unlawfully detained, tortured, or killed; disappearances; cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment, including judicially sanctioned amputation and flogging; politically motivated violence and repression; harsh and life-threatening conditions in detention and prison facilities, with instances of deaths in custody; arbitrary arrest and lengthy pretrial detention, sometimes incommunicado; continued impunity of the security forces; denial of fair public trial, sometimes resulting in executions without due process; the lack of an independent judiciary; political prisoners and detainees; ineffective implementation of civil judicial procedures and remedies; arbitrary interference with privacy, family, home, and correspondence; harassment and arrest of journalists; censorship and media content restrictions; severe restrictions on academic freedom; restrictions on freedom of movement; official corruption and lack of government transparency; constraints on investigations by international and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) into alleged violations of human rights; legal and societal discrimination and violence against women, ethnic and religious minorities, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) persons based on perceived sexual orientation and gender identity; incitement to anti-Semitism; trafficking in persons; and severe restrictions on the exercise of labor rights.<sup>39</sup>*

Thus, after more than seven years in office, officials in the Obama administration continued to criticize Tehran for a range of violations of civil and political rights. Obama's lofty rhetoric and limited policies did not translate into substantive progress in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

### LIMITED LONG-TERM CONSEQUENCES

President Obama changed US foreign policy when he negotiated the nuclear deal with Iran. The administration did not expect that all bilateral relations would improve as a result of the nuclear deal. And they have not. Iran has continued to imprison dual US-Iranian nationals and harass US naval ships in the Persian Gulf. Tehran continued to sow instability in the Middle East (in Yemen) and has continued its material support for Hezbollah and Assad in Syria all of which were contrary to Obama's foreign policy objectives. Obama did take steps to decrease tensions with Tehran. Will these cooperative steps continue in the next administration? It is difficult to say as the foreign policy priorities of the next administration are not clear at the time of writing. As a candidate, Donald Trump,

criticized the nuclear deal with Iran saying it was “the worst deal ever negotiated.”<sup>40</sup> Even if the new president wanted to remove the US from the JCPOA, he could not unilaterally amend its terms. Reissuing unilateral American sanctions would give Tehran an excuse to back out of its obligations which would likely aggravate allies. Disentangling the US from the JCPOA would not be easy to do. Thus, the agreement is likely to remain in place even if tensions rise between Tehran and Washington in the short term.

If the agreement holds and Tehran lives up to its commitments, will this produce a significant change in the country or in Iranian foreign policy? It is always difficult to predict the long-term consequences of a president’s policies. Given the limited nature of the nuclear agreement and the fact that it was in Tehran’s economic interest to sign it, I suspect that it will have a limited impact overall. Dismantling aspects of Iran’s nuclear program and putting effective oversight measures in place to prevent Iran from having the capacity to build nuclear weapons for at least a decade is an important achievement and one that should not be underappreciated. However, the JCPOA will not by itself alter the bilateral relationship between Washington and Tehran. Nor will it significantly realign Tehran’s foreign policy in a more cooperative direction.

Within Iran, hardliners have welcomed the election of Trump. Hardliners require an aggressive Great Satan to justify various policies including domestic crackdowns on political opponents. Harsh rhetoric from Donald Trump will contrast with President Obama’s efforts to reach out to Tehran and pragmatic conservatives such as Rouhani. Rouhani argued for the nuclear deal and the economic benefits for Iranians who had suffered under years of sanctions. If the foreign investment does not improve, Rouhani will have a harder time getting reelected in 2017. Trump did not argue for promoting human rights or democracy around the world during the campaign. So, any reformists or believers in democratic reform or civil society activists seeking to protect human rights will likely not have an advocate in the White House. However, when they had a president who believed in human rights and democracy, they saw little change in their circumstances. Thus, despite President Obama’s intentions, the situation within the Islamic Republic of Iran remained largely intact. Tehran proved it was mostly immune from Obama’s efforts to promote change.

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## Chinese Views of US Foreign Policy under the Obama Administration

*Gaye Christoffersen*

### INTRODUCTION

The Obama administration (2009–2017) will be remembered in China for its rebalance to Asia policy. This chapter will examine how Chinese perceived and debated the US rebalance to Asia and found ways to counter the rebalance. Chinese needed to reconcile the US rebalance with the pervasive Chinese belief in the power transition, a Chinese narrative of China's rise and US decline leading to a power transition that would give Beijing preeminence over its neighborhood East Asia. The power transition is deeply embedded in Chinese consciousness, although it is yet to fully emerge and has not progressed as Chinese had hoped.

When the Obama administration took office in 2009, in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, Chinese assumed the US was in permanent decline and no longer able to block China's rise. Obama's message that America welcomed rather than feared China's continued rise was accompanied by criticism of specific Chinese behavior that violated a rules-based order: trade practices, human rights violations, and cybersecurity. Obama relied on both engagement and containment as previous administrations

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had done but with less negative rhetoric. Obama's use of smart power, both hard and soft power, was misconstrued by Beijing as weakness.

In the post-Cold War era, President William Clinton, 1993–2001, focused on engagement with China and democratic enlargement with the post-communist world. President George W. Bush, 2001–2009, devoted most of his administration's attention to the wars in the Middle East, in Iraq and Afghanistan. At this time, Southeast Asia was treated as the second front in the war on terrorism. This approach alienated most of the East Asian region, as did the Bush administration's overreliance on hard power.

### THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION: STRATEGIZING AND REBALANCING

From early on, Obama intended to maintain stable relations, expand areas of cooperation with China, and manage differences. Asia experts in his administration claim that Obama and his Asia team were initially expecting a cooperative relationship with China and were not focused on Realpolitik's balance of power strategies. The US wanted to shape China's rise so that it would be a stable, constructive force.

Jeff Bader, senior director for East Asian affairs on the National Security Council, has provided an insider's account of the Obama administration's formulation and execution of American foreign policy. Obama had avoided harsh campaign language directed at China as previous presidential campaigns had done. Bader's own priority was to restore US soft power in Asia which the Bush era had destroyed.<sup>1</sup>

The Bush administration had had two warring factions—pragmatic moderates and neo-conservatives—based in the Office of Vice President in contention with the State Department. This factionalism and the ensuing battles led to two competing policy lines toward Asia. The Obama administration's Asia team was determined to avoid that kind of divisiveness.

A precedent for cooperative China relations had been set in 2005 by Robert Zoellick, US Deputy Secretary of State in the Bush administration, when he had called for China to be a “responsible power” that took on greater responsibilities in maintaining the liberal international order. Chinese President Hu Jintao's response at that time was to call for a “Harmonious World,” a different concept which Hu presented in his speech at the UN's 60th anniversary summit. “Harmonious World”

focused on the United Nations, multilateralism, and inclusiveness where all civilizations coexist harmoniously irrespective of their differing political systems.<sup>2</sup> The concept was not closely related to actual Chinese foreign policy behavior.

During 2009–2010, the Obama administration had expectations based on the G-2 concept, the idea that Beijing and Washington would work out solutions to global problems together. Zoellick, Henry Kissinger, and Zbigniew Brzezinski had been advocates of G-2. Brzezinski had suggested it to Beijing in January 2009. In April 2009, the Strategic & Economic Dialogue (S&ED) met for the first time, a dialogue that was important for the multidimensional bilateral relationship and for coordination on global issues.

However, Beijing's new assertiveness had already become apparent in 2009 based on the assumption that the US was in decline following the 2008 financial crisis. Beijing never adopted the G-2 idea, considering it an effort by a declining US to foist on China responsibility for maintaining the liberal world order. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) had challenged US Navy ships in the South China Sea. The Chinese did not play by the rules in trade relations. The American media thought the US was excessively accommodating to China. The G-2 concept had numerous critics.<sup>3</sup>

The Obama administration began with a collaborative approach to Beijing, expecting to build good will, but became disillusioned after Beijing became more aggressive and difficult on trade and military questions. November 2010 appears to be the turning point when Obama felt he was not getting Chinese cooperation in controlling North Korea's nuclear program. China was not the hoped for G-2 partner on global issues. Bader states that the hope for change of the first year was followed by the sharp-edged pushback of the second year.<sup>4</sup>

Realists in the Obama administration felt the US should never be accommodating to Beijing because Chinese respect only power and respond only to that. Kurt Campbell noted, "Chinese respect strength, determination and strategy."<sup>5</sup> In January 2011, Secretary Hillary Clinton stated, "There is no such thing as a G-2."<sup>6</sup>

The architect of the pivot, later called rebalance, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian & Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell during the first Obama administration, wrote in his memoir of the pivot that due to Chinese provocations in the East China Sea and the South China Sea, the US response was a strategy that protected freedom of navigation with US

military deployments, closer coordination with military allies, greater participation in Asian regional institutions, and active public diplomacy.<sup>7</sup> This list reflects Secretary of State Clinton's use of "smart power," drawing on both hard power and soft power.

The US rebalance (美国再平衡战略) was a comprehensive strategy to concentrate US attention and resources on Asia. Campbell stressed that it was not a containment strategy of China. It was a strategy to influence Asia-Pacific's norms and rules, to create a rules-based order which China's rise appeared to undermine. The strategy emphasized an increased US military presence in the region which many East Asian countries had encouraged the US to do in order to balance China's expanding military capacity. A Congressional Research Service report, written for the US Congress in an impartial manner, examined the pros and cons, the risks and benefits, of the US being more assertive with China. The report warned that if successor administrations failed to follow through on the strategy's pledges, there would be costs for American credibility.<sup>8</sup>

There were precursors to the pivot. Prior to taking up a position in the Obama administration, Campbell had written a report in 2008 while at the Center for a New American Security called *The Power of Balance: America in Asia*. In January 2010, Clinton's speech at the East-West Center, Honolulu, provided insight into the direction of US foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific. The US State Department under Clinton's and Campbell's leadership led the rebalance strategy in Asia. The Defense Department remained preoccupied with the Middle East, but the military dimension would eventually become the most prominent dimension of the pivot.

US priorities in Asia had been shaped during Obama's presidential campaign in 2008 by his campaign Asia team: Expand a US diplomatic, economic and military presence in Asia, strengthen US military alliances, find a workable approach to dealing with China, participate in and further institutionalize Asia-Pacific multilateral institutions, and devote more attention to Southeast Asia.<sup>9</sup>

These ideas were further elaborated on in Secretary of State Clinton's 2011 article in *Foreign Affairs*, "America's Pacific Century." US strategy would be to strengthen bilateral military alliances while broadening the US military presence in the Asia-Pacific through new security partnerships with China, India, Indonesia, and Vietnam. Clinton would engage extensively with Asian multilateral institutions—Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asian Summit, and numerous other regional organizations and dialogues. She

would expand trade and investment opportunities through Free Trade Agreements and in particular the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The Obama administration would encourage a rules-based regional order with adherence to international law.<sup>10</sup>

The US Department of Defense had introduced the Air-Sea Battle (ASB) concept in its 2010 *Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR). Although not all details were published on the ASB concept, it was meant to counter Chinese anti-access strategies that Beijing was perceived as using in East Asia against the US military. This would form part of the military dimension of the US rebalance.

The US rebalance had American critics. Robert Ross, professor at Boston College, argued that the Obama administration overemphasized the military dimension of the US rebalance. He claimed the US had misread Beijing's assertiveness which stemmed from insecurity rather than confidence. China's assertive foreign policy behavior was meant to legitimize China's leadership as it faced a rising domestic nationalism. The US rebalance would increase Beijing's insecurities and undermine possibilities of US-China cooperation.<sup>11</sup> A rejoinder to Ross claimed US policy sought to construct a regional order based on rules, principles, institutions, and international law. This was meant to prevent conflict rather than provoke it. The military dimension was only one part of the US rebalance which included economic and diplomatic engagement with China.<sup>12</sup>

The philosophical origins of the rebalance go back to the nineteenth century. The US grand strategy from then until the present in the Asia-Pacific has been to balance power with the goal of preventing any single hegemon from dominating East Asia. Historians divide this into two phases. The first phase was 1784–1907. The US policy in Asia was driven by interest groups, merchants and missionaries, promoting the Open Door policy meant to prevent European hegemons from closing off markets to US merchant and missionary interests. The second phase was 1907–1973. During this phase, the US went to war with an Asian hegemon, Japan, which tried to dominate East Asia within a yen block. This was followed by a Cold War with the Soviet Union which threatened to control East Asia within a Communist Bloc, thus closing off US commercial access to markets. The US strategy was an anti-communist symmetrical containment. The Nixon Doctrine represented a shift in strategy, requiring US allies to take primary responsibility for their own defense. The US shifted to asymmetrical containment, and balance of power politics within the US-USSR-PRC strategic triangle.<sup>13</sup>

Scholars agree that the rebalance follows American traditional strategies rather than representing a sharp break with the past. What was a break with the past was the emphasis on Asian multilateral regimes. The previous Bush administration had no confidence in Asian multilateralism and had skipped several meetings of organizations such as the ARF and had not tried to join the East Asian Summit.

Obama was following the principles of the Nixon Doctrine, greater burden sharing, and a type of “leading from behind” strategy Japan had followed in helping ASEAN create the ARF. The Obama administration’s rebalance strategy was not a G-2 strategy, nor was it an anti-China containment strategy. East Asia would not have supported a G-2 strategy, nor would it have supported containment of China, the largest trading partner with most of the smaller Asian countries. The US rebalance strategy was a hedging strategy, compatible with East Asian countries’ own hedging strategies as they promoted economic relations with China and relied on the US for security assurances. The US policy was not containment but rather a strategy of “integrate but hedge” incorporating both cooperation and competition.

The US reliance on a nuanced balancing strategy would be met with Chinese strategies for redefining the situation. The Chinese had debated for years the “power of discourse” (话语权), the power to define international relations and global order with Chinese concepts.<sup>14</sup> Beijing would redefine the US rebalance strategy to accommodate Chinese views of the power shift with a China rising and a declining US.

### CHINA’S INITIAL RESPONSE TO THE REBALANCE

Beijing’s first major experience with the emerging US rebalance strategy was in Hanoi, June 2010, at the ARF when Clinton mentioned South China Sea territorial disputes and offered to host multilateral discussions on the disputes. ASEAN countries responded positively. Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi was surprised and livid, caught off guard. He had specifically warned ASEAN countries, prior to the ARF meeting, not to talk about South China Sea disputes at gathering. He did not want these issues “internationalized”—bringing “outside powers” into the South China Sea.

Chinese responses to the US rebalance more forcefully emerged in 2012 after publication of Secretary of State Clinton’s November 2011 article in *Foreign Affairs*. Chinese repeatedly referred to the US rebalance

as a containment strategy directed at China. The US pivot set off Chinese debates over whether China should have become more aggressive after 2009, abandoning its previous low profile strategy, and debates over whether the US was really in decline or not.<sup>15</sup> There was a wide spectrum of pessimistic and optimistic analyses. *People's Daily* responded immediately, referring to the US pivot to the Pacific as a “US return to Asia,” implying that the US was an outside power in Asia, and might pivot out of Asia as quickly as it had pivoted in. The editorial specified conditions for the US return to Asia: First, the US must get along with China. Second, the US must play a constructive role in Asia.<sup>16</sup> These conditions in 2011 reveal the beginnings of a Chinese counter-strategy to the US rebalance that would emphasize the centrality of US–China relations while attempting to create rules for US participation in Asia.

This phrase, the “US return to Asia,” would be used in numerous publications and conferences to which the US would respond that it is a “resident power” in East Asia rather than an outsider. This was just one phrase among many that were part of Beijing’s effort to exercise the “power of discourse” with Chinese concepts, almost all of which have not yet been adopted regionally or internationally,

In 2012, Michael Swaine categorized these Chinese responses into authoritative, quasi-authoritative, and non-authoritative, finding variations between these categories, with emphasis on five issue areas: The TPP, the South China Sea territorial disputes, US defense doctrine; US military deployments and exercises in Asia, US strategy within US–China relations.<sup>17</sup> Chinese authoritative responses recommended China remain cautious, restrained, and not overreact to the US rebalance. Non-authoritative Chinese responses were more likely to be critical and alarmist, to view the US rebalance as containing China’s rise, destabilizing the Asian regional order, and to focus in detail on the security dimension—US military exercises, basing, and deployments. These non-authoritative voices also recommended restraint rather than confrontation, and gave no indication of how China might try to undermine the US rebalance.<sup>18</sup> Chinese took a watch and wait approach.

American writings in 2012–2013 gave no indication that Americans had anticipated how China would respond to the US rebalance. Some Chinese wanted to maintain a stable balance of power between the US and China, considered US strategy as hedging China’s expanding military power while continuing to stress US–China cooperation. There was disappointment that Chinese discourse on China’s peaceful rise and peaceful development had not been adopted by the US or East Asia.



Chinese analyst Wu Xinbo claimed Obama's first term "deteriorated from a high start to a low ending, leaving a legacy of growing mutual suspicion and rising competition."<sup>19</sup> Wu asserted that the US during this time did double-dealing with China, which gave the US tactical and short-term gains, but as a result cost China's trust. He criticized the US pivot as having a negative impact on regional interactions and Sino-US relations. He claimed the US pivot had exacerbated disputes in the South China and East China Seas as Vietnam, the Philippines, and Japan tried to use the US to pressure China on these territorial issues. Wu criticized the economic facet of the pivot, the TPP, as undermining East Asian regional economic cooperation that excluded the US such as ASEAN+3, China-ASEAN FTA, China-South Korea FTA, and the proposed Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Wu suggested that if the US were wiser, it would recognize China's expanding influence in "its neighborhood" East Asia.

The Chinese counter-strategy to the US rebalance would involve Chinese views of East Asia as its periphery or neighborhood. This Chinese discourse on East Asian regionalism, with China at its center, had been developing since the 1997 East Asian financial crisis, and had evolved into a regionalism that excluded the US.<sup>20</sup> It may have been one of the factors that led the US to emphasize its rebalance to Asia.

Chinese viewed the US pivot as a new stage in US-China relations, debating the nature of the pivot and its consequences for China. During 2012-2013, the major Chinese publications, *Contemporary International Relations* and *China International Studies*, devoted approximately one-third of their articles to the debate over the US rebalance. There were clear differences between two groups, pragmatists and pessimists. Chinese pragmatists argued that the US rebalance was a legitimate US shifting of resources to the Asia-Pacific and not a strategy to contain China. Chinese pessimists countered that the US rebalance was meant to contain China and re-establish US dominance over East Asia that had eroded when the US was drawn into Middle Eastern wars.<sup>21</sup>

Both Chinese groups believed unconditionally in China's rise, American decline and the power transition hypothesis in East Asia. China's future dominance in East Asia has remained unquestioned. However, Chinese analysts worried that the US rebalance had economic and strategic consequences that would interfere with China's rise. Economically, the TPP might create economic barriers that would exclude Chinese investment and trade. Strategically, the US rebalance would encourage other Asian

countries to take a more assertive posture toward China, especially countries that had territorial disputes with China—Japan, Vietnam, and the Philippines. These countries might miscalculate, expecting the US rebalance to contain China.<sup>22</sup>

In the US rebalance strategy, the military pillar outweighed the economic and diplomatic pillars giving it the appearance of a containment strategy. In the Chinese debates over US intentions in the rebalance strategy, Chinese hawks seized on the military pillar, using it to promote their own political positions and organizational interests.<sup>23</sup> Chinese perceived the US rebalance as only an initial blueprint that left it *ad hoc* in need of more precise objectives. Debates continued in China as to whether a US–China conflict was unavoidable. Chinese thought assertive behavior, if it did not cross a US red line, could continue as long as the US remained undecided as to the purpose of the US rebalance.<sup>24</sup>

### THE 2012 SENKAKU/DIAOYU CRISIS

The Chinese counter-strategy to the US rebalance became the Chinese concept of the “new model of major country relations” (新型大国关系) which Xi Jinping, Vice President at that time, introduced to President Obama in February 2012. This concept had embedded within it the goal of equal relations between China and the US. It was a Chinese effort to neutralize the US rebalance and to speed up the power transition by imposing a Chinese concept on Asia-Pacific international relations. The two pillars of the concept were US–China equality, which would enhance perceptions of China’s rise, and avoidance of confrontation, which would prevent a balancing coalition from emerging and containing China’s rise. The US never fully adopted the concept although Chinese would continue to refer to it.

Chinese viewed the territorial dispute over Japanese-controlled islands in the East China Sea as part of a US island chain strategy that had contained China’s naval development. In fall 2012, the Sino-Japanese Senkaku–Diaoyu territorial dispute over the islands’ sovereignty became the vehicle in which to establish equal relations with the US. Beijing had decided that it could not passively wait for the power transition in Asia that would give China a more equal relationship with the US. Chinese behavior in the dispute was focused more on the US than on Japan. The Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute became a strategic game between China and the US.<sup>25</sup>

Chinese thinking on the new type of major power relationship does not consider Japan within the discourse, except when Japan could disrupt US–China relations. Within this Chinese discourse, Japan is constructed as a declining power which is used to calibrate China’s rising power within the power transition. This erasure of Japan’s role in East Asia, western scholars have argued, remains the major impediment to a realization of a US–China new type of major power relationship.<sup>26</sup>

Some Chinese thought the Senkaku/Diaoyu crisis would help China emerge as East Asia’s leader if it demonstrated Japan’s decline and China’s rise. Yan Xuetong, a vocal advocate of China’s rise leading to a power transition, drew on Chinese international relations theory which anticipates an emerging Sino-centric order. In 2013, Yan blamed the Senkaku/Diaoyu crisis on Japan’s failure to recognize that China had risen and should thus be obeyed. Japan had not been accommodating, which he claimed caused the crisis. Japan did not recognize that there was a “National Rejuvenation” project in China that was returning East Asia to a traditional world order, a Sino-centric order, which should lead Japan to give China more respect.<sup>27</sup> A *Global Times* editorial more explicitly stated, “Japan must recognize Beijing’s will,” with regard to the Senkaku/Diaoyu, and if Japanese did not, they would be “given a humiliation that will stay with them for years.”<sup>28</sup> The author has heard Chinese Foreign Ministry officials state a modified version of this thought, conveyed in code, that “Japan must recognize China’s development.”

Some Japanese scholars also viewed the Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute as an unsuccessful attempt by Beijing to establish a Sino-centric order.<sup>29</sup> Other Japanese analysts thought Beijing was using the Diaoyu dispute to pressure and break the US–Japan alliance and thus to undermine the East Asian order based on the US-led alliance system.

During the 2012–2013 Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute, the US primarily emphasized the US–Japan security treaty and the US role in deterrence, and only secondarily the US role as a mediator at the unofficial level. The consequences of the territorial dispute were not in China’s national interest: strengthened US–Japan security relations, Japan’s increased military modernization, and an increased perception of a China threat in Southeast Asia which boosted East Asian support for the US rebalance strategy. It did not perceptibly strengthen Chinese discourse power or establish a more equal US–China relationship.

## CHINESE POWER OF DISCOURSE

In June 2013, President Xi Jinping met with President Barack Obama at the Sunnylands summit. Xi used the concept of the “new model of major country relations” and suggested the Pacific Ocean was big enough for both countries. The US did not adopt the concept, although it referred to cooperation.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi would further elaborate on the concept in September 2013 at the Brookings Institution, a think-tank in Washington, DC, where he claimed that China and the US had agreed to build a new model of major-country relations. But then Wang asked how to make it a reality, recognizing that it was not yet real. He defined three principles of “no conflict or confrontation,” “mutual respect” and “win-win cooperation,” repeating the two pillars of the new model: US–China equality and avoidance of confrontation.<sup>30</sup> He argued that the US and China should strengthen cooperation in international and regional hotspots such as Afghanistan and the Korean Peninsula. Wang did not mention cooperation in the East China Sea or the South China Sea where there would be no promises of “no conflict or confrontation” between China and the US.<sup>31</sup>

The Chinese had taken the US rebalance strategy, which was meant to counter China’s rise and the power shift, and turned it into a means for enhancing perceptions of a power shift by stressing China’s equality with the US. This strategy depended on China’s power of discourse, using concepts that the US and other countries did not use.

The US did adopt variations on the discourse without using the phrase. In March 2014, at a Xi-Obama summit, the US President stated he would commit to “continuing to strengthen and build a new model of relations.” In 2014, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel called for a “new model” in relations with Beijing’s military while he was criticizing Beijing for establishing an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea. Chinese Defense Minister Chang Wanquan criticized the military dimension of the US rebalance, shifting more military resources to East Asia, which he thought was meant to contain China’s rise. Chang, standing next to Hagel, stressed that China “can never be contained.”<sup>32</sup>

Some Chinese scholars wrote that Xi and Obama had agreed on the concept of a new model of big power relations to escape the so-called Thucydides trap of an emerging power clashing with an established power.<sup>33</sup> American critics argued it was a conceptual trap—the “new type of great-power relations” concept promoted the power shift thesis, a false

narrative of China's rise and US decline, granting China great-power status without conditionality on its foreign policy behavior.<sup>34</sup>

During the 2014 S&ED, Xi Jinping's speech had referred to the "new type of great power relationship" approximately ten times. President Obama, referring to the S&ED meeting, avoided mentioning major power relations, stating: "We are committed to the shared goal of developing over time a 'new model' of relations with China defined by increased practical cooperation and constructive management of differences."<sup>35</sup>

Chinese scholars noted that Obama and his administration avoided the concept because it posed a dilemma for him. If he accepted China's concept, it would send the wrong signal to Asian allies of US-China joint leadership in Asia, but if he rejected the concept, this would undermine US-China cooperation. Additionally, the concept had different meanings for each side. Beijing thought the concept would give it greater status and influence. Washington thought the concept meant jointly solving global problems.<sup>36</sup>

When US National Security Advisor Susan Rice visited Beijing in September 2014, she avoided referring to the concept, an indication the Obama administration had retreated from the Chinese concept. When she met with Xi, he referred to the new type of major power relations which he defined as respecting each other's core interests, such as Taiwan and territorial disputes. The US would not make such concessions.<sup>37</sup> In June 2016, at the eighth round of the China-US S&ED, Xi referred to a US-China new model of major country relationship, referring to the numerous issues on which the US and China cooperated.<sup>38</sup>

## RECONFIGURING THE ASIAN REGION

Beijing had mistakenly thought that the time period from 2012 to 2020 was a time of strategic opportunity for China, a time when China could rise without counterbalancing from other major powers, and where it could be more assertive within a broad strategic space. This time of strategic opportunity would allow for the Chinese military's incremental assertiveness in territorial disputes. Yet other Asian countries, in reaction to Chinese assertiveness, had unexpectedly at times wanted to bandwagon with the US rebalance, although they often remained ambiguous, hedging between China and the US. The US rebalance was squeezing China's strategic space in Asia. You Ji has noted that China's position was vulnerable, an emerging power rising but not yet powerful enough to constrain US

actions, and provoking a dominant power, the US, which was increasingly less tolerant of the power shift in Asia.<sup>39</sup>

From 2011 to 2014, Chinese debated how China should respond to the US rebalance. Different assessments were made by moderates and hardliners on whether the US rebalance was a strategy of containment or a hedging strategy.<sup>40</sup> Chinese discourse on containment was meant to discredit US policy by designating it a “cold war mentality,” a commonly used Chinese phrase, leaving little space to examine its nuances. For example, Jin Canrong, a professor at Renmin University in Beijing, claimed: “The pivot is a very stupid choice ... The United States has achieved nothing and only annoyed China. China can’t be contained.”<sup>41</sup> The phrase “China can’t be contained” has great emotional appeal domestically, whether or not it is empirically accurate.

Chinese stress on containment contrasts with US perceptions that “only China can contain China,” which means Chinese missteps in East Asia could lead to self-containment.<sup>42</sup> During the Senkaku/Diaoyu crisis, American analysts argued that it was Chinese persistent assertive behavior that would lead to self-containment as a *de facto* anti-China coalition emerged in response to Chinese behavior.<sup>43</sup> US Secretary of Defense Ash Carter called it China’s “Great Wall of self-isolation.”<sup>44</sup>

A Chinese scholar, Zheng Denghui, has noted that Chinese overstate the importance of China in US foreign policy, perceiving every aspect of it as trying to contain China’s rise.<sup>45</sup> American scholars argue the Chinese widespread use of the word “containment” exacerbates US–China strategic mistrust and dismisses neighboring countries’ legitimate concerns. It overlooks how US incremental balancing is meant to shape China’s choices in a way that leads to stability rather than confrontation.<sup>46</sup>

Additionally, Chinese focus on US “containment” provided a justification for why the power shift had not yet materialized. The US was not declining as expected. In October 2012, Wang Jisi, professor at Peking University, proposed that China march west to Central Asia and the Middle East rather than confront the US rebalance in East Asia.<sup>47</sup> It was during the time of the 2012 Senkaku/Diaoyu crisis. Other Chinese, such as Admiral Yang Yi, disagreed, arguing that China’s interests were in East Asia and its maritime domains were the Pacific and Indian Oceans.<sup>48</sup> Eventually all regions surrounding China would become important as Chinese conceptions of a Sino-centric order emerged.

The Chinese strategy was to discursively change regional configurations. Xi Jinping introduced several regional projects meant to transform

the East Asian regional order into a more Sino-centric order. The strategy was not to confront the US rebalance directly but to redefine the nature of international relations surrounding China.

On 7 September 2013, Xi Jinping gave a speech in Kazakhstan introducing the concept of a New Silk Road Economic Belt, stretching from China, through Central Asia, to the Middle East. The concept had its origins in a vision of a regional order based on economic circles, natural economic territories, that spanned China's borders, linking the domestic economy to surrounding areas, China's periphery.

On 3 October 2013, Xi introduced the concept of the Maritime Silk Road during a speech to the Indonesian parliament. This initiative for constructing infrastructure would reach from China through Southeast Asia, across the Indian Ocean, through the Middle East to Europe. At various points, it would connect with the Silk Road Economic Belt through Central Asia. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) initiative, a multilateral lending bank, was officially launched during Xi's Indonesian visit. AIIB would eventually have \$100 billion in capital and 57 members. On 8 November 2014, Xi Jinping proposed a \$40 billion Silk Road Fund to finance the One Belt, One Road initiative (now called the Belt & Road Initiative, BRI).

On 24–25 October 2013, the Chinese Communist Party's Central Committee convened a work forum on diplomacy for the land and maritime regions adjacent to China, called the periphery (周遍). It was the first work forum to consider China's diplomacy in its periphery. The forum followed several Politburo study sessions attempting to define China's diplomatic strategy. Numerous analysts had prepared position papers on peripheral diplomacy, published in the November/December 2013 issue of *Contemporary International Relations* [现代国际关系]. East Asia was discursively constructed as China's periphery.

In the same way, Beijing reconstructed the Asian order without the US in May 2014. During the Fourth Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) that month, Xi Jinping called for an Asian order run by Asians, where Asian people run the affairs of Asia and maintain the security of Asia.<sup>49</sup> Member countries are from West Asia, Central Asia, South Asia, and a few East Asian countries—South Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand. CICA originated in 1992 in Central Asia. Beijing hoped to elevate CICA to be the primary Asia-Pacific security regime, although not many Asia-Pacific countries par-

ticipated in it. CICA is only a summit meeting, and not yet an organization. There has not been notable activity since 2014, perhaps waiting for the BRI to develop and create a need for this organization.

In November 2014, China hosted the APEC meeting in Beijing. Xi Jinping during the meeting introduced his concept of a Chinese-driven “Asia-Pacific Dream” meant to counter the US rebalance strategy. The dream was for an Asia-Pacific community with a shared destiny, economic cooperation, and a Free Trade Area of the Asia Pacific (FTAAP). It was the regional counterpart to the domestic “Chinese dream” which Xi hoped would “realise the great renewal of the Chinese nation.” Xi’s Asia-Pacific Dream was for a China-centered Asia-Pacific, and the FTAAP was meant to be an alternative to Obama’s TPP.

At the end of November 2014, China’s Second Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs analyzed the successes and problems of China’s policy in the peripheries, the BRI. Terminology had changed to China’s “neighborhood policy” rather than periphery. Xi’s address to the Conference called for expanding and broadening the agenda of neighborhood policy, turning “China’s neighborhood areas into a community of common destiny.” He called for improved foreign policy coordination and management. He urged government agencies to do the following:

*[R]eform and improve institutions and mechanisms concerning foreign affairs, step up their coordination among different sectors, government bodies and localities, increase strategic input, ensure well-regulated foreign affairs management, and strengthen the ranks of officials managing foreign affairs.<sup>50</sup>*

Xi sought to strengthen Chinese diplomatic capacity and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Numerous problems and complications had emerged in China-Central Asian relations which Beijing was insufficiently prepared to respond to due to lack of Central Asian expertise which made cooperation difficult.<sup>51</sup>

American scholars viewed the BRI as China’s strategy to counteract the US rebalance, and had concerns that it was more than an initiative for building infrastructure. They expected BRI would ultimately challenge the liberal world order by creating an alternative world order. Zhu Feng, executive director at the China Center for Collaborative Studies of the South China Sea, Nanjing University, argued the intention of BRI was to develop China’s globally oriented economy. Nevertheless, he did think the BRI would eventually pose a challenge to the US rebalance in the future



when Beijing would convert its economic power within the BRI countries to strategic influence. The US rebalance had triggered Chinese apprehension over US intentions, and motivated Beijing to increase China's military budget and military forces.<sup>52</sup>

The military dimension of the US rebalance is considered its most alarming aspect from the Chinese perspective, and the dimension that Beijing watched most closely. In November 2016, China published the *Report on the Military Presence of the United States of America in the Asia-Pacific Region*, a detailed review of the military dimension of the US rebalance. The report was issued by the National Institute for South China Sea Studies (NISCSS) and focused on the impact of the US rebalance on South China Sea territorial disputes. The report claimed the US was using South China Sea territorial disputes as a vehicle to implement the rebalance strategy, and making US–China geopolitical rivalry the most important factor in South China Sea issues.<sup>53</sup> Despite the detailed coverage of US military forces and military alliances in the Asia-Pacific, the report ended with a discussion of US–China military cooperation based on the three principles of the new model of major power relations

On 11 January 2017, China's State Council issued a white paper on China's Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation. The section on China–US relations focused on the wide array of bilateral cooperation in climate change, counter-terrorism, marine environmental protection, Afghanistan, Korean Peninsula, Iranian nuclear program, Syria, and several military exercises. The white paper referred to a new model of major country relationship and restated the three principles which Beijing hoped it would rely on with the incoming Trump administration: “no conflict, no confrontation,” “mutual respect” and “mutually beneficial cooperation.”

## CONCLUSION

In January 2017, the US Department of State's website defined the US approach to China:

*The United States seeks to build a positive, cooperative, and comprehensive relationship with China by expanding areas of cooperation and addressing areas of disagreement...The United States welcomes a strong, peaceful, and prosperous China playing a greater role in world affairs and seeks to advance practical cooperation with China.*<sup>54</sup>

This was a clear statement of accepting China's rise without any hint of containment. There was no mention of the new type of major power relations or other Chinese concepts. The Obama administration will be remembered in China for its rebalance to Asia policy.

Yet, in President Obama's Farewell Address in January 2017, he did not mention the US rebalance to Asia. Rather he focused on the state of American democracy and the need to preserve the liberal world order against all challengers, "autocrats in foreign capitals who see free markets and open democracies and civil society itself as a threat to their power." Obama mentioned China just once, stating:

*Rivals like Russia or China cannot match our influence around the world—unless we give up what we stand for—(applause)—and turn ourselves into just another big country that bullies smaller neighbors.<sup>55</sup>*

Obama's emphasis on sustaining the liberal world order, a rules-based order of peace and prosperity, was the ultimate objective of the US rebalance to Asia.

In September 2016, Susan Rice provided an assessment of the US rebalance strategy during the Obama years. The goal was to "renew and redefine US leadership on the world stage" following a Bush administration mired in the aftermath of 9/11 attacks, two protracted Middle East ground wars and a dangerous financial crisis. The US would shift focus to the Asia-Pacific, which was becoming the global center of gravity, promoting a rules-based order, peaceful resolution of disputes, economic openness, and human rights.<sup>56</sup> The Obama years had significantly increased American soft power with its shift in priorities compared to the previous administration.

In November 2015, the White House had issued a report on the rebalance, listing its numerous achievements in Asia, which included promoting "a more durable and productive relationship with China, defined by expanded areas of practical cooperation on global challenges, and constructive management of differences."<sup>57</sup> The kind of rising China which the US would welcome was "peaceful, stable, prosperous, and a responsible player in international affairs ... working with us and others to strengthen the existing international system of norms, rules, and institutions."<sup>58</sup> The report also noted US-China differences where China was not following the rules: It referred to cyber security, market access, human rights, maritime security, and warned that "China cannot effectively wield influence while selectively opting out of international norms."<sup>59</sup>

The economic dimension of the US rebalance, the TPP, at the end of the Obama administration appeared to be dead, with opposition to it from all sides of the political spectrum. The TPP should have been an important component of Barack Obama's legacy. Instead, TPP was characterized as a job-killing trade deal. The US Congress, dominated by the Republican Party, had failed to approve the TPP. The US withdrawal from the TPP signaled the US ceding leadership on Asia-Pacific trade, possibly to the China-led trade agreement, the RCEP.

Regarding the security dimension of the US rebalance under the Obama administration. US Secretary of Defense Ash Carter in *Foreign Affairs* in November 2016 had focused on maintaining regional order through a "principled security network" of military alliances and partnerships that share the burden of maintaining regional order. This network is inclusive, open to all countries that share the goal of regional stability, and not directed against any particular country, that is to say not directed against China.<sup>60</sup> Carter had introduced the concept of principled security network at the June 2016 Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore.

Carter reiterated the kind of China the US preferred within the Asia-Pacific, "The United States welcomes the emergence of a peaceful, stable, and prosperous China that plays a responsible role in and contributes to the region's security network."<sup>61</sup> He criticized the China he saw emerging—a country that did not play by the rules, undermined the principles of regional order, and placed itself out of step with the Asia-Pacific region.

Up to the end of the Obama administration, the uniquely Chinese concepts Beijing had introduced over and over again had been avoided by Washington. Chinese political elites and scholars, having not succeeded in exercising the power of discourse, referred to a "perception gap" between China and the US that included values, domestic political systems, and civilizations. The gap is widest on belief in "the power shift."

The nature of the US rebalance is dependent on Chinese behavior, making the purpose of the rebalance elastic. Some US officials and scholars have referred to it as China's self-containment rather than a US strategy to contain China. The US policy continues to pursue both engagement and competition with Beijing. The US rebalance strategy was elastic enough to manage both. Beijing, under the assumption that a power transition had already occurred, or that it could speed up the transition discursively, engaged in overreach in East Asia, leading neighboring countries to form balancing coalitions while simultaneously engaging Beijing. The US rebalance strategy is compatible with the ways in which East Asia has

responded to China, helping to restore US soft power in the region. Given this compatibility with East Asia's approach to China, it would be difficult for Washington to switch to an entirely different approach to China.

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## South Korea's Perceptions of Obama's Foreign Policy Toward Northeast Asia

*Mason Richey*

When the US presidency of Barack Obama ended in January 2017, the United States-Republic of Korea (US-ROK) alliance was strong. This was true for shared strategic interests, military cooperation, diplomacy, commerce, and the mutual understanding between the two countries' governments and broader populations. There were few traces of the perception gaps that plagued relations between the White House and Blue House under Presidents G.W. Bush and Roh Moo Hyun, and little expression of popular anti-Americanism in the ROK that accompanied protests against the US in 2002 and 2008.

A major factor supporting the tightened US-ROK relationship was Obama himself, who remained highly popular in the ROK throughout his presidency. This positivity toward Obama came despite his inability during his mandate to resolve heightened tension on the Korean Peninsula in particular and East Asia in general. Two examples are instructive. Obama's "strategic patience" vis-à-vis the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) was at best ineffective at halting Pyongyang's advances in its nuclear weapons program, and at worst signaled indecisiveness that encouraged it. Meanwhile, Washington was unable to reduce geostrategic

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friction in the South China Sea (SCS), which became a destabilizing factor in Asian geopolitics. This was—and will continue to be—a risk for the ROK, as 85% of its oil arrives on ships crossing the SCS, while 1.1 bn tons of its traded cargo traverses the contested waters.<sup>1</sup>

Obama’s “rebalancing” toward East Asia was more than a slogan but nonetheless failed to contribute much to solving the region’s problems. Indeed, the discrepancy between the ROK’s record-level support for Obama and his performance on the Korean Peninsula and in East Asia is puzzling.

In this vein, this chapter evaluates the US-ROK partnership during the 2009–2017 period through the lens of the ROK’s expectations and perceptions of the Obama administration. A special focus is how the ROK’s appreciation of the US responded to the dynamics of (a) the security threat emanating from the DPRK and (b) the Northeast Asia regional competition between the US and China. In turn, this gives a perspective on the alliance’s resilience in the face of challenges that may arise during the Trump administration and beyond.

Three observations are evinced in this study. First, President Obama was extraordinarily popular in the ROK, and the loss of an “Obama premium” in US-ROK relations prefigures a more difficult future partnership. Second, the ROK has not been an especially demanding partner of the US, as the ROK expects signals of credible hypothetical security support from the US more than actual progress in solving regional and Peninsular issues. This expectation will be tested in the future. For its part, the US has not inordinately demanded that the ROK transcend its role of being a security “consumer” on the Peninsula, but future pressure will mount for Seoul to become a fully-fledged security provider. Third, one should understand the US-ROK partnership through the lens of improving military capabilities by China and the DPRK, which has a new capacity to threaten the US in addition to its long-standing ability to threaten the ROK. As Beijing and Pyongyang improve both strategic and theater military systems, these advances will cause political dilemmas for the US and the ROK, which face different risks within the context of their conventional and extended deterrence relationship.

### REPUBLIC OF KOREA’S PERCEPTIONS OF OBAMA

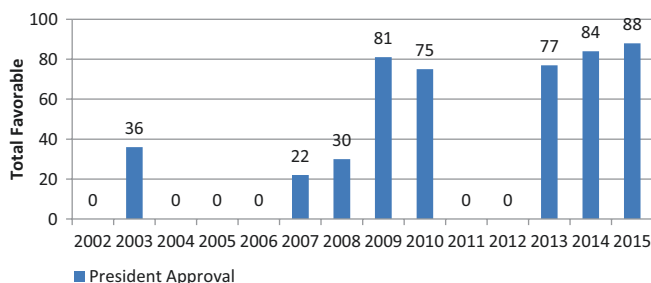
Immediately after taking office, Barack Obama raised ROK popular approval of the US president by nearly 300%, as Obama’s 81% positive rating in 2009 far exceeded President Bush’s final approval score (30%) in

2008 (Graph 12.1). Certainly, ROK appreciation for Obama stemmed partially from the fact that he was not Bush. Bush's time in office had started with a 2002 mass demonstration against the presence of US troops<sup>2</sup> in the ROK following the "Yangju Highway Incident," in which two American soldiers ran over two schoolgirls. Bilateral relations were marked by strains with President Roh's Blue House, especially concerning policy coordination on DPRK issues. Restarting US beef imports created major protests in 2008. And the Bush era ended with a global economic crisis originating in the US.

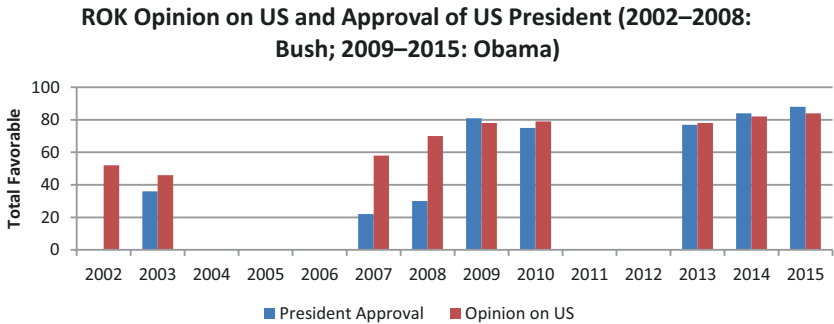
Another factor in Obama's popularity in the ROK was his optimistic message, accompanied by soaring rhetoric that won him the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize. At the start of his administration, this garnered Obama significant political capital in the ROK, and he never saw it decline meaningfully, as his lowest approval ratings were more than twice as high as Bush's best. One also notes that Obama's popularity exceeded that of the US itself (Graph 12.2).

The ROK's other primary regional partner was China, with which it had two-way trade of USD 228 bn in 2015 (representing 26.6% (USD 137 bn) of its total export value, and 21.1% (USD 90 bn) of imports).<sup>3</sup> This was double the bilateral trade the ROK had with the US, its second most important trade partner (USD 114 bn<sup>4</sup> in trade volume in 2015, of which USD 70 bn were exports).<sup>5</sup> Favorability surveys by the Asan Institute, a

**US President Approval Rating in the ROK  
(2002–2008: Bush; 2009–2015: Obama)**



**Graph 12.1** US president approval rating in the ROK (2002–2008: Bush; 2009–2015: Obama). Source: Pew research center: global attitudes and trends <http://www.pewglobal.org/database/indicator/1/country/116/>. Note: No data for 2002, 2004–2006, and 2011–2012

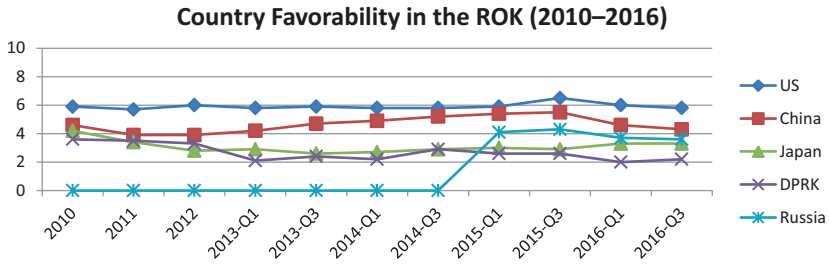


**Graph 12.2** ROK opinion on US and approval of US president (2002–2008: Bush; 2009–2015: Obama). Source: Pew research center: global attitudes and trends <http://www.pewglobal.org/database/indicator/1/country/116/>. Note: No data for 2004–2006 and 2011–2012

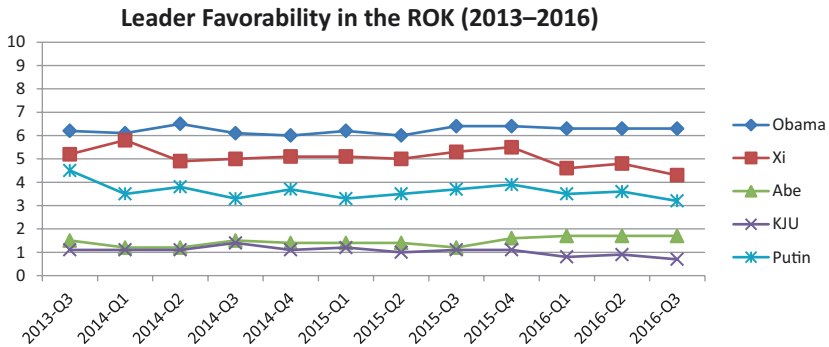
Seoul-based think tank, consistently showed that the ROK public clearly valued the trade partnership with China, which was augmented both by the critical role that it played vis-à-vis the DPRK and the historical ties between the Korean Peninsula and the Middle Kingdom.<sup>6</sup> Both ROK presidents during Obama’s tenure, Lee Myung Bak and Park Geun Hye, met with their Chinese counterparts, Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping, on numerous occasions. For both Korean leaders, the goal was to create and maintain productive relations with Beijing, which were expressed in the ROK’s positivity toward China and Xi.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, between the two rivals for East Asian regional supremacy, Washington was still ahead of Beijing in terms of popularity with the ROK public (Graphs 12.3 and 12.4).

The survey results showing the US and China as favored over other powers in Northeast Asia were consistent with the ROK government’s hedging strategy—ROK leaders wanted to avoid overdependence on either the US or China in the domains of security, defense, and commerce. The ROK population’s relative esteem for China and the US reflected its government’s realist management of relations with the two major powers. Soft power also played a role, as the US-ROK relationship was guided by attraction. American attractiveness stemmed from lifestyle and ideology, including shared liberal domestic and international political values (Graph 12.5 and Table 12.1).

Comparing the ROK’s attitudes toward the US and China to other Asia-Pacific states puts in context the strategic opportunities and dilemmas faced by the ROK during the Obama era. It also explains why hedging



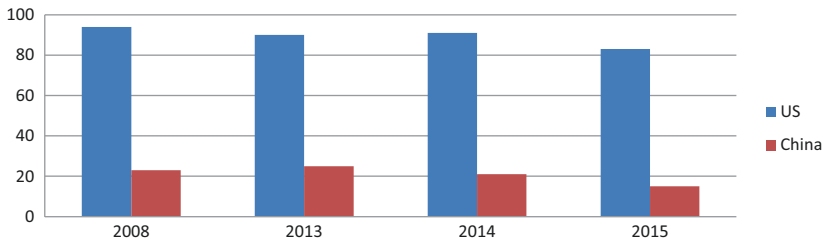
**Graph 12.3** Country favorability in the ROK (2010–2016). Source: Jiyoon Kim, “Measuring a Giant: South Korean Perceptions of the United States,” Asan Report—Public Opinion Studies Program (April 2015). file:///C:/Users/SONY/Downloads/Asan-Report-Measuring-A-Giant-South-Korean-Perceptions-of-the-United-States%20(1).pdf; Jiyoon Kim, 2016. Unpublished survey data (contact author for data files). Note: Survey data for Russia begin in 2015



**Graph 12.4** Leader favorability in the ROK (2013–2016). Source: Jiyoon Kim, “Measuring a Giant: South Korean Perceptions of the United States,” Asan Report—Public Opinion Studies Program (April 2015) file:///C:/Users/SONY/Downloads/Asan-Report-Measuring-A-Giant-South-Korean-Perceptions-of-the-United-States%20(1).pdf; Jiyoon Kim, Unpublished survey data (2016) (contact author for data files)

was a natural response. The ROK demonstrated a greater attraction to the US than did Indonesia and Australia, which were largely shielded from the geopolitics and threats arising from the fraught international security situation in Northeast Asia (e.g., DPRK weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and Japan-China maritime territorial disputes), although both Canberra

### ROK Perceptions of Countries Respecting Personal Freedoms



**Graph 12.5** ROK perceptions of countries respecting personal freedoms. Source: Pew research center: global attitudes and trends. (<http://www.pewglobal.org/database/indicator/72/country/116/>). Note: No data for 2009–2012

**Table 12.1** Comparative attraction to US higher education for selected Asia-Pacific countries (soft power proxy)

	<i>Country</i>				
	<i>ROK</i> (%)	<i>Japan</i> (%)	<i>Australia</i> (%)	<i>Indonesia</i> (%)	<i>China</i> (%)
<i>Univ. preference</i>					
Definitely prefer US university	27	8	5	31	20
Probably prefer US university	40	28	11	30	37
No preference	22	43	24	16	21
Probably prefer domestic university	7	14	19	12	11
Definitely prefer domestic university	3	8	41	12	11

Source: Simon Jackman et al., Asian Research Network: Survey on America's role in the Asia-Pacific (2016). [http://ussc.edu.au/ussc/assets/media/docs/publications/2016\\_ARN\\_Report.pdf](http://ussc.edu.au/ussc/assets/media/docs/publications/2016_ARN_Report.pdf)

Note: Percentage of respondents

and Jakarta were affected by Chinese revisionism in the SCS. Yet ROK enthusiasm for the US trailed that of Japan, which had less at stake in its relations with the DPRK than did the ROK, and accordingly had less need to hedge between the US and China (which was—and is—crucial to negotiating with Pyongyang).<sup>8</sup> Data from a 2016 report by the Asian Research Network (ARN) support the foregoing analysis (Tables 12.2

**Table 12.2** Perceptions of the positive/negative impact of the US and China in the Asia-Pacific

	<i>Country</i>			
	<i>ROK</i>	<i>Japan</i>	<i>Australia</i>	<i>Indonesia</i>
<i>Metric</i>				
US helpful (+)/harmful (-) in region	+33%	+17%	-5%	-9%
China helpful (+)/harmful (-) in region	+11%	-60%	-7%	+13%
US vs. China net favorability differential	+22% US	+77% US	+2% US	+22% China

Source: Simon Jackman et al., Asian Research Network: Survey on America's Role in the Asia-Pacific (2016). [http://ussc.edu.au/ussc/assets/media/docs/publications/2016\\_ARN\\_Report.pdf](http://ussc.edu.au/ussc/assets/media/docs/publications/2016_ARN_Report.pdf)

Note: Net percentage of respondents

**Table 12.3** Perceptions of the positive/negative impact of the US and China on selected Asia-Pacific countries

	<i>Country</i>			
	<i>ROK</i>	<i>Japan</i>	<i>Australia</i>	<i>Indonesia</i>
<i>Metric</i>				
US positive/negative influence	+40%	+31%	+15%	+5%
China positive/negative influence	+28%	-58%	+20%	+31%
US v China net favorability differential	+12% US	+89% US	+5% China	+26% China

Source: Simon Jackman et al., Asian Research Network: Survey on America's Role in the Asia-Pacific (2016). [http://ussc.edu.au/ussc/assets/media/docs/publications/2016\\_ARN\\_Report.pdf](http://ussc.edu.au/ussc/assets/media/docs/publications/2016_ARN_Report.pdf)

Note: Net percentage of respondents

and 12.3). The ROK was the only country surveyed that positively assessed the roles of both the US and China in the Asia-Pacific (Table 12.2). It also reported the highest aggregate score evaluating the impact of the US and China domestically, with the ROK giving the US the highest rating and China the second highest (Table 12.3).

An alliance relationship with the US was not dispositive for determining the favorability rating of the US. Although the ROK and Japan had full-spectrum alliances with the US and US-favorability scores to match,

Australia was also a stalwart US ally, yet had a conflicted relationship with it. The US-Australia relationship was (and is) anchored by the ANZUS Treaty (a collective security arrangement) and a free trade agreement (FTA), yet Australians had an overall negative view of the US role in the Asia-Pacific and a less favorable view of the US domestic impact compared to China.

Australia and Indonesia were both disproportionately dependent on commerce with China and sufficiently removed from Northeast Asian geopolitical strains to privilege trade over security issues—these factors combined to discount the risk of popular opinion favoring Beijing. Using this logic, one might assume the inverse would hold for both the ROK and Japan, as they are located near China and have more diversified trade portfolios. In fact, only Japan posted negative opinions about the role of China. The ROK, in fact, esteemed both the US and China highly, partially because of deeper economic ties to China (than those of Japan), but also due to the perception that Beijing was a crucial security interlocutor rather than security threat. This reflected the special nature of the Korean Peninsula and Beijing's role in influencing the DPRK. Moreover, a significant percentage of Japanese respondents (37%) viewed China as the most likely cause of regional war (almost as much as the DPRK), while ROK popular opinion reported a much lower figure for China (8%).

Among Asia-Pacific countries, there was widespread belief that a US-China power transition was occurring in Asia during the Obama era. Inevitably such perceptions affected the strategies of the region's states, and especially the ROK. In this situation, much international relations theory predicts that states will balance or hedge. Balancing behavior indicates a state believes a growing power represents a threat, and, in this context, it is not surprising that survey results from Japan—a strong regional power focused on the US-Japan alliance as a way to balance China—indicated both high threat perception associated with China and low desire for deeper engagement with the Middle Kingdom (Tables 12.2, 12.3, and 12.4; Tables 12.5 and 12.6). Australia and the ROK—like many Asia-Pacific states—adopted a hedging strategy in which both the US and China were viewed as important partners (Tables 12.2, 12.3, and 12.4; Tables 12.5 and 12.6). From a ROK perspective, this was a sensible expression of uncertainty about the power transition outcome, and recognition of the constellation of nonuniform security and economic interests of Washington, Beijing, and Seoul.



**Table 12.4** Perception of state most likely to cause interstate conflict in the Asia-Pacific during next decade

	<i>Country</i>				
	<i>ROK (%)</i>	<i>Japan (%)</i>	<i>Australia (%)</i>	<i>Indonesia (%)</i>	<i>China (%)</i>
<i>Metric</i>					
Taiwan	1	1	1	2	1
US	2	3	10	21	12
Vietnam	1	3	1	5	1
Philippines	2	1	2	1	7
South Korea	13	2	6	10	2
Japan	22	2	2	11	56
China	8	37	17	13	9
North Korea	51	50	62	36	9

Source: Simon Jackman et al., Asian Research Network: Survey on America's role in the Asia-Pacific (2016). ([http://ussc.edu.au/ussc/assets/media/docs/publications/2016\\_ARN\\_Report.pdf](http://ussc.edu.au/ussc/assets/media/docs/publications/2016_ARN_Report.pdf))

Note: Net percentage of respondents

**Table 12.5** Perceptions of comparative state influence now and in ten years: regional and global

	<i>Country</i>			
	<i>ROK (%)</i>	<i>Japan (%)</i>	<i>Australia (%)</i>	<i>Indonesia (%)</i>
<i>Metric</i>				
US most Asia influence today	60	48	22	47
US most Asia influence in ten years	23	28	11	34
China most influence today	35	39	69	22
China most influence in ten years	67	34	64	29

Source: Simon Jackman et al., Asian Research Network: Survey on America's Role in the Asia-Pacific (2016). ([http://ussc.edu.au/ussc/assets/media/docs/publications/2016\\_ARN\\_Report.pdf](http://ussc.edu.au/ussc/assets/media/docs/publications/2016_ARN_Report.pdf))

Note: Net percentage of respondents

During the Obama administration, the ROK acutely felt the strains of the dilemmas associated with hedging. As a concept, hedging is a strategic approach to managing the risks of uncertain shifts in power relations. Concretely, hedging involves foreign policy decisions regarding the depth and extent of a partnership that the hedging state will enter into with the relevant competing powers. Frequently these areas of cooperation with

**Table 12.6** Comparative interest of selected Asia-Pacific countries for altered relations with the US and China

	<i>Country</i>			
	<i>ROK</i> (%)	<i>Japan</i> (%)	<i>Australia</i> (%)	<i>Indonesia</i> (%)
<i>Metric</i>				
US stronger (+)/weaker (-) relations	+43	+29	+4	+38
China stronger (+)/weaker (-) relations	+53	+6	+30	+44

Source: Simon Jackman et al., Asian Research Network: Survey on America's role in the Asia-Pacific (2016). [http://ussc.edu.au/ussc/assets/media/docs/publications/2016\\_ARN\\_Report.pdf](http://ussc.edu.au/ussc/assets/media/docs/publications/2016_ARN_Report.pdf)

Note: Net percentage of respondents

one partner are perceived as contradictory to the interests of another, however. The following section examines these dynamics in detail.

### MAJOR EVENTS IN THE US-ROK ALLIANCE UNDER OBAMA

When the Obama administration took over the White House in January 2009, it inherited several crises that had emerged during the period of his predecessor. Two were particularly fateful: the global economic crisis that started in late 2007, and protracted wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. By contrast, US-ROK relations were at their most robust since the 1953 formation of the alliance. Correspondingly, actions were underway to advance cooperation on numerous fronts, notably those of policy coordination on the DPRK (a mixture of active pressure and multilateral diplomacy) and heightened trade relations (via the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA)). Indeed Obama inherited a US-ROK relationship in the nascent phases of transformation to a global partnership going beyond Peninsular issues.<sup>9</sup>

#### *Toward "Strategic Patience"*

Things would not be so simple. Almost immediately the Pyongyang specter dented the notion that a US-ROK global partnership would emerge independently from DPRK issues. The vexations began in April 2009, as the DPRK abandoned the Six-Party Talks (6PT), the multilateral<sup>10</sup> diplomatic effort to dismantle the DPRK's nuclear weapons program. This step followed a 13 April United Nations (UN) condemnation of a 5 April satel-

lite launch by the DPRK, generally seen as a veiled test of an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). The 6PT had been losing momentum in the waning days of the Bush administration, although there was hope that Pyongyang's mixed signals to the incoming Obama administration could provide impetus moving forward.<sup>11</sup> However, Pyongyang's break with the 6PT was accompanied by the expulsion of international inspectors and a statement to the International Atomic Energy Agency that the DPRK would resume its nuclear weapons program. The DPRK conducted its second<sup>12</sup> nuclear bomb test detonation a month later, on 25 May.

The summer of 2009 saw Pyongyang remain on the US-ROK alliance radar. To begin with, in mid-June Washington and Seoul shepherded the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1874, sanctioning the prior nuclear test. Also in mid-June, a summit between Obama and Lee Myung Bak in Washington resulted in the "Joint Vision for the Alliance," a statement of principles and broad actions reaffirming the mutual defense treaty, reiterating the value of the imminent arrival of the KORUS FTA, and promising cooperation outside the alliance's traditional foci.<sup>13</sup> The summit also highlighted the two leaders' good interpersonal chemistry.

Soon, the US settled on the path of "strategic patience" vis-à-vis the DPRK. This approach emphasized implementing targeted sanctions and ceasing meaningful negotiations with the DPRK regarding its nuclear weapons program until Pyongyang indicated interest in denuclearization. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton first alluded to this defining policy of Washington's Obama-era diplomacy with the DPRK at a press conference in December 2009: "The approach that our administration is taking is of strategic patience in close coordination with our six-party allies."<sup>14</sup> The message had the advantage of placing diplomatic responsibility on other Northeast Asian states and was welcomed by Lee's Blue House, which came into power in 2008 intending to take a harder line on the DPRK, following the Sunshine Policy<sup>15</sup> of 2000–2008.

Strategic patience relied on three interconnected prongs:

1. The condition for halting substantive efforts to incentivize Pyongyang to dismantle its nuclear weapons program was the estimation that DPRK capabilities to produce nuclear bombs and delivery systems were primitive enough that they did not represent a short-/medium-term danger to US national security. That is, the US "could afford to wait for North Korea to make its decision to denuclearize."<sup>16</sup>

2. Sanctions—growing in intensity and scope with each DPRK nuclear and missile test—were assumed to bite in the interim, squeezing the regime and pushing it toward reform, regime change, or collapse.
3. China was to be given responsibility for its quasi-partner. If through merit alone Beijing could not be persuaded to press reform on Pyongyang, then the DPRK's slow weakening and potential collapse would incentivize the Chinese to reign in Pyongyang, as DPRK state failure and possible unification under the auspices of the ROK-US alliance was among China's worst case scenarios for Northeast Asia. Thus, a lynchpin of strategic patience was that Beijing<sup>17</sup> would support and enforce increased UN sanctions against the DPRK—no small gamble, as there was scant evidence that Beijing was inclined to see its interests served by doing so.

### *North Korean Provocations*

Strategic patience also initially appeared to be a principled way of handling a truculent regime. Three months after Clinton first referred to the policy, Pyongyang allegedly carried out one of its deadliest attacks against the ROK since the end of the Korean War in 1953. On 26 March 2010, an explosion occurred off the navy corvette ROKS *Cheonan*, which sank in the Yellow Sea. In the incident, 46 crewmen died and 56 were wounded. The US provided immediate support to the ROK, at first aiding with rescue and recovery. In the weeks after the attack, the ROK and the US, along with a consortium of other states, investigated the event and concluded that a premeditated, unprovoked DPRK mini-submarine attack was nearly certainly responsible for the ROK vessel's demise. Pyongyang denied any role in the tragedy, while Beijing offered only boilerplate calls for calm in the region, and refused to support international censure of its quasi-ally. By contrast, in addition to forensic assistance, the US also provided politico-diplomatic help to the ROK, making a full-throated condemnation of Pyongyang. This reminded both the ROK government and population which of the two regional powers had security interests and perceptions aligned with the ROK. The US and the ROK also initiated a biennial 2+2 meeting in which the US Secretaries of State and Defense would meet jointly with their ROK counterparts. The first meeting concluded with a joint statement explicitly threatening the DPRK with "serious consequences for any [further] such irresponsible behavior."<sup>18</sup> The

aftermath of the *Cheonan* incident also led to the upgrade of the annual summer US-ROK military exercises, as the aircraft carrier USS *George Washington* participated as a show of strength.

The reactive focus of the US-ROK alliance during the first half of Obama's first term was given a reprieve by the G20 Leaders Summit, which Seoul hosted on 11–12 November 2010. The meeting was a triumph for the ROK in general and its partnership with the US in particular. President Lee met with Obama to discuss trade, security, and diplomatic relationships between the two countries. The G20 was also the second of Obama's four visits to the ROK (the same number as Japan). The G20 photo ops and coordinated messaging of the US and the ROK allowed the alliance partners to highlight their unity on global and East Asian issues. With Obama and Lee the stars of the summit, the G20 underscored how the ROK's relationship with the US allowed it to amplify its middle power status.

The euphoria was brief. On 12 November 2010 nuclear scientist Siegfried Hecker was invited by Pyongyang to tour the DPRK's uranium enrichment facility at Yongbyon. The international community had suspected that the country was attempting to establish a uranium enrichment (HEU) pathway to nuclear weapons, as a complement to plutonium reprocessing, but the sophistication of the program was shocking.<sup>19</sup> Hecker concluded that the DPRK's enrichment program had progressed sufficiently to produce enough HEU to construct two nuclear bombs annually.<sup>20</sup> This development cast a shadow over one of the three prongs of strategic patience: that time favored the interests of the international community.

In late November, two weeks after the G20, the DPRK doubled down on its kinetic provocations, this time artillery shelling Yeonpyongdo, a ROK-controlled island near the disputed North-South maritime demarcation line (the Northern Limit Line). Four people were killed—two civilians and two marines—and eighteen injured, while numerous buildings were damaged or destroyed. Unlike in the case of the *Cheonan* sinking, the ROK engaged in kinetic retaliation, returning fire against DPRK emplacements with 155 mm howitzers. The US and the ROK remained steadfast in their alliance commitment, as the US responded by dispatching an aircraft carrier to the Yellow Sea, serving as a deterrence reminder for Pyongyang and a message of irritation vis-à-vis China, whom the US and the ROK blamed for not controlling Pyongyang.

### *US-ROK Alliance Maintenance*

In retrospect, one can infer that Beijing's wan responses to the DPRK's major, violent provocations against the ROK (the *Cheonan* and Yeonpyongdo), as well as the revelation of the HEU program, were signals that strategic patience's critical China-prong was unlikely to hold up. However, that was not obvious at the time, as, following 2010's turbulence, 2011 saw a return to (comparative) calm in the Northeast Asian region in general and on the Korean Peninsula in particular. This provided room for working on several alliance-related activities that occurred during Obama's presidency. Indeed, throughout the vagaries of Pyongyang's provocation cycles during Obama's first term, the US and the ROK were continuing the routine tasks of alliance maintenance. These tasks included:

- Cultivating human-human exchanges in the domains of culture, science, education, etc.
- Engaging in multilateral and bilateral diplomacy (including public diplomacy)
- Holding official high-level government visits
- Meeting for security and defense consultative talks (including in configurations such as 2+2 meetings, and the Extended Deterrence Policy Committee institutionalized in 2010)
- Signing procurement agreements for interoperable defense/weapons systems
- Planning and carrying out regular US-ROK military exercises<sup>21</sup> (in addition to less intense forms of mil-mil cooperation)

These are all straightforward maintenance and development tasks for any alliance, but in the case of the US-ROK partnership, this list of standard issues was augmented by several special topics. First was the issue of relocating US Forces Korea (USFK). President Obama entered office with the US Defense Department already committed—under Bush—to reorganizing the US military presence on the Korean Peninsula. The number of US troops stationed in the ROK duly declined from 41,000 in 2003 to 28,500 in 2016. This troop reduction was accompanied by the relocation of USFK to bases south of the Han River. The troop relocation—a rebalancing of alliance burdens—consisted of two primary aspects: (i) the transfer of the Yongsan base to a new base and command center in Pyeongtaek (40 miles south of Seoul), and (ii) the restationing of 10,000 DMZ-based

troops<sup>22</sup> to sites south of Seoul. Despite a history of delays and other concerns (eventually resolved in the Special Measures Agreement), the relocation effort was underway as Obama left office.

Second on the list was the issue of ROK wartime operational control (OPCON). If the base and soldier relocations were uncontroversial in the ROK, the same cannot be said of wartime OPCON transfer. Peacetime OPCON had reverted to the ROK in 1994, but throughout the 1990s and early 2000s wartime transfer had been delayed due to concerns about the ROK's warfighting and command/control readiness during a possible DPRK attack or contingency. This concern was coupled to worries about wartime ROK OPCON leading to interoperability difficulties and a general atrophy of US-ROK operational cooperation. The impetus for changing this arose during Roh's presidency, which sought more strategic independence vis-à-vis the US. The Bush administration was cautiously supportive of the OPCON endeavor, as it implied a more capable and self-reliant alliance partner.

The original September 2006 agreement envisioned wartime OPCON reversion by April 2012. However, conservative ROK politicians were against wartime OPCON transfer, due to fears that it would mean a loosening of US defense and security commitments on the Korean Peninsula. Moreover, by the time of President Lee, it was becoming apparent that the ROK lacked the necessary capabilities to take over wartime OPCON. Consequently, Lee and Bush decided to push back the transfer date to the end of 2015. When Park succeeded Lee in 2013, wartime OPCON transfer again made it onto the alliance agenda under Obama, this time taking the form of an agreement to an open-ended delay with a "conditions-based" transfer date. This in effect meant that the ROK would progress toward the establishment of a future command structure in which it can lead theater operations.

The third topic was economic ties. The KORUS FTA dated to the Bush and Roh presidencies, having been signed in 2007. The agreement remained in limbo, however, as Bush's "fast-track" trade promotion authority expired and Congressional Democrats in the US objected to parts of the document, notably beef export and automobile-related clauses. Consequently, the KORUS FTA had not been ratified by the time of the Seoul G20 in 2010. The two leaders took the summit as an opportunity to continue their efforts to revive the languishing FTA, and by Fall 2011 the two sides' negotiators had resolved final sticking points. US Congress ratified it in October 2011, with the ROK National Assembly

following suit in November. The KORUS FTA—the largest US FTA since NAFTA in 1994—entered into force in March 2012.

Between ratification and 2016, total bilateral trade volume rose 19%.<sup>23</sup> At the time of ratification, 60% of Koreans favored the KORUS FTA, and, with the US facing a doubling of its trade deficit with the ROK over 2011–2015, most ROK citizens continued to have a positive view of trade with the US at the end of the Obama administration.

### *Leadership and Policy Changes in North Korea*

The end of 2011 was a microcosm of the US-ROK alliance. The November ratification of the KORUS FTA underscored the deep ties between the two countries and symbolized the potential for expansive cooperation. Yet the December death of DPRK leader Kim Jong Il, and the dynastic transition to his son, Kim Jong Un, about whom there was much uncertainty, was a reminder that the US-ROK alliance would never be free of the DPRK millstone. The long-term concern was that neither the US nor the ROK knew what to expect from a DPRK led by a young, unknown quantity. The immediate manifestation of his coronation was the dynamization of a set of negotiations with the DPRK that had been underway since mid-2011.

The DPRK direly needed food aid in 2011. As Lee's government was taking a hard line approach toward Pyongyang, Seoul was precluded as a sufficient aid source. Consequently, Kim Jong Il had turned to Washington. With his death and the power transfer to a new leader, there was unexpectedly the possibility of expanding the ongoing discussion over food aid to something grander. The ROK facilitated US-DPRK meetings via the New York channel, which led to US-DPRK negotiations in Beijing. Through this circuitous path, the US and the DPRK arrived at a more ambitious agreement, indeed one fateful for the US Obama-era role on the Korean Peninsula—the “Leap Day” agreement.

On 29 February 2012, the State Department announced an agreement in which the DPRK would begin a moratorium on long-range missile launches, nuclear weapons tests, and uranium enrichment. In exchange, the US would release 240,000 tons of food aid, with more to follow if needed, and if Pyongyang complied. The sweetener to the deal was the prospect of additional talks and a virtuous circle of cooperation bringing Korean Peninsula nuclear diplomacy back into swing.



The apparent goodwill in the DPRK was accompanied by continued momentum in the US-ROK partnership. Within weeks of the Leap Day agreement, the KORUS FTA entered into force and Obama made his third trip to the ROK, this time for the Second Nuclear Security Summit (NSS) held in Seoul in March. As with the G20, the NSS—an Obama initiative—served as a showcase for the friendship between Obama and Lee, as well as the tightness of the US-ROK partnership. This was even clearer given the contrast between the ROK as a responsible global stakeholder and the DPRK as a nuclear proliferator.

As with the G20, the positivity was soon dashed. As if on cue, Pyongyang lived down to expectations and reinforced its negative image. The ink was barely dry on the Leap Day agreement when Pyongyang announced an impending launch of its Unha-3 SLV (space launch vehicle), which it duly carried out (unsuccessfully) in early April. The SLV launch—again widely considered a disguised ICBM test—redemonstrated the DPRK's diplomatic duplicity, and seemingly reinforced the US decision to opt for strategic patience rather than negotiations with Pyongyang.

Thus began a dismal period on the Korean Peninsula, as the April 2012 Unha-3 launch was followed by a second, successful attempt in December. Pyongyang then raised the stakes in February 2013, when it successfully conducted a nuclear test detonation (its third overall). To add to the risks, the ROK was ushering in new executive leadership at the Blue House, as Park Geun Hye, who had campaigned partially on a policy of “Trustpolitik”<sup>24</sup> vis-à-vis the DPRK, had won the December presidential election and succeeded Lee in February 2013. The success of the SLV launch and the nuclear test were signs that both strategic patience and Trustpolitik were on shaky ground, although there were signs that Beijing's harsh response to Pyongyang's provocations indicated such irritation with Pyongyang that China could be counted on to subdue its unruly neighbor.

In consultation with China, US and ROK sought and successfully passed UN resolutions (2087 and 2094) sanctioning the DPRK. Obama and Presidents Lee and Park also hastened to demonstrate the solidity of the US-ROK alliance. In March 2013 a new “ROK-US Counterprovocation Plan” was promulgated to deal with DPRK aggression, while the annual US-ROK Security Consultative Meeting in October endorsed a “Tailored Deterrence Strategy Against North Korean Nuclear and Other WMD Threats” and announced capability improvements to alliance-based, interoperable missile defense systems.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile Washington took steps in March to show the credibility of its extended deterrence, especially via nuclear-capable aircraft overflights: B-52s based in Guam flew over ROK

territory; B-2A bombers made the round-trip from the US to the Korean Peninsula (dropping inert munitions on a ROK firing range); B-1B Lancers were deployed to Guam; and stealth F-22 Raptors were displayed at Osan Air Base.

The political dimension of the US-ROK alliance was also strengthened in 2013, as President Park made her first official visit to the US in May. Park's state visit included a well-received speech before a Joint Session of Congress, which celebrated the 60th anniversary of the US-ROK alliance, demonstrated the shared values of democracy and human rights, and underscored the congruent US and ROK perspectives on DPRK WMD developments. Park's meetings with US leaders were warm and productive, covering responses to DPRK provocations, ROK-China and ROK-Japan relations in the context of the US "rebalance" to East Asia, and trade. Her visit to the US was buttressed by Obama-Park summits at the 2014 Hague NSS (March) and the November meeting of APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) in Beijing. Sandwiched between these multilateral events, in April 2014 Obama made his fourth visit to the ROK, which resulted in few deliverables, but broadcast the message of US-ROK friendship and cooperation.

### *China, the US, and Hedging South Korea*

The Peninsular crises of 2013 were a reminder of the shared interests that drive together the US and the ROK on security and defense issues. Beyond reaffirming the US-ROK alliance, it should be recalled that Park also made a diplomatic push in 2014–2015 to re-engage China as a significant contributor to pressure on the DPRK.<sup>26</sup> This was an important part of strategic patience, and there was opportunity for success in the endeavor, as Beijing was aggravated by DPRK nuclear/missile progress and dismayed at the December 2013 execution of Jang Song Thaek, Pyongyang's number two leader and Beijing's best regime contact. Although this outreach would ultimately founder on fundamental differences between Chinese and US-ROK alliance preference order for outcomes on the Korean Peninsula, Beijing responded positively to some appeals, agreeing to greater diplomatic pressure on Pyongyang and sporadically tighter enforcement of sanctions.

The US largely supported Park's DPRK-related entreaties with China, as they were important to strategic patience. This was testified to by Obama's 2013 Sunnylands summit with Xi and the follow-on meeting in 2014, during both of which Obama pressed China to better control the

Kim regime. But even if ROK-China relations were improving, and the fundamental state of the US-ROK security alliance remained airtight, the geopolitical and economic realities of East Asia were catching up to the US-ROK partnership. If it was not already heavily salient, by 2014 the ROK was coming under pressure from US and Chinese competition for leadership in the domains of international economics and development in East Asia.

Two issues particularly illustrated the ROK's delicate position between the two great powers, and how it responded by hedging. First, Washington was forging ahead with the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), and Seoul was facing pressure to make a decision on joining the free trade area. Throughout 2014 the Blue House responded by continuing to limit its commitment to an "expressed interest," in order to buy time and avoid the Scylla of irritating the US by refusing to join the TPP and the Charybdis of angering China by committing to it (a danger to improved relations with Beijing, especially Chinese cooperation on DPRK issues and a ROK-China FTA that was under negotiation). Second, Park's government was facing competing demands from Washington and Beijing regarding ROK participation in the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), a China-founded competitor to the Asia Development Bank dominated by Japan and the US. The Obama administration was overtly pushing Park to refrain from joining the AIIB, while Xi was wooing Seoul with prospects for greater cooperation on DPRK issues, expanded economic cooperation, and diplomacy. Regarding the latter, Park's lavish 2013 visit to China was reciprocated by Xi's state visit to Seoul in July 2014, marking their fifth meeting since Park's assumption of power. It was also symbolically significant that Xi's visit to the ROK was prior to visiting the DPRK.

China's frustration with Pyongyang was a positive for the security and defense component of the US-ROK alliance, and for strategic patience in particular, but the attention China turned toward the ROK also highlighted Beijing's strategic interest in undermining the broader US-ROK partnership. And as if the challenge from China were not enough to test the US-ROK alliance, in 2014 Japan and the ROK—both bilateral alliance partners with the US—saw their politico-diplomatic relationship degrade to the lowest point in decades. The proximate cause of the problem was unresolved historical issues from the Japanese colonial and WWII periods, with both Seoul and Tokyo desiring Washington to take its side, and disappointed by US neutrality. Even improvements in the Japan-ROK relationship were tinged with frustration. A December 2014 intelligence-sharing

agreement among the US, Japan, and the ROK was a substitute for a direct Japan-ROK agreement that the two parties failed to negotiate, necessitating the tri-lateral arrangement in which the US operated as an indirect information conduit between the two “frenemies.”

Like 2014, the year 2015 marked a relative lull in DPRK provocations that test the US-ROK alliance, but the year was not without strains. On 5 March, US Ambassador to Korea, Mark Lippert, suffered knife wounds to his face and hands from an attack in Seoul. The slashing by a DPRK sympathizer was both shocking and a reminder of latent anti-Americanism among parts of the ROK populace. Of more long-term concern for the US-ROK alliance, in late March the Blue House confirmed its participation in the AIIB, despite pressure from the US not to join the institution viewed as a challenge to US leadership in Asia. Seoul’s AIIB decision stood out even more in comparison to its continued vacillation on TPP membership. The discordance was amplified by the June signing of the ROK-China FTA, which, from Washington’s perspective, symbolized a potential future in which Seoul’s closer orbit around Beijing would accompany diminished US influence in the Western Pacific.

In other respects, however, Washington and Seoul were advancing their partnership. In April the US and the ROK announced a “Section 123” agreement, an enhanced civil nuclear cooperation framework that the US reserves for strategic partners with demonstrated credibility and importance in the domain of nuclear nonproliferation. Also in April, and again in September, the biannual Korea-US Integrated Defense Dialogue met and produced a deliverable, the launch of the Deterrence Strategy Committee for strengthening combined responses to DPRK nuclear threats. Other elements of expanded defense cooperation were also underway, including a ROK purchase of a Patriot Missile Defense System and development of an alliance-interoperable, indigenous missile defense system (Korea Air Missile Defense (KAMD)).

On the negative side, however, the US irritated stakeholders in the ROK when it denied permission for the transfer of four advanced technologies for the F-35 fighters the ROK had ordered in 2014. In fact, Obama’s last full year in office saw events that were major tests for the US-ROK alliance: 2016 was the year (a) strategic patience definitively failed, as DPRK nuclear weapon capabilities demonstrated rapid operational progress, while China, despite some cooperation on DPRK-related UN resolutions and sanctions enforcement, demonstrated its limits on pushing Pyongyang; (b) China’s rise remained unabated, emboldening

Beijing to advance its interests, including through attempts to drive wedges between the US and the ROK; (c) radical, unexpected changes in domestic politics in the US and ROK upended the sense of the alliance's inevitability.

The turmoil began with a 4 January 2016 nuclear test detonation, the DPRK's fourth overall. As a show of deterrence, the US responded with a ROK airspace flyover by a nuclear-capable B-52. The measure may have reassured the ROK, but Pyongyang remained unimpressed, countering in September with a fifth test detonation (the fourth under Obama), which the US answered by dispatching the USS *Ronald Reagan* carrier strike group as a show of force. Following the January nuclear test, in February the DPRK carried out an SLV launch considered a disguised ICBM test. Throughout much of the year, the DPRK conducted regular ballistic missile tests, including launches of intermediate-range Musudan missiles and a submarine-launched ballistic missile. The international community, led by the US and the ROK, condemned the DPRK's continued bellicosity, first promulgating expanded sanctions under UNSCR 2270 in March, followed in November by the adoption of a stiffened package in UNSCR 2321.

China was guardedly supportive of these international responses to DPRK nuclear weapons development. The same cannot be said about another key US-ROK alliance measure, the controversial deployment in the ROK of a THAAD battery (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense). Alliance discussions on THAAD installation on ROK territory had been ongoing since at least 2015, with the ROK hesitant to allow it due to both domestic politics and concern about blowback from Beijing, which vehemently opposed THAAD in the ROK, particularly citing that its X-band radar could penetrate deep into China's territory and compromise China's strategic posture. The DPRK's fourth nuclear test spurred Seoul to accept THAAD, and by July 2016 the alliance announced the system's impending deployment. China was furious and retaliated against the ROK with punitive measures targeting selected ROK economic interests in China. In early January 2017, China reiterated its displeasure, sending bombers into the ROK's air-defense identification zone. Xi's message was clear: he would not let China's perceived strategic interests be undermined in order to reign in Pyongyang. Beijing's incandescence over THAAD was a reminder that its preference order for the Korean Peninsula ranks denuclearization below stability in the region in general and the DPRK regime in particular. Moreover, it underscored that China's growing power in East

Asia was sufficient to allow it to punish the ROK for policy decisions deemed detrimental to China, thus fomenting a gap between US and ROK interests.

The unexpected victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 US presidential election heralded additional, fundamental challenges to the US-ROK partnership. His campaign promised renegotiation of trade pacts deemed detrimental to US manufacturing (including the KORUS FTA), a reconsideration of US alliance commitments (including those with the ROK), possible pressure on the ROK and Japan to develop indigenous nuclear deterrents to counter the DPRK, and increased regional friction with China (a problem for Seoul's hedging strategy). Trump's election also guaranteed the demise of the TPP, vindicating ROK hesitancy to join, but also casting doubt on future US leadership in East Asia.

In terms of ROK domestic politics, in December President Park lost her battle against impeachment, the fallout of interlocking, sensationalistic Blue House scandals. Her removal from office—pending the constitutional court's ruling—left a power vacuum in the ROK executive. Consequently, her administration's numerous accomplishments became uncertain, notably those with Japan: for example, the GSOMIA (General Security of Military Information Agreement) signed in November, a planned 2017 anti-submarine drill, and interstate agreements concerning financial stability and wartime historical issues. Even more problematically for the US-ROK alliance, the sensitive (but settled) THAAD agreement came back into play with the prospect of China exploiting the disarray of ROK conservatives and pressing ascendant liberals to cancel system deployment, as many of them were hostile to THAAD already.

## CONCLUSION

When Obama left office, his Northeast Asia policy was a dangerous failure for the ROK. Strategic patience had been unmasked as nonstrategic passivity. As Victor Cha put it, “[W]e were patient because we ha[d] no strategy.” The consequences of this are playing out in the short- and medium-term as increased risk to ROK national security. Pyongyang's nuclear capability development has been much faster than expected, while outsourcing to China key aspects of pressuring the DPRK has ceded leverage over China in other areas of East Asian geopolitics. Indeed, the US inability under Obama to deal effectively with China's growing power and

regional revisionism is threatening ROK national interests in the long-term, as the ROK potentially will be forced to make unpleasant policy choices entailing trade-offs between security cooperation with the US and economic cooperation with China.

Yet on 20 January 2017, the US-ROK alliance appeared as strong as ever, and Obama was as popular in the ROK as he was on day one of his administration. How does one reconcile the gap between the Obama administration's performance and ROK perception? Perhaps ROK support for Obama was informed by the melancholy realization that any US president would have foundered given the circumstances. Indeed, along with the Middle East, the East Asia region has been one of the world's most difficult geostrategic areas, and any US foreign policy toward the region—and especially the Korean Peninsula—was likely to have weaknesses. Still, it is difficult to overlook the factor of an “Obama premium,” the diplomatic value-added of the charisma, charm, and equanimity of the man who rode into office on the winds of hope and change. If such a factor were significant in keeping the US-ROK alliance cemented during challenging times, one cannot help but wonder how the alliance will evolve in the near-term, as geopolitical headwinds appear unabated and Obama's successor has demonstrated little of his inspirational talents.

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## The Obama Era: The View from Indonesia

*Prashanth Parameswaran*

### INTRODUCTION

When US President Barack Obama was elected as the 44th president of the United States, some in Washington and Jakarta saw a “window of opportunity” for both sides to upgrade and transform the US-Indonesia relationship.<sup>1</sup> Though cooperation between the two governments had been proceeding to varying degrees over the decades, there was still no overall structure or strategic direction for the bilateral relationship, while segments of the Indonesian elite and public also continued to harbor misgivings about past and present US policies and doubts about America’s future position. With the United States now having its first president who had spent some years growing up in Jakarta and a newly democratic Indonesia looking to play a greater role in the region and the world, change seemed to be in the air.

But as this chapter will show, in practice, shifting perceptions in Indonesia and transforming the US-Indonesia relationship in fact proved to be a much more challenging task for the Obama administration during its two terms in office. A closer examination of secondary source material, combined with conversations with US and Indonesian policymakers as well as polling data, reveals that Indonesian elite and public opinion con-

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tinued to be characterized by sustained ambivalence during the Obama era, with relatively more positive views of America's image and regional presence but continuing discontent about its current conduct in the region and the world as well as pessimism about the future US position. And though the administration unquestionably elevated, upgraded, and broadened bilateral ties to an unprecedented level, its impact on the relationship was limited by a familiar list of obstacles tied to history, interests, and policy implementation.

The chapter will proceed in four separate sections. The first section will briefly examine the checkered legacy of US-Indonesia relations up to Obama's entry into office, focusing in particular on the key factors on both sides that had informed perceptions of the other and inhibited more strategic collaboration from materializing. The second and third sections will then assess the Obama administration's achievements and limitations with respect to two separate objectives: Shifting Indonesian elite and public perceptions and transforming the US-Indonesia relationship. The fourth and final section will end with concluding observations.

### THE LEGACY OF US-INDONESIA RELATIONS

The enduring strategic logic of better relationships between the United States and Indonesia would appear to be quite clear, whether it be at the outset of Indonesia's independence in 1949 or today. For the United States, Indonesia is a significant actor to cultivate in the Asia-Pacific. It is by far the largest country in Southeast Asia demographically and economically, it is situated astride critical sea-lanes, and it has increasingly evolved into a rare example where Islam, democracy, and modernity can exist as the world's third largest democracy and largest Muslim-majority nation. And for Indonesia, the United States, as the world's superpower, would be important to engage to further Jakarta's security and prosperity and to address common challenges in the region and the world.

In reality, cooperation has been far from smooth and the record of relations has been quite mixed due to the outlook, interests, and actions of both sides. Since independence, Indonesia has sought to play what its former Vice-President Mohammad Hatta called a "free and active" (*bebas-aktif*) role in world affairs, as demonstrated by its leadership role in the founding of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). This *bebas-aktif* tradition, combined with a strong sense of nationalism and its regional heft, has meant a preference for a more diversified set of relationships and a

belief in its role as a regional leader, rather than simply aligning with or offering support to extra-regional powers like the United States.<sup>2</sup>

As a result, though both governments have faced similar challenges for most of the relationship's history, from communism to terrorism, and have cooperated for decades, Jakarta has a record of fiercely disagreeing with Washington about how to address those issues, be it over communist China during the early Cold War or US foreign interventions in the Middle East during the George W. Bush administration's "War on Terror." And though foreign policy still very much remains an elite affair in Indonesia, democratization in the post-Suharto era from 1998 on has made this dynamic much more complex.<sup>3</sup>

Washington's checkered record in Indonesia has also created perceptions among segments of Indonesians that US engagement has far too often been inconsistent, indifferent, and interfering.<sup>4</sup> Though the Indonesian public and elite do generally have positive dispositions toward the United States today, past US actions dating back to the 1950s, be it its involvement in supporting anti-communist rebels that eventually saw the overthrow of Sukarno regime in 1965 or interfering on behalf of the often security-beleaguered US mining giant PT Freeport Indonesia, still fuel anti-American rants and conspiracy theories.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, America's Indonesia policy has also far too often been dominated by issues that either stoke Indonesian sensitivities, like democracy and human rights concerns in East Timor, or exacerbate differences, such as counterterrorism and the US approach to the Muslim world.<sup>6</sup> At times, Washington has also not done itself any favors by appearing tone-deaf, most infamously with its lack of compassion during Asian financial crisis in 1998 as President Suharto was forced to swallow the bitter medicine doled out by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). China, by contrast, stepped in to provide assistance to Indonesia and other Southeast Asian nations, a point which these countries have not forgotten.

Amid this mixed picture, Obama's election offered an opportunity for the United States to elevate the US-Indonesia relationship and forge broader and deeper collaboration with Indonesia. With the inauguration of a US president who had a personal connection with Indonesia and a newly democratic Indonesia looking to play a larger role in the region and the world, there was hope that Washington could seek to both chart out a vision for strategic convergence with the Indonesian government as well as improve perceptions of the United States among the Indonesian people and elite. But as the administration would discover, both of these goals

would be much more difficult to achieve than could have been imagined at the outset.

## INDONESIAN PERCEPTIONS OF THE UNITED STATES DURING THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION

Though the Obama administration did try to improve perceptions of the United States among Indonesians, it ultimately found it challenging to translate greater favorability ratings for the administration and the United States into support for current US policies and optimism about America's future position in the region and the world.

Instead, elite and popular perceptions of the United States in Indonesia during the Obama administration could be characterized as sustained ambivalence. Even though the Indonesian public did view America's image positively—especially under a president who had a personal connection to Indonesia—they remained critical about aspects of the United States' policies and conduct around the world. And while few Indonesian elites doubted current US capabilities and influence especially as the Obama era saw a rebalancing of US commitment to the Asia-Pacific, they continued to be skeptical about the future of America's position and regional role.

### *Popular Perceptions*

Indonesian public opinion is notoriously fickle, and at times it can be driven by particular incidents rather than broader trends in the relationship.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, not unlike other Asian publics, it is fair to say that popular perceptions of the United States in Indonesia have tended to differ depending on whether one is talking about what America is or what America does. On the one hand, Indonesians admire certain aspects of US history, culture, and society, along with some of the other more superficial manifestations of American soft power. But on the other hand, that may not necessarily translate into support for US policies, whether it be toward Indonesia directly or even in the broader region and world.

The Obama era was not exempt from this trend. To be sure, Indonesians definitely viewed the United States much more favorably during the Obama era than they did under George W. Bush. A lot of this certainly had to do with Obama himself: His personal connection to Indonesia; his improbable election and what that said about the United States; and the

more humble tone and style that Washington adopted relative to the recent past. Anecdotes of the euphoria that Indonesians had about the “Menteng kid”—as he was affectionately known due to the Jakarta neighborhood where he had lived between 1967 and 1971 as a child—abounded, whether it be the erection of a bronze statue in his honor, the celebrity-like reception he enjoyed during his twice-postponed, 22-hour visit to Indonesia in November 2010, or even his reply to a letter from a nine-year-old Indonesian girl as he prepared to depart the White House.

Polling data supports this uptick in favorability. The Pew Research Center, for instance, found such a dramatic jump in US favorability ratings in the lead up to Obama’s election—from 37 percent in 2008 to 63 percent in 2009—that it titled its article on the shift “The Obama Effect.”<sup>8</sup> That effect did wane a bit over the next few years, which some attributed to the fact that, following Obama’s reelection in 2012, Indonesian perceptions of the president and of the United States showed signs of normalization.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, the figures also did rebound during Obama’s second term and the average rating for figures available for his two terms was an impressive 59.7 percent, nearly double Bush’s 33.5 percent.<sup>10</sup>

Although Indonesian views about America’s image improved, support for US policies actually either declined or remained lukewarm. As a report by the Washington, DC-based think tank the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) that surveyed Indonesian elite and public perceptions cautioned early on in Obama’s presidency, since some segments of the Indonesian public may have associated the Obama era with decisive changes in US policy with respect to Indonesia, the region, and the Muslim world, frustration may quickly set in should these shifts not in fact play out.<sup>11</sup> And sure enough, there was disappointment to varying degrees when such developments played out—from his two postponements of his trip to Indonesia to the foreign policy challenges he continued to experience managing the Middle East.

Little surprise, perhaps, that Indonesians continued to express skepticism about US conduct in the world. For example, according to Gallup polling data, Indonesian approval of the leadership of the United States actually steadily declined for most of Obama’s presidency, from 46 percent during the tail end of the Bush administration in 2008 all the way to 22 percent in 2016.<sup>12</sup> Gallup noted that these decreases across several other countries had occurred despite some foreign policy successes that ought to have raised those numbers, including the rebalance to Asia as well as a withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Some of the responses to the Pew study's other questions also indicate that this may be part of a broader trend of the Indonesian public rather than just some outlier. For instance, the percentage of Indonesians approving of Obama's policies declined continuously during his first term. And the percentage of Indonesians that viewed the United States as a partner based on its conduct in the world remained stubbornly in the mid-40 percent range during this similar time period.

### *Elite Perceptions*

The same sort of general sustained ambivalence seen in Indonesian public opinion was also visible in aspects of Indonesian elite opinion about the United States. Most notably, despite their appreciation for the massive power that the United States enjoys today, the benefits that Indonesia accrues from benign US leadership, and the generally positive direction of US-Indonesia relations, Indonesian elites still remained deeply uncertain about the current nature of the US presence in the region and the sustainability of Washington's position during the Obama era.

On the one hand, Indonesian elites were broadly positive about present US capabilities as well as policies; including the Obama administration's rebalance. That in and of itself is not surprising. In 2013, Dewi Fortuna Anwar, a revered Indonesian scholar and adviser to the Indonesian vice-president, wrote that during the Bush administration, even though the United States was still involved in Asia, there was a sense that Washington was also distracted by the Middle East. Moreover, the US role in regional affairs was probably declining just as China's was ascending, thus leaving Southeast Asian states like Indonesia to deal with an increasingly powerful Beijing on their own. Seen from that perspective, the rebalance was a good thing for these countries because it helped address a perceived imbalance.<sup>13</sup>

Yet that did not necessarily mean that Indonesian elites supported the specific ways in which US regional presence manifested itself. Indeed, Indonesian officials and scholars spoke out against specific regional moves when they saw them as heightening tensions, while they also continued to express lingering concerns about past and present US policies and initiatives in the Middle East.<sup>14</sup> For instance, when the United States conducted a routing freedom of navigation operation (FONOP) in the South China Sea near one of China's artificial islands in late October 2015 during Jokowi's visit to Washington, the Indonesian president predictably urged

all parties—including Washington—“to exercise restraint.”<sup>15</sup> Luhut Pandjaitan, one of his closest advisers, was harsher, saying Indonesia disagreed with US “power projection” and equating the move with ineffective wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup>

Indonesian elites also remained deeply uncertain about the sustainability of Washington’s future position and regional role in a changing world. Though few of them would dispute the magnitude of current US capabilities or deny the benefits Indonesia gets from a stronger US regional presence, some see an East Asia where power is becoming increasingly diffuse and competition is growing much more intense.

As prominent scholar Rizal Sukma points out, the risk for Indonesia in such an environment is that the rise of China, the limits that this exerts on the US regional primacy, the greater potential for Sino-US rivalry, all combine to increase regional instability and polarization while restricting Indonesia’s autonomy.<sup>17</sup> In this more uncertain and competitive environment, Sukma argued that the logical position for Indonesia is not to align itself closer to Washington, but to hedge against uncertainty in the intentions of both the United States and China by moderating the potentially negative implications of Beijing’s rise, which requires an engaged Washington, while also reducing US dominance as a hegemonic power, which works better with a more influential Beijing.<sup>18</sup>

Sukma was far from alone in advocating this; indeed, even he admitted that this would be in line with the *bebas-aktif* tradition that large sections of Indonesia’s government and elite have often been fond of pursuing and advocating. And parts of this worldview were also articulated by other Indonesian scholars and, on occasion, even top policymakers.<sup>19</sup>

Some elements of this sustained ambivalence in the Indonesian elite are also supported by some polling conducted in the run-up to or during the Obama era. In a poll of Asian elites conducted by CSIS in 2014, on the one hand, Indonesian elites not only overwhelmingly supported the Obama administration’s goal of a strategic rebalance to Asia, as did those in other countries, but were also notably the only group that said that said that the best statement that represented their evaluation was that “it reinforced regional stability and prosperity” (most other countries, including US allies, said it was the “right policy but had insufficient resources and implementation”).<sup>20</sup> Indonesian elites thus clearly supported a greater US presence in the region and understood the benefits that it brought.

But on the other hand, those same Indonesian elites were also among the most pessimistic across Asia about the future position of the United



States relative to a rising China. Asked which country would be the most powerful in Asia in the coming decade, just 22 percent of Indonesian elites said the United States—the third lowest in the study after India and Thailand—while 70 percent said China. Though this was an improvement from when the same question was asked in an earlier CSIS poll in the run-up to the Obama administration in 2008–2009 (back then, just 5 percent said the United States, while 66 percent said China, which was the second lowest in the study after Thailand, which may have been affected by developments during the Bush years), it nonetheless suggested a firm belief that the trend toward a more diffuse world would continue and that the resulting power shifts would quickly result in China’s displacement of Washington in terms of comprehensive capabilities.

Those same Indonesian elites were also more comfortable with a more multipolar world than a US-led one, reflecting the traditional suspicion of extra-regional powers embodied in Jakarta’s *bebas-aktif* tradition. The poll found that just 9 percent of Indonesian elites said that “continued US leadership” would be in the best interest of Indonesia—the second lowest in the study—while a whopping 79 percent said a future scenario of a new multilateral community of nations would serve Jakarta best (a figure that far outstripped any other country in the study). They also thought that the latter scenario was much more likely than the former, in line with their more pessimistic outlook for the future of the US position in a more diffuse world.

### OBAMA’S IMPACT ON THE US-INDONESIA RELATIONSHIP

Though the Obama administration had a significant impact on the US-Indonesia bilateral relationship, it was much less than it had hoped. On the one hand, there is no question that the Obama era did see an elevating, upgrading, and broadening of the US-Indonesia relationship to an unprecedented level. But on the other hand, for all this effort, the administration’s impact on the relationship continued to be limited by a familiar list of obstacles tied to history, interests, and policy implementation.

#### *Achievements*

The Obama administration had three principal achievements when it came to transforming the US-Indonesia relationship. The first achievement was the elevation of Indonesia’s importance within US foreign policy. Though

Washington and Jakarta have had varying degrees of cooperation for decades, the upgrading of the relationship to a comprehensive partnership in November 2010 and a strategic partnership in October 2015 was a clear signal to Indonesia that the United States viewed it as a key power to bring into the US alliance and partnership network to address regional and global challenges, rather than just a friend to cooperate with on selective issues as US interests dictated as had been perceived previously.

From the start of Obama's presidency, Washington highlighted Indonesia as among the main target countries that could be enlisted as a partner as the United States pursued its rebalancing policy in the Asia-Pacific—with a key emphasis on Southeast Asia—and sought to tackle key problems from climate change to managing the global economy. As then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told the Council on Foreign Relations in July 2009, the administration would place "special emphasis" on emerging powers like Indonesia as "full partners in tackling the global agenda" and as part of a broader effort to create a "multi-partner world."<sup>21</sup>

The fact that Indonesia was now being viewed not just through the narrow prism of terrorism but a much broader strategic lens of comprehensive engagement that recognized its influence was a shift that was not lost on Indonesians, both in the public and in elite circles. "We cooperated before, but what is new now is the recognizing and integrating of Indonesia into American foreign policy at this level," one Indonesian official put it to me in Jakarta in a conversation after the signing of the strategic partnership.<sup>22</sup>

Obama's second achievement was the setting up of an overall architecture for the US-Indonesia relationship that would both sustain the additional momentum built up within ties and provide direction for the two sides. Even if there was already some collaboration going on to various degrees, the pursuit of a formal partnership made Washington and Jakarta identify key areas of focus under various lines of effort with proper oversight.<sup>23</sup>

Under the comprehensive partnership officially announced in November 2010 during Obama's visit to Indonesia, for instance, both sides conceived of a Plan of Action to implement it that focused on 54 areas of cooperation under three categories—political and security cooperation; economic and development cooperation; and sociocultural, educational, science and technology and other cooperation.<sup>24,25</sup> To structure that cooperation, they tasked the implementation of the Plan of Action to a joint commission chaired at the highest diplomatic levels—initially Clinton and

her counterpart Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa—with the commission meeting annually and comprising six working groups: Democracy and Civil Society; Education; Climate and Environment; Trade and Investment; Security; and Energy.<sup>26</sup>

Though this architecture was worked on by both sides, Washington's commitment to its creation and development it was clear and was important for two reasons. For one, it provided the relationship with a clear road ahead embedded within a broader strategic vision. In the words of former US ambassador to Indonesia Dino Patti Djalal, who was instrumental in the initial construction of the partnership and its implementation, it helped provide “a compass,” with “a clear direction, with set objectives and targets, and a plan of action to achieve them” to help avoid drift in the future.<sup>27</sup>

In addition, by institutionalizing and structuring the relationship, the Obama administration gave it the time and attention it deserved and tried to ensure that momentum would be sustained beyond its time in office. As then Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell told an audience at the CSIS in 2012, structuring relationships is important because it creates a “tempo” in the relationship, thereby both disciplining existing bureaucracies to take stock of cooperation on a regularized basis and ensuring that this momentum would be sustained beyond the current administration who may not be as committed to it.<sup>28</sup>

Obama's third and final achievement was engaging Indonesia in a way that began to bring along not just the Indonesian government, but the Indonesian people as well. Though the two governments have been working together for decades, Indonesia's democratization following Suharto's fall in 1998 increased the role of the Indonesian people in policymaking. That has in turn both elevated the importance in Jakarta for proper alignment between the Indonesian government and the Indonesian people in the making of foreign policy as well as impressed upon Washington the necessity of investing even more in ensuring that the US-Indonesia relationship is in line with the needs of the Indonesian people as well as the interests of their government.<sup>29</sup>

The Bush years had witnessed the point that public opinion can sometimes act as an irritant in US-Indonesia relations if not managed well, even if selective cooperation can still proceed in the short-term. To its credit, the Obama administration leveraged the president's personal popularity and made people-to-people ties a key pillar of the US-Indonesia partnership at the outset and from then on. Indeed, Obama and his team were

fond of reiterating the importance of this dimension of the relationship both privately and publicly. During Jokowi's visit to Washington, during which the strategic partnership was announced, Obama emphasized that "the friendship that the United States feels towards Indonesia is not just an issue of strategic interest but also represents the strong people-to-people ties between Americans and Indonesians."<sup>30</sup>

In terms of actions, though progress has been much slower than some would have liked and resourcing was an issue on the US side, there were nonetheless some good initial steps taken in this dimension of the relationship, including expanding the Fulbright program, improving English-language training, and better marketing of US universities to get more Indonesians to study in the United States.<sup>31</sup>

That impacted bilateral ties in two ways. First, with Washington placing more weight on the alignment between the government and the people, it helped assuage a key anxiety for both sides as they pursued greater cooperation. For Jakarta in particular, as the prominent Indonesian scholar Rizal Sukma has noted, given Indonesia's *bebas-aktif* tradition as well as the more competitive and democratic political environment today, aligning too closely with any great power carries serious risks for the government as it is.<sup>32</sup> If the United States acts in ways that risk diminishing support for Washington among Indonesians or that do not factor in the interests of the Indonesian people, that only increases the risk that cooperation can become divisive domestically, which can restrict policymakers' ability to pursue greater collaboration. As one Indonesian official put it to me in Jakarta in March, "it's [more] difficult if we cannot bring [along] our people also."<sup>33</sup>

Second, it helped boost interactions between Americans and Indonesians to provide a more solid and broad-based foundation for the relationship. As Evan Laksmana, a researcher at the Jakarta-based think tank the CSIS and a Fulbright recipient, correctly noted, by investing in both state-to-state and people-to-people ties, the administration was essentially creating a "strong ballast" in the relationship that, if sustained, would help to safeguard the US-Indonesia strategic partnership in the face of the inevitable differences that will arise in the future.<sup>34</sup>

### *Challenges*

Despite these achievements, Obama's impact on the bilateral relationship was also constrained significantly by a range of challenges. Difficulties sur-

rounding structural differences, strategic convergence, and implementation difficulties all combined to pose formidable obstacles to making inroads in the US-Indonesia strategic partnership.

The first challenge that limited Obama's impact on the US-Indonesia relationship was deeply rooted structural differences between the two sides. In particular, Indonesia's continued adherence to a free and active policy meant that even as Washington expected Jakarta to back US-led initiatives, in practice the Jokowi government proved reluctant to do so and at times even opposed certain American actions despite the commitment to a more formalized partnership, the pursuit of which had also initially proved more challenging than it appeared.<sup>35</sup>

The result was a series of disagreements during Obama's two terms in office. At times, Indonesia felt like certain US moves escalated regional tensions in ways that would constrain its freedom of action. For instance, when Obama announced the stationing of US Marines in Darwin, Australia, in November 2011—a key initiative within the rebalance—Indonesia saw the action as destabilizing and heavy-handed and not only did not publicly support a stronger US presence but spoke out against it. As Natalegawa explained at the time, though Indonesia was in favor of the general idea of the rebalance, that particular move risked creating a “vicious cycle of tension and mistrust” between the United States and China where Southeast Asian states like Indonesia may be forced to take sides.<sup>36</sup>

At other times, both sides could not forge tighter, formal partnerships publicly even on pressing challenges. For instance, though both the United States and Indonesia viewed fighting the Islamic State as among their top priorities and counterterrorism cooperation had already been going on prior to Obama's time in office, there was still little sign of bolder moves such as Indonesia joining the 65-member US-led Global Coalition to Counter Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Indonesia's absence in the Coalition is notable given that Malaysia, the other major Southeast Asian Muslim-majority state that shares similar sensitivities, nonetheless joined the grouping and has led regional efforts particularly in countering messaging.<sup>37</sup> This is despite the fact that Malaysia possesses only a comprehensive partnership with the United States, as opposed to a strategic partnership that Jakarta enjoys.

A second challenge that limited Obama's impact on the US-Indonesia relationship was the lack of strategic convergence between the two governments on some issues, as opposed to more structural issues that related

to the foreign policy traditions of both countries. This was particularly visible in the struggle that the Obama administration faced in operationalizing strategic convergence with the domestic-oriented government of Indonesian President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo when he came to power in late 2014 rather than his relatively more internationalist predecessor Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. Even if Washington and Jakarta were able to continue to pursue cooperation in some areas, this did limit what could be accomplished by the two sides bilaterally, regionally, and globally.

Under Yudhoyono, Indonesia had begun to become more active in foreign policy after a tumultuous few years in the late 1990s, with Jakarta recapturing its role as *primus inter pares* in Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and began to play a leading role on global issues like climate change. The Yudhoyono’s worldview was quite aligned with the Obama administration’s notion of a multi-partner world where countries would work together to address regional and global challenges, which provided a solid base to upgrade ties. But Jokowi’s emergence in late 2014, and the narrowing of Indonesia’s conception of its interests and the resulting reprioritization of issues, made cooperation much more selective as well more difficult to achieve for both sides in some sense.

Bilaterally, though some areas of cooperation, like education or illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, saw some modest progress, other priority areas for Jokowi were difficult for both countries to make inroads on within the relationship. Take for instance the Jokowi government’s emphasis on the need for greater diversification of US foreign direct investment (FDI) into Indonesia. As it is, the economic dimension of the relationship has traditionally been the most difficult one for both sides to address. And though few would disagree that US business involvement in Indonesia needs to be better distributed beyond extractive industries, especially in an environment of economic nationalism, the sheer scale of the issue as well as the ambitious steps required to address it always meant that prospects for a quick resolution would be quite dim. The challenges Jokowi faced in enacting the domestic reforms necessary to create the conditions for more investment, and Obama’s failure to pass the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) that would have served as an additional external driver for change, illustrate how heavy of a lift this really was.<sup>38</sup>

Meanwhile, collaboration on regional and global issues—the real bedrock of strategic partnerships—was much less than such a label might suggest. For instance, though part of the rationale for a US strategic partnership with Indonesia was the fact that it was a leader in ASEAN, the

reality under Jokowi and Obama was such that Washington appeared to be more committed to regionalism than Jakarta. As Obama was lavishing time, attention, and resources to Southeast Asia and ASEAN to an unprecedented degree, the region was worried about Indonesia's lack of interest in ASEAN, from Jokowi's initially checkered record of attending regional meetings to more substantive issues like Jakarta's hesitance about the ASEAN Economic Community or its assertive behavior in sinking neighboring vessels to eradicate illegal fishing.<sup>39</sup> While Indonesian officials are right that some of this is overstated, it is also true that the relative comparison to the Yudhoyono years is clear for all to see and felt by some of the country's most seasoned diplomats.

The third and final challenge that limited Obama's impact on the bilateral relationship was the familiar challenge of following through on ongoing cooperation. Though this is far from unique to the US-Indonesia strategic partnership, the Obama era did see a few rather stark examples of how a range of factors—from vested interests to bureaucratic inertia—delayed and at times undermined or disrupted collaboration in some areas.

Maritime security is a case in point. Cooperation in this area was a top strategic priority for both governments within the defense realm, especially given Jokowi's vision of Indonesia as a global maritime fulcrum between the Indian and Pacific Oceans and the Obama administration's emphasis on improving maritime domain awareness capabilities in Southeast Asia and countering Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea. And they had begun to make significant inroads in terms of translating shared objectives into actual cooperation.

But at times, following through on implementing some of these proposals either fell short or faced long delays. For instance, just days before Jokowi landed in Washington for his October 2015 visit, Indonesian officials canceled the inking of a work plan that would have institutionalized US assistance to Jakarta's newly created coast guard known as BAKAMLA, an entity critical to coordinating the country's dizzying array of maritime security actors,<sup>40</sup> US officials were understandably miffed when informed of this with little notice, with one warning the Indonesian side that failure to ink the agreement would negatively impact maritime security cooperation between the two countries.<sup>41</sup> Though the pact was signed months later, it was nonetheless a reminder of an all-too-familiar story in which domestic interest groups frustrated an area of promise in the bilateral relationship.

## CONCLUSION

As this chapter has shown, shifting perceptions in Indonesia and transforming the US-Indonesia relationship proved to be quite an arduous undertaking for the Obama administration in spite of a number of factors that worked in its favor, including Obama's personal connection to Indonesia. Even as Indonesians did view the United States more favorably and appreciated some aspects of its presence, elite and public opinion continued to be characterized by sustained ambivalence about America's current policies and its future position. And while the US-Indonesia relationship was elevated, upgraded, and broadened to a level not seen before under any previous administration, it also continued to face the same obstacles that had bedeviled ties before tied to history, interests, and policy implementation.

Though this may be far from surprising, it nonetheless speaks to the difficulty of altering a historical legacy that has shaped perceptions and driven the relationship for so long despite the inflated expectations among some in Jakarta and Washington when Obama took office. It is also testament to the enduring power of more structural variables like power and interests even in the face of temporary but nonetheless dramatic shifts in agential ones. Although the American presidency may be one personal manifestation of US power and purpose, it is far from the only or even the most important one when driving perceptions and policy.

At a more granular level, it is also an important reminder that certain aspects of perceptions and areas of policy are subject to change far more easily, quickly, and dramatically than others. Ratings of favorability or evaluations of current policy may shift appreciably with particular personalities or events, but future expectations may be much more difficult to change among both elites and the population. Similarly, views on certain areas of policy that tend to dominate the relationship and evaluations of it, like the Middle East or terrorism, may not change as much because they are tied to deeply rooted historical sensitivities much more so than other areas might be. Furthermore, certain policy achievements or limitations may be more easily discerned by elites who are more directly involved in the evolution of a relationship than by the public at large that is more indirectly so.

Finally, it is a clear demonstration that worldviews are complex things that demand nuanced treatment. Perspectives on "the United States" or "the Obama administration" can vary depending on whether one is talk-



ing about current American power or its future potential, and which specific manifestations of US presence or particular policy one is referring to. That makes capturing those nuances in both perceptions and policy more challenging for pollsters, policymakers, politicians, and scholars alike, particularly in the world's fourth largest country. And it speaks to the importance of continuing to fine-tune the tools we have at our disposal for commentary, analysis, and scholarship.

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## Obama and the United States–Pakistan Marriage of Convenience

*Christopher Clary and Niloufer Siddiqui*

### INTRODUCTION

Pakistan and the United States have long been stuck in a marriage of convenience. Neither has a better alternative to their present partnership, but episodes of marital discord are frequent. Both find the other party to be misguided and duplicitous. Rather than transform the relationship into a stable and enduring partnership, President Barack Obama’s tenure was characterized by the loss of any illusion that happier ties were achievable.

This decline in the relationship is even more remarkable, given—and perhaps, partly due to—the lofty expectations that accompanied Obama’s entry into office. His mother’s time in Pakistan working on development projects, his Pakistani college roommate, and Obama’s brief visit to Karachi in the early 1980s led some Pakistani commentators to assess that the new president knew Pakistan “very well” and would work to help the country.<sup>1</sup> More broadly, Obama sought to project a familiarity with Muslims through these experiences as well as his youth in Indonesia. He hoped they would provide a biographic foundation for “a new beginning” for the United States and the Muslim world, which served as the

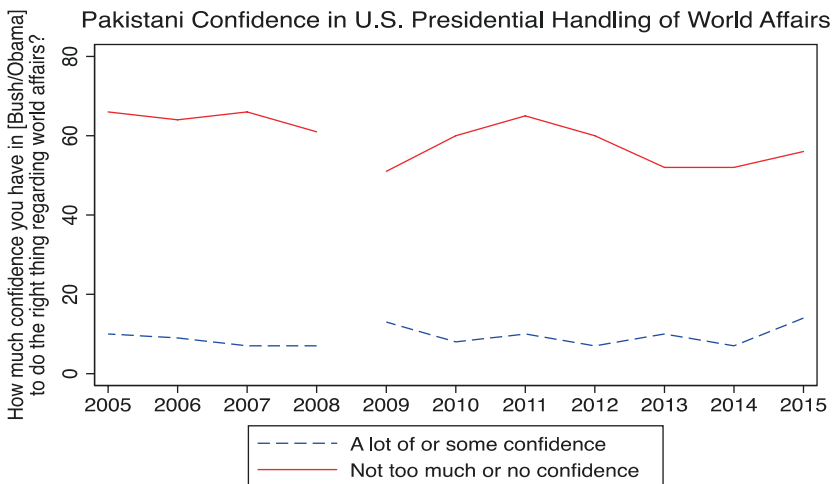
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title for a speech he gave in Cairo in June 2009. While some Pakistanis were willing to offer Obama the benefit of the doubt after Bush's conflictual presidency, this honeymoon period was limited in scope and exceptionally brief. Even in his first months in office, fewer than 20 percent of Pakistanis believed he had a better understanding of Pakistan than most western leaders, and less than 10 percent even knew that his mother had worked in Pakistan. In contrast, by that same date, nearly 80 percent of Indonesians knew that he had lived for some time in Indonesia.<sup>2</sup> Obama's policies—rather than his biography—led the Pakistani public to be just as critical of him by 2010 as it was of his predecessor George W. Bush, despite the earlier president having initiated wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. See Graph 14.1.

The following year the relationship faced its most severe challenge, when the United States initiated a raid that killed Osama bin Laden in May 2011, seemingly without the approval or involvement of the Pakistan government. That year began the pivot away from optimism about the future of the United States–Pakistan relationship and toward the cynicism and grudging coexistence which now defines the partnership.

This chapter reviews three key elements that remain foundational to Pakistani views of the United States and which helped define the nature of



**Graph 14.1** Pakistani confidence levels in US presidents, 2005–2015. Source: Pew global attitudes and trends question database

the bilateral relationship under Obama. First, it examines the evolution of the US “war on terror” and the associated military mission in Afghanistan during the Obama years. This effort generated constant friction between the two states because Pakistan has covertly supported groups hostile to the American presence in Afghanistan, while the United States has—both covertly and overtly—violated Pakistani sovereignty in order to attack suspected terrorists, with the bin Laden raid merely being the most widely known episode. Second, it surveys Pakistani perceptions of the strengthening United States–India partnership, which Pakistanis overwhelmingly view as injurious to their interests. Third, it examines US efforts to improve the public health sector, the economy, and governance in Pakistan through the provision of development aid. It finds that initiatives to generate goodwill toward the United States have been more than counteracted by reactions to other avenues of US policy, leading to frustrations on both sides.

### WAR ON TERROR AND AFGHANISTAN

As early as 2007, in the initial months of his candidacy for president, Obama promised to “tak[e] the fight to the terrorists in Afghanistan and Pakistan.” He argued for conditionality in US military aid to encourage Pakistan to cease support for terrorist groups within its borders and pledged to act “if we have actionable intelligence about high-value terrorist targets” and Pakistan would not do so.<sup>3</sup> By 2008, Obama had refined a set of policies that included elements more pleasing to Pakistani ears, including his assessment that the United States “should probably try to facilitate a better understanding between Pakistan and India and try to resolve the Kashmir crisis so that they can stay focused not on India, but on the situation with [extremist] militants.”<sup>4</sup> Seventy-four percent of Pakistanis surveyed in 2009 assessed Kashmir to be a “very big problem,” with a similar percentage believing that resolution of the dispute was “very important.”<sup>5</sup> Obama dispatched Vice President-elect Joseph R. “Joe” Biden to Islamabad in January 2009 to both reassure Pakistani leaders and also caution them: “If you do not show spine, then all bets are off” on United States–Pakistan ties.<sup>6</sup> After assuming the presidency, Obama expanded his message to include assurances that he sought to “avoid the mistakes of the past,” and “demonstrate through deeds as well as words a commitment that is enduring” to the Pakistani people.<sup>7</sup>

During the Pervez Musharraf period in Pakistan (2001–2008), there was some sense that United States–Pakistan relations were improving. In



Washington, there was a widespread belief that Musharraf was Bush's "personal favorite among third world leaders," or, more disparagingly, his "favorite dictator."<sup>8</sup> Nearly 50 percent of Pakistani respondents assessed that ties with the United States had improved when asked in April 2006.<sup>9</sup> This figure was likely artificially inflated by President Bush's visit to Pakistan in March of that year, just a few weeks prior to the survey. Bush was the first US president to visit Pakistan since 2000, when Bill Clinton had visited for just a few hours and never left the tarmac of Islamabad airport.

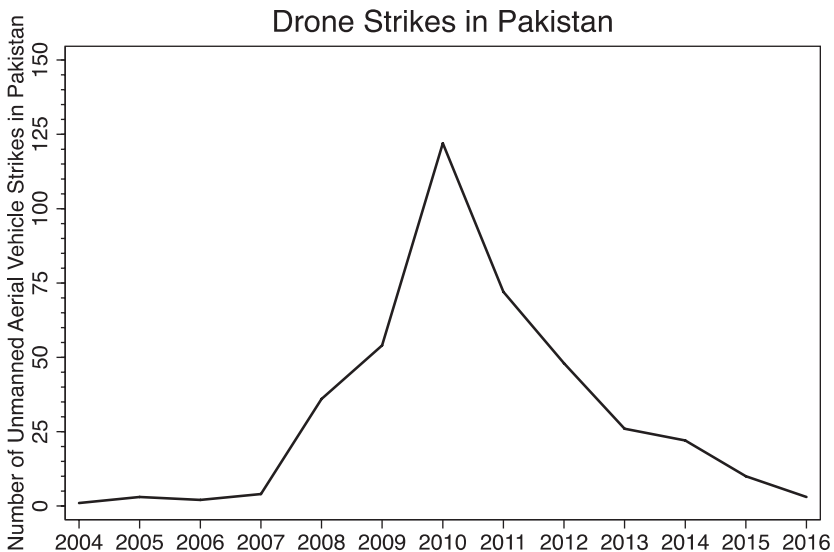
### *The Drone Campaign*

By the end of his presidency, however, even Bush had grown frustrated with Pakistan. The US government had belatedly facilitated an incomplete transition of Pakistan to democratic rule, with Musharraf's resignation in August 2008. Perhaps as important for the future trajectory of the relationship, Bush had authorized a substantial increase in the number of strikes from armed unmanned aerial vehicles above Pakistani airspace. Since 2004, the United States had conducted only a handful of such attacks—perhaps just 10 by the end of 2007. In 2008, however, Bush was convinced of ties between the Pakistan Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and a militant group commonly known as the Haqqani network for its patron, Jalaluddin Haqqani. The Haqqani network was involved in a wide range of attacks within Afghanistan, including those targeting the US-led military coalition as well as a deadly attack on the Indian embassy in Kabul that killed 58 people. US intelligence believed that previous drone strikes had limited effectiveness because Pakistani intelligence would be notified of a target and the ISI would then warn the endangered groups of the pending strikes, permitting key militants to escape. Bush directed his government to no longer provide Pakistan advance warning, and instead only "concurrent notification" as an attack was about to happen or shortly after a drone strike had already taken place.<sup>10</sup> This was bound to create tensions with Pakistan, which secretly permitted the drone campaign, including allowing flight operations to take place from a Pakistani air base near Quetta, Pakistan, from 2001 to 2011, even as Pakistani officials publicly condemned it.<sup>11</sup>

After only 4 drone strikes in 2007, Bush approved 36 in 2008.<sup>12</sup> The Bush team assessed that these attacks had substantial tactical benefit, killing 7 of the top 20 al-Qaeda leaders in the year prior to Obama's election.<sup>13</sup> In

his first year in office, Obama not only continued the drone war but increased the quantity of strikes and size of the area in which drones could operate.<sup>14</sup> By 2010, at its peak, the United States conducted 122 strikes in Pakistan (see Graph 14.2). By 2012, non-governmental and academic analysts concluded that between 500 and 800 civilians had died cumulatively in the drone strikes, out of perhaps 2500–3300 total killed in the attacks.<sup>15</sup> The US government disputed those claims, with President Obama ultimately releasing a report in his final year in office that concluded that fewer than 116 civilians had been killed in all drone strikes outside of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria.<sup>16</sup> Importantly, the distinction between civilians and militants in this context was largely blurred.

A majority of Pakistanis came to conclude that collateral damage from the strikes was unacceptable. By early 2009, 95 percent of Pakistanis who knew of the drone strikes—importantly, only 32 percent professed knowledge of the strikes that year—viewed them as a “bad” or “very bad” thing. Beginning in 2011, a majority of Pakistani respondents claimed to have heard “a lot” or “a little” about the drone campaign in Pew surveys. By 2013, when all Pakistani respondents were polled about whether drone strikes were necessary, fewer than one-third agreed they were necessary to



**Graph 14.2** US drone strikes in Pakistan. Source: New America foundation

defend Pakistan from extremist groups, while more than two-thirds believed they killed too many innocent people.<sup>17</sup> Over the course of the initial five years of the Obama administration, the number of Pakistani newspaper editorials devoted to the drone campaign increased, with the vast majority of these editorials condemning the morality and efficacy of the campaign.<sup>18</sup> In December 2013, the Pakistan National Assembly, Pakistan's lower house of parliament, unanimously approved a motion to condemn "the drone attacks by the allied forces on the territory of Pakistan, which constitute violation of the principles of the Charter of the United Nations, international laws and humanitarian norms."<sup>19</sup>

There remains a debate as to the extent of the drone program's unpopularity. Gen. James Cartright, former Vice Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, reflected the predominant view in Washington, when he said in 2013: "If you're trying to kill your way to a solution, no matter how precise you are, you're going to upset people even if they're not targeted."<sup>20</sup> Similarly, counterinsurgency experts David Kilcullen and Andrew Exum concluded in 2009, "every one of these dead noncombatants represents an alienated family, a new desire for revenge, and more recruits for a militant movement that has grown exponentially even as drone strikes have increased."<sup>21</sup> Academics have expressed some skepticism. Fair and colleagues suggest that at most a plurality, rather than a majority, of Pakistanis oppose the drone strikes, though even they find 50 percent of Pakistanis with awareness of the strikes do not support them "at all."<sup>22</sup> Aqil Shah, based on 147 interviews from a non-random sample of residents of North Waziristan, found 79 percent of respondents supported the drone attacks.<sup>23</sup>

These critiques, while important, are not inconsistent with the overall body of evidence. It may be true that many Pakistanis do not have an opinion on the drone campaign, but it may also be true that those that do have an opinion are strongly opposed to it. It may be true that those Pakistanis nearest to the drone attacks are least opposed to them, perhaps being more aware of their precision or more directly threatened by the militants whom the drones target, but even so the vast majority of Pakistanis do not live near the targeted areas, and as such their views are consequential.

The Obama administration sharply curtailed drone use following the 2010 peak. In addition to concerns over the strategic consequences of the drone campaign, technological and doctrinal developments also led the United States to increasingly target vehicles, rather than residences,

beginning around 2011, with a concomitant decrease in civilian deaths. In mid-2012, Obama also ordered a reassessment of US drone policy that eventually led to a new standard that required “near certainty” that an attack would not endanger civilians before it could be launched.<sup>24</sup> Elite and public opinion are sticky, however, and Pakistani criticisms of the drone program did not diminish as a result of these improvements in accuracy or decreases in the number of strikes.<sup>25</sup>

### *Covert Operators: Blackwater and Raymond Davis*

In some cases, as with the drone campaign, US policy was bound to be unpopular as Washington attempted to use violence—however selective—in Pakistan to reduce risks to the United States. In other cases, it was not so much US policy as much as allegations of US activities that led to popular uproar in Pakistan. Widespread rumors of the presence in Pakistan of CIA agents and private security firms like Blackwater running covert operations complicated US efforts to build trust. Blackwater (renamed Xe Services in 2009) gained notoriety for its involvement in the Iraq War, where its employees were accused of excessive force, and were found guilty of involvement in a mass shooting in Baghdad in 2007 that left 17 people dead. In 2009, the *New York Times* reported that the company was involved with drone strikes in Pakistan, but there was no official acknowledgment of its presence in the country by the Pakistan government.<sup>26</sup> Pakistanis, lied to by the US government, now saw Blackwater’s role in myriad events in the country. “When things go boom in the night, Pakistanis blame Blackwater” ran a headline in the *Christian Science Monitor*. A common conspiracy theory was that Blackwater was charged with organizing suicide attacks to create instability in Pakistan to justify a US operation to seize Pakistan’s nuclear weapons. The Pakistani security services had some incentive to blame a “hidden” foreign hand in these attacks, rather than admit that many attackers were radicalized Pakistanis. Protests and demonstrations against the security firm took place in Peshawar, Lahore, and Karachi despite little knowledge—or evidence—of its precise role in the country. Reassurances from Interior Minister Rehman Malik that Blackwater was not operating in Pakistan—he vowed to resign if evidence to the contrary was discovered—fell on deaf ears.<sup>27</sup>

Given this backdrop, perhaps it was not surprising that the events surrounding US security contractor Raymond Davis became a flashpoint in United States–Pakistan relations. In January 2011, Davis killed two

Pakistani men in Lahore—reportedly petty street criminals, while another innocent bystander was killed in Davis’s escape from the scene. The two men, perched on a motorcycle, had approached Davis’s car on a crowded intersection in Lahore and drawn their guns. Davis, using a semiautomatic pistol, shot through the windshield of his vehicle, killing one, and when the other attempted to flee, Davis got out of his car, fired, and killed the other. For two months, the United States and Pakistan disputed whether Davis was entitled to diplomatic immunity, a feud that concluded with Davis’s return to the United States and a large US cash payment to the families of the victims. As Mark Mazzetti wrote in 2013, while the Davis affair was largely forgotten in the United States, in Pakistan, it, “more than the Bin Laden raid, ... is still discussed in the country’s crowded bazaars and corridors of power.”<sup>28</sup> To many Pakistanis, Davis was the physical manifestation of all of their darkest fears of American intentions. For one, it became apparent quickly that Davis was not just another American diplomat. A camera found inside Davis’s car contained photos of Pakistani military installations. Second, the manner in which the issue was ultimately resolved—with the Americans paying “blood money” to the victims’ families—was widely perceived as “imperialistic arrogance.”<sup>29</sup> The Davis affair also had long-lasting ramifications for the countries’ leadership, and is credited for ruining relations between the ISI chief at the time, Pasha, and the CIA chief Panetta.

### *Osama bin Laden*

Davis was released on 16 March 2011. Less than seven weeks later, on 2 May 2011, US special operations forces carried out a raid in Abbottabad, Pakistan, which killed Osama bin Laden and four others. The inability of the Pakistani military to stop the raid, and their apparent lack of knowledge of the event, led to widespread public criticism and created a civil–military crisis. Already turbulent United States–Pakistan relations hit a new low. Most news reports—as well as President Obama’s speech after the raid—indicate that the administration waited till *after* the raid was completed to tell the Pakistan government about it. Obama stated:

*Over the years, I’ve repeatedly made clear that we would take action within Pakistan if we knew where bin Laden was. That is what we’ve done. But it’s important to note that our counterterrorism cooperation with Pakistan helped lead us to bin Laden and the compound where he was hiding.... Tonight, I called President Zardari, and my team has also spoken with their Pakistani*

*counterparts. They agree that this is a good and historic day for both of our nations. And going forward, it is essential that Pakistan continue to join us in the fight against al Qaeda and its affiliates.*<sup>30</sup>

The fact that Osama bin Laden had been living in Abbottabad, where the Pakistani Military Academy is also located, has raised some eyebrows among commentators in the US and Pakistan alike. Neither interpretation of the Pakistan government's role—either it was complicit in ensuring that he was alive and well in Abbottabad or it was incompetent in failing to locate him—is reassuring. Indeed, the events of that day have left many questions unanswered, and, when in 2015, renowned investigative journalist Seymour Hersh published an article disputing many of the details of the raid that had been provided by Obama's administration—including the exact role of the Pakistani government—the questions only increased.<sup>31</sup>

The official Pakistani response to the events of May 2nd was largely face-saving in nature. The Pakistani public, for the most part, has refused to believe the American narrative of the events. Numerous surveys have demonstrated that a majority of Pakistanis do not believe that Osama bin Laden was killed at all, indicating the deep-seated nature of mistrust of the United States.<sup>32</sup> To many, the American narrative of events was merely intended to embarrass the Pakistani government and military, in order to justify continued US meddling in Pakistan. In the aftermath of the raid, 51 percent of Pakistani respondents thought United States–Pakistan relations would worsen, with only 4 percent concluding they might improve.<sup>33</sup>

### *The US War in Afghanistan*

The same year that bin Laden was killed also saw a confluence of United States–Pakistan tensions over Afghanistan. Pakistan had long believed that the US presence in Afghanistan was transitory, as had been the Soviet presence of the 1970s and 1980s. They also feared that India would gain influence in Kabul at Pakistan's expense. India had periodically flirted with Pashtun separatists that sought a greater Pashtunistan carved out of parts of Pakistan as well as the Pashtun heartland in southern Afghanistan.<sup>34</sup> Pakistani intelligence was convinced that any Indian presence in Afghanistan would be used to support Pashtun militants as well as separatists from Pakistan's southwestern Balochistan province. So Pakistan “hedged,” permitting the United States to use its airspace, ports, and ground corridors to support the war in Afghanistan, while also maintaining contacts with and, in some cases, support of anti-US militant groups

in Afghanistan. Foremost among these actions was maintaining custody of many senior Afghan Taliban leaders in Balochistan's largest city, Quetta. Over time, Pakistan's ties with the Haqqani network also became undeniable. Pakistan was "living a lie," the US Director of National Intelligence reportedly told Obama during his initial national security briefings.<sup>35</sup>

The Afghanistan effort was flagging when Obama came into office. In order to demonstrate his national security *bona fides*, Obama had argued that increasing US effort should focus on the Afghan war, instead of Iraq, what Obama argued was Bush's mistake. The Bush administration had shown that a "surge" of counterinsurgency troops might be able to alter civil war dynamics, at least temporarily, in Iraq in 2007. With the Iraq surge winding down, Obama sought to create a surge in Afghanistan, combined with a diplomatic and development effort to deal with Pashtun grievances in the south that helped fuel the Taliban insurgency. More US troops in the south meant increasing contact with anti-US groups, many of which had ties to Pakistan. In other words, larger and larger constituencies in the United States were becoming aware of and growing frustrated that Pakistan was financing and supporting militants that were literally shooting at Americans. Pakistan had difficulty articulating openly its preferred path in Afghanistan since so much of the hedging activity was compartmentalized and secret. When major portions of a state's strategy are secrets and publicly denied, diplomacy becomes considerably more difficult. But the outlines of Pakistan's—at least the Pakistan Army's—preferred approach in Afghanistan involved some sort of negotiated outcome with so-called moderate members of the Taliban, which would likely involve weakening ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks in the Afghan government who had historically closer ties to India.

The US war in Afghanistan had always been unpopular in Pakistan, and Obama's surge was also unpopular, even if its goal was to stabilize and protect the civilian populace of the Pashtun south. In six separate polls between 2007 and 2011, the Pew Research Center never found more than ten percent of Pakistanis that believed the United States and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies should keep troops in Afghanistan until the situation had stabilized. Large majorities of between 65 and 75 percent of respondents believed troops should be removed as soon as possible.<sup>36</sup> In contrast, Pakistanis were largely ambivalent about whether the reemergence of Taliban control in Afghanistan would be good, bad, or irrelevant for Pakistan, with roughly equal numbers of respondents holding each view when asked in 2010 and 2011.<sup>37</sup>

The increase in US forces failed to transition Afghanistan onto a trajectory of self-sustaining stability. The Taliban and other anti-US groups were too strong in the south, the Afghan state was too corrupt, there was too much attrition from the Afghanistan Army that the United States was training, and there was considerable political intrigue in Kabul. Others criticized Obama for announcing simultaneous with the surge that the increase would last only until July 2011, encouraging in their view the Taliban to wait out the period of enhanced US troop presence. Obama eventually followed through with that promise, beginning the slow withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan in 2012 and decreasing the combat role for those remaining troops. A large plurality of Pakistani respondents assessed US troop withdrawals from Afghanistan as a “good thing for Pakistan,” when asked in 2013 and 2014.<sup>38</sup>

After the Abbottabad raid, Obama reiterated his intent to draw down US forces in a June 2011 speech. This left many tens of thousands of US troops in Afghanistan, though, where they would remain for years to come. As they sought to stabilize the country, they continued to generate friction with Pakistan or Pakistan-backed groups. Two additional events punctuated the already tumultuous year. In September 2011, gunmen allegedly associated with the Pakistan-based Haqqani network attacked the US Embassy in Kabul, leading to public and private US allegations that the Pakistani state abetted the attack. If Abbottabad had poisoned the relationship between US and Pakistani intelligence, the US Embassy attack led to a public rupture between the US and Pakistan militaries. Since the last years of the Bush administration, Admiral Michael Mullen, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, had an important role as a principal liaison between the United States and the Pakistan military, especially its most influential service, the Pakistan Army. It was all the more telling that after the embassy attack, Mullen came out publicly to state that “Haqqani operatives” had “planned and conducted” several high-profile attacks against US and NATO targets in 2011, including the “assault on our embassy,” and did so “with ISI support.”<sup>39</sup> Mullen likely felt he had greater latitude to make his critical comments since he was set to retire shortly after the attack, but the extent of US distrust was at an all-time high entering into the fall of 2011.

In this toxic atmosphere, things got worse. In November 2011, US and other Western forces attacked a border post in the Salala area of the Pakistani border near Afghanistan, killing 24 Pakistani soldiers and injuring 13 more. The United States claimed that a joint US–Afghan ground force



operating on Afghan territory came under fire from the vicinity of the border. These forces then requested and received air support to attack the positions from which the firing originated, which in the process killed and injured dozens of Pakistani personnel.<sup>40</sup> Pakistan emphasized that while the Salala post was the most serious incident of cross-border firing, it was the fifth incident since June 2008, and previous episodes resulted in 18 dead and 10 injured Pakistani soldiers. Moreover, they argued that the initial firing that resulted in the US response was almost certainly Pakistani posts attempting to draw out a suspected militant near the Pakistan border post, and whatever its cause, that the fire never effectively targeted US troops. The disproportionate US air response, then, was contrary to standard rules of engagement, and unnecessarily led to the loss of Pakistani life.<sup>41</sup>

The Pakistan Foreign Ministry expressed its “extreme outrage” over the attack.<sup>42</sup> There is some evidence the Pakistan military believed the attack to have been “deliberate and pre-planned,” rather than accidental.<sup>43</sup> The Pakistan government used its largest lever: It halted US and NATO transshipment lines from Pakistani ports into Afghanistan and vowed it would “not let even a single container move ahead.”<sup>44</sup> Given Afghanistan’s location, and the troubled relations between the United States and Iran, Pakistan offered by far the most economical land route for resupply of the large Western military force there. The United States had sought over the previous year to lessen its dependence on Pakistan by bolstering its ability to move equipment and supplies via more circuitous and expensive northern routes through the Caucasus or Central Asia, but the geography strongly favored the more direct Pakistani routes.<sup>45</sup> The Pakistan government also demanded that the United States vacate Shamsi air base, near Quetta, which had been the source of some of the US drone operations over Pakistan since late 2001.<sup>46</sup> In practice, the Pakistani demand on Shamsi had more symbolic than practical implications, since the United States already conducted many drone operations from air bases in Afghanistan.<sup>47</sup>

Pakistan would not reopen the routes until the United States apologized. After months of negotiation, eventually the two governments settled on a formula. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton released a statement on 3 July that during a conversation with her Pakistani counterpart:

*I once again reiterated our deepest regrets for the tragic incident in Salala last November. I offered our sincere condolences to the families of the Pakistani soldiers who lost their lives. Foreign Minister Khar and I acknowledged the mis-*

*takes that resulted in the loss of Pakistani military lives. We are sorry for the losses suffered by the Pakistani military. We are committed to working closely with Pakistan and Afghanistan to prevent this from ever happening again.*<sup>48</sup>

In exchange, the Pakistan government announced the supply lines into Afghanistan were open again.

### *Pakistan's Own War on Terror*

Pakistan's ties with anti-US militants such as the Haqqani network, which triggered so much turmoil in the United States–Pakistan relationship, were not just about hedging any future US departure from Afghanistan. It was also an understandable decision by the Pakistani state intended to triage the numerous internal threats with which it was faced. By ignoring some militant actors and diverting the attention of others outward, Pakistan could focus on groups that more actively sought to target state institutions, especially those groups willing to attack the Pakistan Army. One of these groups was the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which had conducted particularly brazen attacks on the Army General Headquarters in Rawalpindi, the Minhas airbase in Attock, Karachi's Jinnah International Airport, and perhaps most tragically, the Peshawar army school. Targeting the TTP was therefore a national priority. In June 2014, one week after the attack on the Karachi airport, the Pakistan Army began Operation *Zarb-e-Azb*, a clearance and holding operation involving tens of thousands of Pakistani troops.

*Zarb-e-Azb* is merely the most high profile of a series of operations Pakistan has conducted against anti-state militants since 2001, which are a complicated mix of brute force, coercion, political negotiation, and discretion. Detailing the campaign is beyond the purview of this chapter, but several aspects are important to highlight. First, the Pakistan Army and security services have suffered enormous casualties, with nearly 7,000 killed in action according to non-governmental assessments. Second, the Pakistani intelligence services have retained ties with many militant groups engaged in terrorist violence outside of Pakistan's borders and some militant groups engaged in anti-Shi'a or even anti-state violence internally. In other words, despite the very real courage and suffering of Pakistani soldiers it is also true that elements of the Pakistani state are at least partially complicit with terrorist violence in Pakistan and are certainly complicit with terrorist violence in Afghanistan and India. Even so, the enormous

losses suffered by the Pakistan security services, as well as the more than 20,000 Pakistani civilians killed by terrorists, mean that Pakistani interlocutors bristle when asked to “do more.”<sup>49</sup> This negotiation over US demands on the extent of Pakistani counterterrorism operations often occurred, sometimes explicitly and sometimes tacitly, in the context of what the United States called “coalition support funding.” When Pakistan engaged in operations that United States deemed supportive of US-led military operations, the Defense Department could reimburse Pakistan for a portion of the costs of those operations. The United States restricted those payments during the closure of resupply lines from 2011 to 2012 and, in recent years, has withheld several hundred million dollars of reimbursement because of Pakistani failure to act against the Haqqani network. Even with these more recent restrictions, Pakistan has received over USD 14 billion in US Coalition Support Funds since 2001, almost equal to the entirety of all other US aid.<sup>50</sup>

The United States and Pakistan managed to prevent a complete rupture despite these incidents, but the relationship after 2011 became more transactional and less trusting. A continued US requirement for Pakistan to support operations in Afghanistan along with US desire to avoid widespread instability in Pakistan prevented US abandonment, while Pakistan continued to need US resources to subsidize its military and finance its government. As the Pakistani state increased military operations after 2014 to combat anti-state militant groups, most importantly the TTP, the United States–Pakistan relationship has stabilized, even if neither Washington nor Islamabad is motivated by love or affection. While the “war on terror” was the centerpiece of the United States–Pakistan relationship during the Obama years, it was not the only component. The remainder of the chapter examines how United States–India ties and the broader United States–Pakistan aid relationship shaped Pakistani perceptions of the Obama administration.

### UNITED STATES–INDIA TIES

From Pakistani independence in 1947 until the US administration of James “Jimmy” Carter (1977–1981), the United States favored Pakistan as its partner of choice in South Asia. US administrations assessed that India was more strategically important than the smaller Pakistan, but Pakistan’s willingness to ally with the United States more than compensated for whatever theoretical heft India might have. India’s non-align-

ment rhetoric and belief at the outset complicated the United States–India relationship, while Pakistan soon became an important member of both the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and its Southeast Asian counterpart (SEATO). The United States also was long sympathetic to Pakistan’s stance on the Kashmir dispute, where the United States favored some sort of plebiscitary vote to determine the fate of that Muslim-majority princely state that served as the *causis belli* of the first India–Pakistan war.

Beginning in the 1970s, Pakistan’s nuclear weapons program became an increasing irritant on the relationship, though this was also true in United States–India ties following India’s 1974 “peaceful nuclear experiment.” Additionally, US policy grew increasingly concerned with the Pakistan military’s periodic habit of overthrowing civilian leadership, which it had done in 1958, 1977, and 1999, along with many other lesser forms of meddling in between coups. The United States was willing to overlook these concerns during periods of acute strategic needs, such as after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.

By the 1990s, however, the Soviet Union had dissolved, and India’s nearly uninterrupted experience of democratic rule seemed more appealing to policymakers in Washington. Simultaneously, India sought to rebalance its international relationships given the collapse of the Soviet Union, which had been a close partner of New Delhi since 1971. At the same time, Washington was increasingly worried about the rise of China, a threat that India also viewed as severe given a history of territorial disputes between the Asian powers, which had resulted in a war in 1962. If US policy tilted toward Pakistan in the Cold War, Washington sought some sort of balance in its regional policy. Policy toward either state was “hyphenated,” in the parlance of Washington, where changes toward Islamabad had to be considered in the “India–Pakistan,” or simply “Indo-Pak,” context. The reciprocal rounds of nuclear weapons tests in May 1998 led to sanctions against both Washington and New Delhi, followed by additional sanctions in October 1999 when General Musharraf overthrew the civilian government of Nawaz Sharif. The new Bush administration had planned on relaxing sanctions against New Delhi in 2001, but the terrorist attack of 11 September of that year led that administration to relax sanctions against both India and Pakistan. United States–India ties would be based on a multifaceted strategic partnership, motivated in the background by mutual concerns over China, even though both governments were reticent to attribute their improving ties to the other Asian power. United States–Pakistan ties, as

the previous section describes, became increasingly focused on counterterrorism.

This new approach was referred to as “de-hyphenation,” since it sought to break the automatic link between India and Pakistan in US policy deliberations. Instead, US relations “would be governed by an objective assessment of the intrinsic value of each country to US interests rather than by fears about how US relations with one would affect relations with the other,” in the words of Ashley Tellis, one of the new policy’s authors.<sup>51</sup> This decoupling often made Pakistan the more “urgent” relationship, but made India the more “important” one, though US officials were loath to admit so publicly.

Obama’s early mentions of Kashmir quickly ceased once India made it clear that it would not accept any attempt by Washington to inject itself in what New Delhi viewed as a settled matter or, at the minimum, a bilateral India–Pakistan problem with no acceptable US role. Obama visited New Delhi twice during his eight years in office, but chose to bypass Islamabad. This both reflected the differing stature of both countries in US eyes, though it also almost certainly reflected concerns by US security services about their ability to protect Obama during any hypothetical Pakistan visit given repeated attacks against airports, US diplomatic installations, and Western hotels. The symbolic snubbing of Pakistan in the president’s travel schedule was reflected in divergent policies, most tellingly by US willingness to carve out an exemption for civilian nuclear technology for India despite India’s non-signatory status on the Nonproliferation Treaty and its possession of nuclear weapons. Pakistan asked for, but did not receive, a similar exemption. Additionally, the United States–India defense partnership continued to grow during the Obama years, at the same time as the United States began to restrict the types of weapons it was willing to offer Pakistan given its concerns about Pakistan’s lack of focus on counterterrorism operations. The United States believed the Pakistan military spent disproportionate resources on preparing for a war with India while neglecting its ability to fight terrorists at home. To Pakistani eyes, it seemed as if the United States had few, if any restrictions, on the types of military hardware India was allowed to procure.

Between 2009 and 2013, Pew asked Pakistani respondents in six separate surveys whether they perceived US policies toward India and Pakistan as “fair” or if they thought they favored India or Pakistan “too much.” Throughout that timeframe, a large plurality of approximately 50 percent of Pakistani respondents perceived that US policies favored India, while

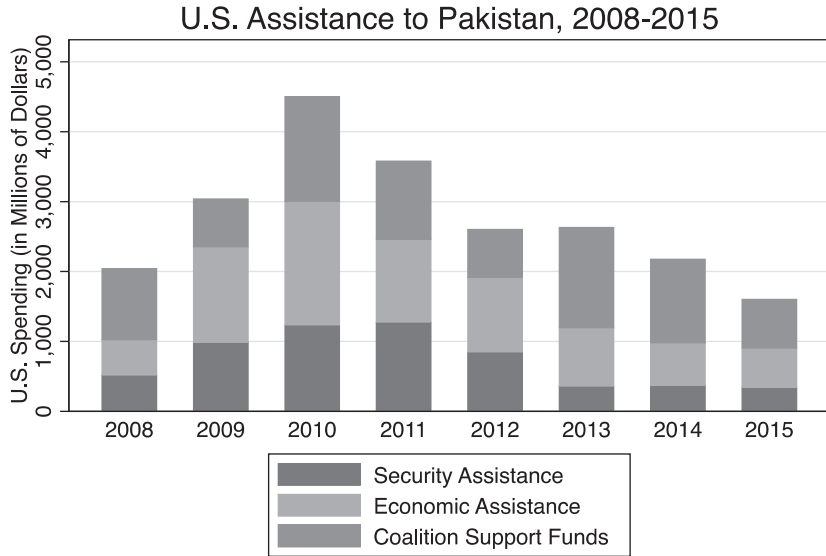
only 10 percent judged them to be fair with even fewer judging them to favor Pakistan. (About a third of respondents did not answer or did not know.) This is not merely a case of a state always perceiving slights disproportionately. In Pew polls in India, a majority of respondents have assessed that US policies are either fair or in fact favor India in surveys carried out between 2009 and 2015, with less than 20 percent of Indians identifying a pro-Pakistan bias from Washington.<sup>52</sup> As mentioned above, Pakistanis largely assessed United States–Pakistan relations were worsening in Pew polls during the Obama era, while in contrast, across the border, more Indian respondents believed United States–India relations to be improving than not.<sup>53</sup>

On the major strategic issues that confront Pakistan, then, the United States has pursued a policy that is in tension with current Pakistani grand strategy and unpopular with Pakistani public opinion. The United States attempted to manage some of these tensions by making a multiyear commitment to the Pakistani people, in theory attempting to redress a relationship that previously was too focused on global politics and insufficiently focused on the everyday needs of Pakistanis. The next section looks at how those efforts have also failed to improve United States–Pakistan relations.

## US AID TO PAKISTAN

During Obama’s first term, US aid to Pakistan, both economic-related and security-related assistance, initially increased, reaching a peak in 2010, after which it dropped significantly. By the end of Obama’s tenure, Pakistan received less than half of the economic and security assistance it had received in 2010, and an even smaller proportion once decreases in Coalition Support Funds were included.<sup>54</sup> See Graph 14.3 for the development of US aid under the Obama administration.

What was meant to be the hallmark civilian aid package delivered during the Obama years also largely failed. The Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan Act of 2009 (also known as the Kerry-Lugar-Berman Act, or KLB) authorized the release of USD 7.5 billion of non-military aid to Pakistan over five years. The act was meant to signal American commitment to the Pakistani people and by investing in civilian sectors, show that it cared about the country’s well-being and not just about the military relationship. In particular, KLB signaled a recognition that there was a deficit of trust between the US government and its Pakistan allies and sought to remedy it.



**Graph 14.3** US aid to Pakistan. Source: Congressional research service

However, the act failed to achieve its goal. By some accounts, it was even worsening relations between the two countries. First, the aid came with several conditions attached, which called for greater civilian oversight of the military. While later drafts of the bill tempered these requirements,<sup>55</sup> segments of the Pakistani public remained suspicious of conditions laid out by the bill, with some viewing it as an infringement of the country's sovereignty. Protests against the bill led by the religious political party Jamaat-e-Islami took place in 2009 in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. An article in *The New York Times* quoted Pakistani civilians as stating that the bill was an indication of the Americans "trying to dictate us in every walk of life"<sup>56</sup> and aimed to denuclearize Pakistan. The military, for its part, viewed the bill as a direct and personal affront, which served to further complicate relations between it and the Zardari government. The military also has a variety of means to help steer Pakistani public opinion, including pressuring publishers and journalists, facilitating political protest, and encouraging Pakistan-funded researchers to pursue certain lines of argument.

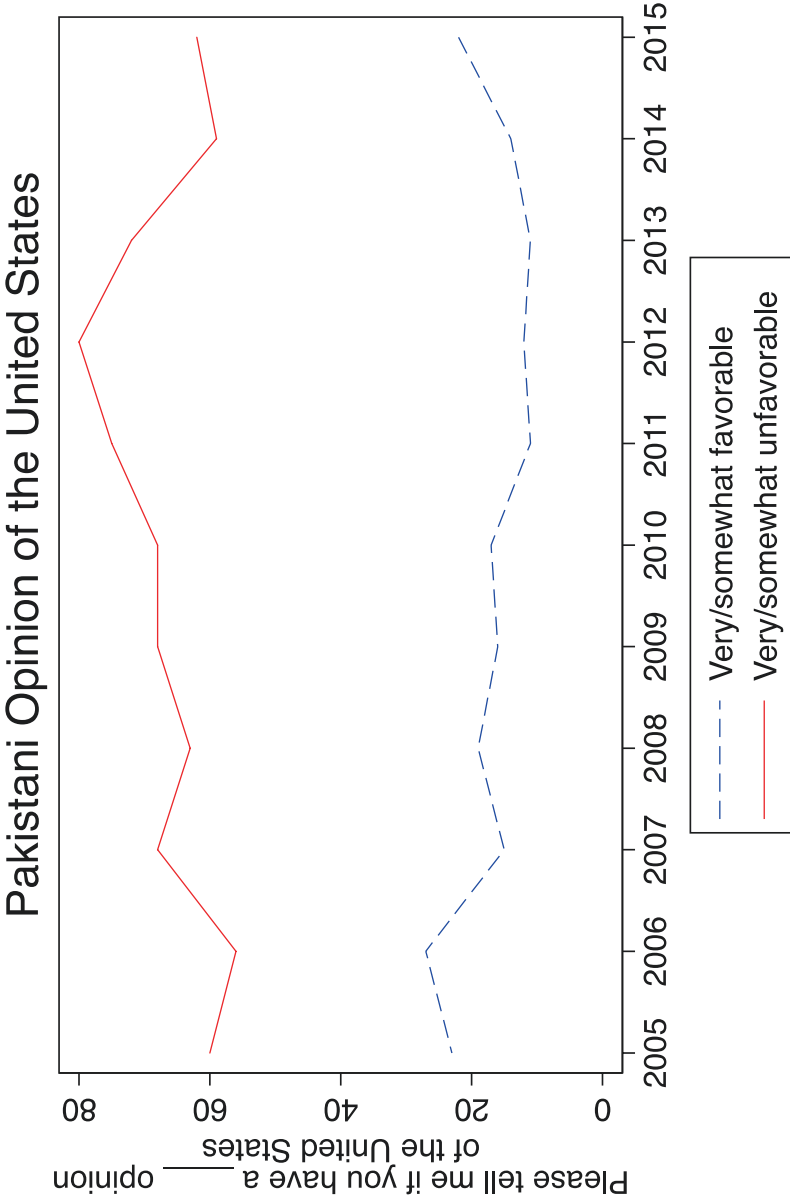
Aside from debate about its conditionality, the bill also largely failed to live up to any expectations that it would improve socio-economic conditions in the country. USD 4.7 billion of the allocated USD 7.5 billion was spent in Pakistan, of which 25 percent went to the government. From the US perspective, the aid was difficult to target because corruption in Pakistan was so rife and incompetency so widespread in the civilian bureaucracy.<sup>57</sup> The Pakistan government complained that KLB was “a hoax,” with the finance minister alleging that only USD 200 million was received in the first year, and not the promised USD 1.5 billion.<sup>58</sup> Many Pakistani citizens similarly viewed the continuation of economic hardship as an indication that the aid was never intended to help the average Pakistani person.

Polling data further demonstrates that US aid has largely failed in capturing the “hearts and minds” of the populace. Pew surveys in 2012 and 2013 found approximately ten percent of Pakistanis willing to argue that *either* US economic aid *or* US military aid was having a “mostly positive” impact, while large pluralities of approximately 40 percent assessed US assistance in both categories as “mostly negative.”<sup>59</sup> Most Pakistanis were aware of US assistance, they just were critical of it.<sup>60</sup>

In addition to this multiyear aid program, the United States also attempted to demonstrate its support of the Pakistani people during periods of acute difficulty. Large floods in the summer of 2010 killed nearly 2000 Pakistanis and damaged or destroyed nearly 2 million homes.<sup>61</sup> The United States offered over USD 268 million in relief and recovery assistance in response, and US civilian and military aircraft evacuated more than 13,000 people from flooded areas along with delivering millions of pounds of relief supplies.<sup>62</sup> The US government hoped that the relief effort would “chip away at the deep hatred and mistrust that many Pakistanis have for America.”<sup>63</sup>

This additional effort led to no discernable improvement in Pakistani opinion of the United States, as indicated in Graph 14.4. Whether the aid effort was ineffective or whether other trends in the relationship swamped any improvement caused by the aid is not evident in the data. What is known is that in 2010, 17 percent of Pakistani respondents had a very or somewhat favorable opinion of the United States, while in 2011 that figure was 12 percent. Additionally, the number of Pakistanis with an unfavorable opinion of the United States went from 68 percent in 2010 to 73 percent in 2011, including 62 percent of respondents with a very unfavorable view in 2011.<sup>64</sup>





**Graph 14.4** Development of Pakistani views of the United States. Source: Pew global trends and attitudes question database

## CONCLUSION

As this chapter has demonstrated, Pakistan very much remains stuck in a marriage of convenience with the United States, a partner which Pakistan finds frequently to be naïve, misguided, and duplicitous. In Obama's first term, the United States–Pakistan relationship came under strain as the United States pursued a combined political–military strategy to stabilize Afghanistan and defeat al-Qaeda in the Afghanistan–Pakistan borderlands. This strategy led to a surge of Western troops in Afghanistan and a dramatic increase in US drone attacks on Pakistani soil against suspected militants. While considerable evidence suggests that many of the US counterterrorism strikes in Pakistan were conducted with the support, knowledge, and acquiescence of the Pakistan military, Pakistani officials chose to obfuscate their own involvement. This illicit United States–Pakistan relationship led to an increase in anti-US sentiment in Pakistan and did little to stem anti-state violence by radical groups. Pakistan continued a hedging strategy in Afghanistan, which sought to prevent a stable anti-Pakistan government from emerging in Kabul. This strategy, however, led to tacit Pakistani support of militant groups that targeted the Afghan state and US troops, which in turn deepened mistrust in Kabul and Washington. That Obama sought to cultivate more productive ties with India during this period did not go unnoticed by the Pakistan government or its people. Efforts to improve bilateral relations—and win the “hearts and minds” of the Pakistani populace—through large amounts of non-military aid failed. Ultimately, US efforts were insufficient to overcome a long history of mutual mistrust in the context of ongoing policies, such as drone strikes, which were unpopular and considered contrary to the Pakistani national interest.

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# India's Views of the Obama Era: Maturing Defense Partners but Reluctant Asia-Pacific Friends

*Shivaji Kumar*

## INTRODUCTION

Asia is the dynamic center of international relations, and the growing Indian-American friendship is one of Asia's defining strategic relationships. Both sides profess support for a rule-based world order with freedom of navigation and overflight. They also assert that their relationship strengthens peace and cooperation in the Indian Ocean and Pacific regions. Even more importantly, the United States and India claim that relations were at an unprecedentedly high level, and they ushered under the Obama administration in a new stage in their bilateral relationship. The United States conducted more military exercises with India than any other country, and declared it as a "Major Defense Partner."<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the following question arises as to what extent this partnership strengthened India's interests. While Washington under the Obama administration viewed India as a linchpin of its Asian policy, with its relations with India critical to the success of its pivot to Asia strategy, New Delhi

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believed that only some aspects of relations with Washington served its own national interests. India appeared satisfied with growing cooperation in defense and remained at best ambivalent about the US pivot to Asia. This Indian ambivalence originated from Obama administration's allocation of insufficient resources to implement the pivot to Asia strategy, India's own concerns of defending against territorial incursions from China and Pakistan, and the skepticism of Washington's motives in forming close relations. This skepticism was part of a continuing history of belied expectations.

### THE HISTORY OF BELIED EXPECTATIONS AND THE FIRST OBAMA ADMINISTRATION

Although some analysts maintained that Washington would continue the high momentum achieved under the Bush administration in the India-US bilateral relations, the succeeding Obama administration decided to dial back the relationship. The end of the George W. Bush administration in 2008 marked a crescendo in the US-India bilateral relations. President Bush had called the two countries as "natural partners" and the Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice touted that partnership as "our opportunity with India."<sup>2</sup> The focus of this partnership was not on just increasing economic opportunities for the US companies, but it also centered on expanding Washington's strategic cooperation with New Delhi. The Bush administration articulated a clear position that the rise of India in the international system was in the strategic interests of the United States. The big ticket items under this strategic partnership were the signing of the civil nuclear agreement, supporting waivers for India from the Nuclear Suppliers Group, and transferral of missile technology to India. Thus, the mutual mistrust and acrimony of the previous 60 years were consigned to the dustbin of history. Free from the antagonistic or indifferent Cold War posture, there was a palpable expectation that the bilateral relations would achieve several milestones in the future.<sup>3</sup>

However, in January 2009, Washington's priorities shifted with the inauguration of the new administration, which produced negative assessments of the India-US bilateral relations.<sup>4</sup> Some thought that the strategic partnership was no more, whereas others argued that the partnership was not moving forward and instead was sliding "sideways."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, these evaluations brought back memories of the two countries' historical



antipathy. The Cold War politics put both the United States and India on the opposing sides. Even without forming an alliance with the former Soviet Union, India joined the Socialist bloc in opposing the United States on virtually all issues of regional and global security. Given this antipathy, the US-India bilateral relations gained the notorious distinction of being “estranged democracies.”<sup>6</sup>

Since January 2009, many of Washington’s decisions with regard to India evoked this historical pattern of antipathy. Henry Now claimed that this was part of a larger tendency in early Obama administration to “swing the pendulum of American foreign policy away from the Bush administration.”<sup>7</sup> In this pendulum swing, Washington also included a shift away from the close partnership with New Delhi that had developed in the past decade. In a report to the Aspen Institute in autumn 2009, Nicholas Burns, a Bush administration former Assistant Secretary of State, admitted that Washington under the new Obama administration did get off to an uneven start with India. Burns argued that these early missteps tended to lend credence to many apprehensions whether President Obama considered, as G W. Bush clearly did, that India’s rise to power was in the strategic interest of the United States.<sup>8</sup> These missteps related to the following four main points.

First, the fears of an indifferent administration in Washington were confirmed when India was left conspicuously absent from one of the early major speeches in which the president singled out a string of American partners among Asian states worthy of special attention. Analysts attributed this omission to the president’s approach of “innate realism and political caution.”<sup>9</sup> As part of this approach, Washington determined that close relations with other more powerful Asian states than India were important for the pursuit of American national interests. This was in sharp contrast to the preceding Bush administration. Although solely of symbolic significance, India would receive routine phone calls from President Bush or his high cabinet members before any major foreign policy pronouncements. This went missing from Washington’s roster since January 2009, thus sending strong signals from Washington under the first Obama administration to New Delhi that it was indifferent to the strategic partnership and wanted to dial back the political relations.

Second, from a strategic perspective, alarm bells rang in New Delhi when a significant US-China joint policy statement appeared to give China an influential role in the future of the South Asian region. As part of this,

Washington suggested that the United States and China should assume joint responsibility for securing stability in the South Asian region. The US-China joint statement stated that the United States and China

support the improvement and growth of relations between India and Pakistan. The two sides [the US and China] are ready to strengthen communication, dialogue, and cooperation on issues related to South Asia, and work together to promote peace, stability and development in that region.<sup>10</sup>

India understood this burden sharing in South Asia as giving a direct role to China in resolving the Kashmir issue between India and its traditional rival Pakistan.<sup>11</sup> This understanding certainly produced a loud negative reaction from New Delhi, but more importantly, it also confirmed that Washington would interfere in what India considered as its internal affairs. Without understanding that China could not be a neutral stabilizer in the Kashmir dispute on account of its steadfast support of Pakistan, Washington offered this olive branch to China only as a small price to achieve its larger goal of maintaining American leadership in the world.

To make matters worse, this active intervention in what New Delhi considered its internal affairs stemmed from President Obama's belief that the Kashmir dispute contributed significantly to the instability in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Even as a presidential candidate in 2008, Obama promised to make Kashmir one of Washington's priorities. It would mean, in his words, "[w]orking with India and Pakistan to try to resolve Kashmir."<sup>12</sup> For this, he committed himself "to devote serious diplomatic resources to get a special envoy to figure out a plausible approach."<sup>13</sup> Driven by this high level of commitment, Washington, under the Obama administration in January 2009, appointed a special envoy for South Asia and decided to include Kashmir in its purview, and encountered stiff Indian resistance in response.<sup>14</sup> Although Washington was forced to drop Kashmir from the special envoy's responsibility in the face of strong Indian pressure, this further confirmed that the Obama administration would adopt an interventionist approach over the Kashmir issue to secure cooperation from China and Pakistan. These measures squandered the tremendous political goodwill of the recent years and set a negative tone for the US-India relations for a significant period of the first Obama administration.

Third, Washington also failed to advance the US-India partnership under the first Obama administration because of the Democratic Party's long-standing antipathy toward India. This stems in part from that party's strong commitment to nuclear disarmament through the non-proliferation regime on the one hand, and New Delhi's stubborn refusal to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) on the other. President Obama had been a strong advocate of this Democratic Party's nuclear non-proliferation position. He often talked about "the need to reduce arms, especially nuclear arms."<sup>15</sup> India's long-standing refusal to sign the Nuclear NPT and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) over the decades had made most Democratic Party members antagonistic toward improving relations with that country. In fact, they considered signing the civil nuclear agreement with New Delhi under the G. W. Bush administration as being tantamount to rewarding a persistent nuclear cheat.<sup>16</sup> Washington under the Obama administration also developed strong reservations about several policies of the Bush administration, such as the signing of the civil nuclear deal, giving various waivers from the Nuclear Suppliers Group and the transferral of missile technology to India. For Washington, these specific policy measures of the previous Bush administration appeared to be overplaying into the hands of Indian interests and simultaneously undermining the US national interests of achieving nuclear non-proliferation.

Fourth and finally, the absence of a major idea to propel the bilateral relations forward even further contributed to a loss of momentum. Many thought the George W. Bush administration could achieve a radical break from the previous antagonistic US-India relations because of his overwhelming emphasis on the two countries' "shared democratic values." This focus on shared values turned many contentious issues, such as the trade barriers or normalizing New Delhi's nuclear status, subservient to that overarching value. In contrast to Bush's shared values, President Obama emphasized "shared interests." This then became the touchstone of all aspects of the US-India bilateral relations. Henry Now put this rather cogently, "[i]n the Obama doctrine there is no global struggle for freedom that parallels and limits the prospects for cooperation."<sup>17</sup> In fact, "[c]ooperation emerges from shared interests not from shared values."<sup>18</sup>

In the absence of a major guiding vision to propel the bilateral relations forward, Washington, under the first Obama administration, relied

heavily on a transactional approach. The president and his cabinet in the initial three years of the administration emphasized *quid pro quo* in all economic and defense exchanges with India. Driven by this approach, Washington considered that New Delhi failed to respond positively to many extraordinary policy concessions from the United States, and exhibited an attitude that is at best lukewarm. Take the example of nuclear technology trade. The United States thought that it had worked hard with the international community to remove decades-long nuclear-related sanctions against India. This entitled the United States to receive preferential treatment in securing contracts for the supply of nuclear-related technology. In contrast, New Delhi enacted stringent nuclear liability laws to force companies to pay high compensations in the event of an accident. Although aimed at all foreign companies, the American companies took particular objection to its enactment and framed it as a deliberate move to block them from entering the lucrative Indian nuclear market.<sup>19</sup>

As the Obama Administration's first term progressed, Washington further pointed at a string of Indian failures that undermined the growing proximity of the two countries. Washington appeared impatient with India's slow economic reforms that restricted American exports to that country. As a result, US companies either scaled back or canceled their Indian contracts. The prolonged controversy about the level of foreign direct investment into the Indian market further contributed to the uncertainty regarding the American investments in that country.<sup>20</sup> More importantly, Washington highlighted New Delhi's failure to award a high profile multirole fighter jet contract to American companies. This contract was worth more than ten billion dollars and had the potential of bringing thousands of jobs to the United States. Instead, India awarded the contract to its European competitors.<sup>21</sup>

As a result of a combination of differences over the Indian policy with the previous Bush administration, the Obama administration's first term displayed a mix of liberal Democratic Party values and hard-nosed realism toward India. However, Washington shifted its policy priorities dramatically toward New Delhi during the second Obama administration. The following section will highlight the two elements Washington considered as the core American national interests and the ways in which strong relations with India could help achieve those interests.

## INDIA-US TIES UNDER THE SECOND OBAMA ADMINISTRATION: MATURING RELATIONS

Washington reevaluated American foreign policy toward India under the second Obama administration and affected dramatic changes. The US National Security Strategic Directive in January 2012 singled out India in particular as a country in which the United States was “investing in a long-term strategic partnership to support its ability to serve as a regional economic anchor and provider of security in the broader Indian Ocean region.”<sup>22</sup> Secretary of State Hillary Clinton wrote in the magazine *Foreign Policy* that the “United States [was] making a strategic bet on India’s future—that India’s greater role on the world stage will enhance peace and security.”<sup>23</sup> It is for this reason, she further wrote elsewhere, India’s role in the American twenty-first century Asian strategy was “critical.”<sup>24</sup> In fact, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta termed the US-India relations for the American defense policy as “the linchpin.”<sup>25</sup> Given these concerted efforts toward the end of the first Obama administration to reprioritize relations with New Delhi, Washington, under the second Obama administration, focused on two elements that the president considered most salient for the US national interest: The so-called pivot to Asia and defense cooperation.

### *India-US Defense Ties: Sophisticated Partners*

The first element that Washington under the second Obama administration considered vital to American interests, and one that largely drove its foreign policy toward New Delhi, concerned building close security and defense cooperation. This cooperation between the two countries had improved dramatically over the past decade. This continued apace, even when Washington under the first Obama administration dialed back its political relations with India. As mentioned above, India had for some time been the only country with which the United States conducted the largest number of military-to-military exercises.<sup>26</sup> In the years 2015 and 2016 alone, for example, India and the United States conducted several bilateral and multilateral military exercises. In September 2015, they conducted army exercises known as the Yudh Abhyas. In October 2015, the navies of the two countries participated in the Malabar exercises. In addition, in February 2016, the United States participated in the International Fleet Review of the Indian Navy. India also joined “Red Flag in Alaska,” a

multilateral air force exercise, in April and May 2016. In June and July 2016, India also participated in the Rim-of-the-Pacific (RIMPAC) naval exercises, hosted by the US navy.

Even before this, India-US military cooperation was gaining strength. A report to the Congress “US-India Security Ties” in November 2011 highlighted that there were 56 cooperative events across all services, more than the combined events New Delhi conducted with any other country. In 2010, America’s Pacific Command (USPACOM) and the Indian Integrated Defense Staff (IIDS) began conducting joint exercises (JEI) in Alaska, which marked a significant milestone in the evolution of the two states’ military-to-military strategic cooperation. Such exercises had been critical for the defense partnership to grow, as they facilitated interaction between different military branches on both sides.

In addition to multibranch operational interactions, individual service interactions also grew at a rapid pace. In 2011 and 2012, the US army’s engagement with India was at brigade-level, a level at which the US army is involved only with its traditional allies, such as Japan and South Korea. More significant than such field exercises were the operational and strategic concept sharing between the two air forces. For example, the US and Indian air forces conducted a 2010 seminar on the concept of the future use of air power. These seminars have since become annual features of the interactions between the two air forces, in which they cover topics such as tactics and weapons, airfield engineering, intelligence, and flight safety.<sup>27</sup>

Of course, India-US bilateral defense relations also depended on the sale of military equipment. In the past few years, New Delhi had emerged as one of the important export markets for the US defense industry, totaling close to 15 billion dollars in just past five years. Between 2011 and 2014, US military sales to New Delhi acceded 13.9 billion dollars, and India signed another contract in 2015 valued at three billion dollars.<sup>28</sup> The big ticket items India purchased from the United States included the Boeing P-8I Neptune anti-submarine aircraft, the Boeing C-17 Globemaster III transport aircraft, and the Lockheed Martin C-130J Super Hercules medium cargo transport.<sup>29</sup> It also included Apache Attack Choppers and Chinook Cargo Choppers. In 2014, this made India the second largest arms market after America’s long ally Saudi Arabia.<sup>30</sup> In fact, this Indian market for US defense products might expand considerably as New Delhi takes a second look at the Boeing A/F-18 Super Hornet after downsizing a deal to buy French Raphael fighter jets from 126 to 36. No numbers have been officially mentioned yet, and the deal may take

years before any tangible results are visible, with some conservative estimates put 100–150 as the number of the Boeing jets under consideration.<sup>31</sup> If this deal actually goes through, then it has the potential of ushering in a qualitatively different relationship, one not of buyer-sellers but of co-producers, albeit of junior-senior partners.<sup>32</sup>

This defense engagement between India and United States under the second Obama administration also grew in complexity and sophistication. Both countries actively explored ways to jointly develop and produce military equipment. They included, for example, research and development of mobile electric hybrid power sources and the next-generation of protective body suits.<sup>33</sup> These joint ventures had been admittedly of low value even toward the end of the second Obama presidency, but the two countries moved to research and develop other more sensitive technologies. These technologies included jet engine and aircraft carrier design. In this direction, the creation of the India Rapid Reaction Cell in the Pentagon, the first country-specific cell of its kind, was another small but significant step to overcome the bureaucratic bottlenecks.<sup>34</sup>

The India-US summit in June 2016 formalized this defense cooperation. In a joint statement, the United States recognized India as a “Major Defense Partner.”<sup>35</sup> This had two main implications. First, the United States committed to work with New Delhi to facilitate technology sharing at a level comparable with its closest allies and partners. India will receive license-free access to dual-use American technologies. Second, the United States will actively participate in the “Make-in-India” initiative by supporting the development of India’s defense industry and its integration into the global supply-chain arrangements. Taken together, these two steps accorded New Delhi a special place in the US defense policy. Even without forming a formal alliance, India became a partner with which Washington was ready to form deep defense cooperation. Indeed, the collaborative ventures under the Make-in-India initiative were expected to advance this cooperation to the next level.

Despite this, the United States faced two challenges to develop deeper security and defense relations with New Delhi. First, India continued to operate with a suspicion of the US motives to draw the former into a US-led international system. This suspicion, in part a hangover from the dated ideology of Non-Alignment, and in part from India’s colonial experience, surfaced from time to time in foreign and security considerations. More concretely, it drove India’s refusal to sign what the United States calls “foundational agreements” to further strengthen military coopera-

tion. These included the Communications and Information Security Memorandum Agreement (CISMOA), Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA), and the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA). In fact, the United States had been urging India to sign these agreements for over a decade in order to improve ease of communication and better logistical support for the military of both countries.

After dragging its feet for a long time, in April 2016 New Delhi decided in principle to sign one of the three foundational agreements: the LEMOA.<sup>36</sup> Although this is a watered down version of what the United States has been asking for, the agreement allowed the two militaries to use each other's land, air, and naval bases for resupplies, refueling, and rest. Even in agreeing to this, India was eager to point out that this did not apply to the troop stationing on Indian territory, and also that the logistics support would be considered on a case-by-case basis. This is precisely where the strong pressure to pursue US policies in cooperation with India reached its limits.

Second, the co-development and co-production of military equipment with the United States certainly excited India, but they too faced significant limits. New Delhi has a history of concluding ambitious defense cooperation agreements only to see them fall apart. There are a number of reasons for this, but corruption scandals, bureaucratic inertia, and failed deadlines are common outcomes. The recent deal to purchase the French Raphael aircraft is the case-in-point. Although the agreement was signed in 2011, India has been engaged in protracted negotiations up until now to bring down the cost of the deal and appears to be reducing it from 126 to 36. More importantly, there is no reason to believe that co-development and co-production with the United States will not face some of these challenges. India's own attempts at developing indigenous military technology do not offer many examples of success either. Take the example of the Light Combat Aircraft, the development of which was conceived in the mid-1980s and the delivery of which is taking place only now.<sup>37</sup> Rechristened as *Tejas*, India had to sign an agreement with the US company General Electric to manufacture and supply engines for this aircraft.<sup>38</sup> Despite some tangible outcomes in pursuit of the US national security interests with India, close security cooperation, as seen between the United States and some of its allies, continued to elude the bilateral relations under the second administration.



### *US Pivot to Asia and the Indian Ambivalence*

The second element of American strategic policy for which Washington had little success under the second Obama administration in enlisting New Delhi's active cooperation, and which also added to India's growing ambivalence toward the US-India relations, concerned the strategy of a "pivot to Asia." Washington under the second Obama administration attempted to make a major shift in the American grand strategy by consciously shifting its attention to Asia-Pacific market and reallocating resources from elsewhere to the region. In doing so, President Obama strongly believed that "America's political and economic future lies in Asia."<sup>39</sup> This reflected President Obama's view that the core foreign and economic policies of the United States have shifted to Asia, and maintaining peace and stability in the region would be vital to the American national interests. As a large and growing power, Washington believed that New Delhi would play a critical role in this strategy. In fact, President Obama, on his visit to India in 2015, described India's role thus, "I believe that if we're going to be true global partners, then our two nations must do more around the world together."<sup>40</sup>

Of course, India would welcome this new grand strategy that allowed for a stronger American presence in the region and simultaneously a greater role for India, but only if it had substantive backing. Although the United States deployed over 100 large surface ships, it was also clear to New Delhi that the US significant obligations elsewhere in the world severely limited its ability to commit those ships to the Asian region. Comparative trends in naval power further added to India's sense of ambivalence toward the pivot to Asia strategy. The US naval fleet had shrunk by more than half of its size since 1990 when it had 230 large surface ships.<sup>41</sup> Given Washington's continuous wrangling over national budget and the threats of defense cuts, the naval fleet was likely to shrink even further. In one of the few concrete decisions in 2012 to implement this reallocation of resources to Asia-Pacific, the US navy would move more of its ships to the region, deploying nearly 60 percent of its fleet there by 2020.<sup>42</sup>

India's ambivalence toward the pivot to Asia strategy stemmed from two other reasons. First, New Delhi was weary of tying itself too closely to the United States because of its Cold War antipathy. The United States had imposed sanctions twice in 1974 and 1998 after India tested nuclear devices. Although most of the 1998 sanctions were quickly lifted, their

effects lingered on, hardening anti-American sentiments, particularly among some sections of Indian intelligentsia and bureaucracy. Consider the statement of a retired Indian ambassador: “We don’t want to be identified with US policy in Asia, even if we secretly like it.”<sup>43</sup> This is symptomatic of a widespread mind-set that produces a knee-jerk negative reaction to whatever the United States proposes. On several issues, what the United States proposes is of mutual concern, and cooperation over them would benefit both India and the United States. Specifically, intelligence sharing, counter-terrorism, and special military operations would benefit both of the countries. However, for any of this to be of practical consequence, it needs to be implemented through intergovernmental and interagency cooperation. This ultimately means the reliance on bureaucracy, the same bureaucracy that has decades-long and deeply entrenched anti-Americanism. It is precisely for these reasons that the Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, on his visit to India, vented his frustration thus, “We are moving mountains of bureaucracy.”<sup>44</sup>

Second, New Delhi was also skeptical of the United States as a dependable partner. From the Indian point of view, the US policies change at the whims of the leaders who spend little time to understand the pressures and compulsions of the Asian region. Take the example of President Obama himself, who first courted China to manage the Asian affairs in a G2 alliance, but later seemed to move toward a policy of containment. In this initial supposed G2 partnership, President Obama suggested that China should take an active role in the management of South Asian affairs that includes India and its traditional rival Pakistan. This revealed the total ignorance of the regional compulsions of Indian foreign policy. China had formed what is called an all-weather friendship with Pakistan and had been supporting it about claims over Kashmir, an area staked by both India and Pakistan. More importantly, this suggestion also revealed to New Delhi that the Obama administration overlooked the fact that China and India had their own boundary disputes, with China claiming large parts of what India considers its sovereign territory. According to one account, between 2012 and 2015, there were about 600 Chinese troop incursions into Indian territory. Moreover, the Indian navy reported no less than 22 troubling encounters with the Chinese navy in the Indian Ocean over a 12-month period in 2015.<sup>45</sup> These repeated incursions into the Indian territory from China had become a common occurrence. Indeed, this behavior pattern on the part of China has now become all too familiar in the South and Southeast China Seas, to which Washington is responding through a policy of containment.

India remains highly skeptical that the United States would, in fact, defend its core Indian interests in the face of Chinese aggression. New Delhi considers US involvement in the Asian region as “fundamentally self-serving” and as a transactional arrangement.<sup>46</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Despite several booms and busts in Washington’s engagement with New Delhi, the bilateral relations reached an unprecedentedly high level of cooperation under the Obama administration. This dramatic change in New Delhi’s position in Washington’s foreign policy priorities originated from the assessment of two components of American national interests. In Washington’s view, strong security and defense relations with New Delhi were in the interests of the United States. Barring some hesitation to share sensitive defense technologies and India’s own domestic constraints, the bilateral relations had indeed made the greatest headway in this direction under the Obama administration. However, the US grand strategy of a “pivot to Asia” enlisted India’s attitude that was at best ambivalent. This stemmed from India’s positive perceptions of a greater American political commitment to the Asia-Pacific region on the one hand, and the US failure to devote sufficient military resources on the other. This ambivalence also originated from India’s own regional strategy of defending territorial and other interests against a rising China, and the latter’s growing alliance with India’s traditional rival Pakistan. More importantly, the implementation of tighter security and defense cooperation and a sustained close US-India engagement over the broader Asia-Pacific strategy has the potential to significantly strengthen the India-US bilateral relations in the foreseeable future.

The bilateral defense cooperation has significantly improved, and this has propelled India into the second or third largest export market for the US defense trade, though Washington can do lot more to make India its largest defense market in the future. What is required at this point is to ensure that the past momentum endures the change in Pentagon’s leadership.

Moreover, the United States under President Obama did not commit and deploy sufficient military resources to implement the strategy of pivot to Asia. In addition, New Delhi’s and Washington’s efforts to draw in third parties from the Asia-Pacific region to participate in the existing US-India bilateral engagements fell short. Such engagements with third

parties, such as the existing US-India-Japan trilateral dialog, would have the potential to broaden India's participation in the US-led cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region and would also offer New Delhi important opportunities to learn from those partners how to deal with Washington in spite of their political and cultural differences. Potential new candidates for such future trilateral dialogs may include Australia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. Stronger efforts in this area would have proven American commitment to its rebalancing strategy. As it turned out, Obama's "pivot to Asia" remained incomplete and India's potential new role in it unfulfilled.

Above all, the Obama White House's pivot to Asia strategy depends in no small part on America's ability to credibly deter China from its repeated incursions into Indian territory. Though minor at present, New Delhi increasingly views these incursions as probes to test its resolve to defend its territory against a larger invasion. Under Obama, Washington has not shown any credible commitments to support India in an event of active hostilities between China and India. A clear and positive message to this effect would have gone a long way to convince India of the US credibility of the pivot to Asia strategy. At the end of the Obama era, the American pivot to Asia remains, for India, largely incomplete.

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## The Obama Era in the Eyes of the World: From High Hopes Back to Normalcy

*Matthias Maass*

The candidacy of Barack Obama created high hopes and major expectations overseas. His electoral victory in 2008 promised the return of a benevolent US. He being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize was the ultimate expression of the world's anticipation. Such high expectations had to be disappointed, and they were. However, it is remarkable that Obama frustrated many but maintained his overall popularity worldwide until the end of his two four-year terms. The disillusionment, disappointment, and frustration over Obama's foreign policy and global leadership remained largely sympathetic. It was, in a way, a "benevolent disappointment" which characterizes the world views of the Obama era.

Beginning an international evaluation of the record of the Obama White House, a major achievement lies in the recovery and repair of America's standing. Even if the US did not return to the level of a benevolent hegemon of earlier times, much of the damage done by the George W. Bush administration was repaired in the eyes of the world. For many, Bush's military response to the terrorist attacks of 11 September, his often indiscriminatory "War on Terror," and his willingness to ignore international laws and standards in the pursuit of US security had put in doubt

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American claims to political and moral leadership. And America's willingness to go it alone and split the world in loyal allies and enemies—"you are either with us or against us"<sup>1</sup>—led straight into a "self-imposed exile"<sup>2</sup> of the US.

### TOWARD AN INTERNATIONAL EVALUATION OF THE OBAMA ERA: BETWEEN EXPECTATIONS, REALITIES, AND SYMPATHIES

Looking back at the 2008 and 2009 world views of presidential candidate and President-elect Barack Obama<sup>3</sup> is helpful as a reminder of the global levels of hope and support Obama enjoyed initially. That the new US president would not be able to live up to the hype was clear to many at the time. At the same time, many interpreted his election as a critical turning point and trusted him taking advantage of a wave of sympathies at home and abroad he could ride on.

Soon it became clear, however, that President Obama would not be able to live up to the level of expectation the world held. Much was wishful thinking and naive, but the hopeful campaign promise of change was shared abroad, too. Still, expectations for quick and easy changes in US foreign policies and bilateral relations were too high and overburdened the Obama White House, which initially prioritized an ambitious domestic agenda.

Thus, reality set in. Obama would not change America's international course quickly and completely. The reasons for this are many. They are not the subject of this book and should therefore be indicated only briefly here. First, there are the well-studied constitutional checks and balances placed around the US presidency but also additional and specific limitations. Bureaucracies and foreign policy elites ensured that key policies of the preceding Bush administration were carried over and continued by the Obama administration.<sup>4</sup> Also, Obama presided over a country and a political party system that became increasingly divided and thus limited his room for political maneuver.

Second, Obama had to consider US-America's best interests and at the same to recognize other states' interests. As he had to find out to his own disappointment, the international community was not unified and pulling in one direction. His and his secretary of state's efforts to "reset" relations with Russia in 2009 were rebuffed.

Third, like any state leader before him, Obama, too, was limited by larger dynamics out of his control. The US was a key actor in the international

system of states but not the only great and ambitious power by any stretch of the imagination. The structure of the international system of states funneled policy options and choices in directions Obama might have wanted to avoid otherwise. The rebalance to Asia, for example, was caused largely by the rapid rise of China.

However, few doubted Obama's good intentions. Whereas the international perception of the US returned quickly to its ambivalent normal, the country's leader retained overall favorability overseas. In fact, his failure to close down completely the prison in Guantanamo Bay and thus eradicate the most immediate symbol of his predecessor's legacy in the eyes of the world was not held against him. Neither was the drawn-out process of withdrawal from Afghanistan and Iraq.

### LOOKING AT OBAMA'S INTERNATIONAL RECORD

Obama's record is hard to judge. It may be due in part to the political climate in the US and an underappreciation of his presidency that will be corrected only over time.<sup>5</sup> Internationally, Obama's achievements are easily underappreciated because they may consist in good measure in what he did not do, for example, his refusal to fully engage in the Syrian conflict, in what he only initiated, for example, the pivot to Asia, and in a return to multilateralism. Whether these and his other efforts amount to meaningful achievements or must be judged as failures is difficult to judge today.

The same applies to his role in economic crisis control in 2009 and economic recovery of the American and world economies in the aftermath; to the negotiated halt of Iran's nuclear weapons program; to the re-establishment of full relations with Cuba; to the downsizing, at least, of the prison camp in Guantanamo Bay. Whether these were critical early stages of major strategic achievements or only half-hearted responses to historic opportunities remains to be seen.

In broader strategic terms, Obama does indeed deserve credit to understand America's limits in the 2010s. He was not an isolationist by conviction by any standard, to be sure. But he saw an urgent need for the US to pause and regain its footing before committing again to an interventionist agenda. This made him an "ideological liberal with a conservative temperament,"<sup>6</sup> but prevented the US from pursuing an overambitious internationalist policy.

Closely connected to Obama's efforts to rein in US interventionist temptations, in the Middle East especially, is the multifaceted discourse over American decline. In other words, was Obama holding back the US from what he considered an ill-advised military adventure in Syria, or was he simply managing American decline from the only remaining super-power to one of two or three great powers?

The challenge for the Obama administration was to get the downsizing of America's role right and avoid "wongsizing."<sup>7</sup> When he left the White House in 2017, the US was in better shape economically compared to 2009, when he took over as president. Key economic indicators were proof. However, domestic politics remained bitter and marked by deep divisions. Foreign policy showed a mixed record, too. His readiness to step back and limit US leadership to areas and issues of major US interest and concern challenged the world community to maintain stability and peace.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, the US under Obama frequently faced opposition when and where it claimed moral leadership. Clearly, not all peoples and leaders worldwide were willing to grant leadership to the US,<sup>9</sup> regardless of its president. Under Obama, the US defended its role as the most capable military power by far and Obama also continued American exceptionalism and its particular role as a beacon of liberty and a defender of democracy.<sup>10</sup> Under Obama, too, the US remained driven by power and motivated by purpose at the same time.<sup>11</sup> And as his predecessors, Obama was not able to square the circle of power and morality in US foreign policy and external relations.

While Obama made efforts to disentangle the US from overambitious commitments and respond to "imperial overstretch,"<sup>12</sup> symptoms of American decline were hard to overlook. Russia kept challenging the status quo, China continued its hegemonic rise, the war against international terrorism could not be won decisively, and stability did not return to the wider Middle East. And domestically, Obama was facing ever stiffer and stronger challenges from the political opposition.<sup>13</sup>

Recognizing the challenges the US faced and the growing limits on its power, Obama made the case for international restraint. In his 2009 speech at the military academy at West Point, he announced his intention to raise the threshold for US military involvement overseas.<sup>14</sup> And he applied this standard later, when developments in Libya, Mali, and Syria led to domestic and international calls for major US involvement.<sup>15</sup>

However, these efforts to put a lid on foreign intervention and resist the temptation to use American might to coerce positive outcomes in foreign conflicts were criticized by some as underperformance of the Obama White House. Much more could have been done, the argument goes, without entangling the US again in drawn-out local wars.<sup>16</sup> And in fact, in his second term, Obama reduced his initial rigor and discipline in this matter to a degree.<sup>17</sup>

In the end, a global majority would have preferred to see Obama stay in the White House, it seems. Overall, few wished him out and no overall, worldwide sense of relief was detectable when his second term ended and the 22nd amendment to the US constitution required him to step down. His background and early biography<sup>18</sup> had aroused sympathy and high expectations, and his record, however problematic and incomplete, was not held against him. Overall, the world seemed rather satisfied with the parting president.

To the extent that a good dozen of country studies allow for careful generalizations to the global level, the US under Obama was seen as reliably governed and properly supervised and in this sense trustworthy and reliable. Under Obama, the US had pulled back from the military adventurism of the preceding Bush administration, it seemed. After all, “what horrifies America-watchers overseas”<sup>19</sup> is the broad authority a US president holds in American external affairs and the necessity for such power to be handled wisely.

As his time in the White House drew to an end, Obama had to accept that he would not be able to hand the baton to his former Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton. Instead, the 2016 election was won by the businessman Donald Trump of the Republican Party. And major changes in foreign policy were to be expected. This added to Obama’s disappointment over an all-too-often uncooperative international community. In this sense, his late-found fondness for Germany’s Chancellor Angela Merkel is particularly remarkable. Many of Obama’s thoughts about and tools for international affairs will most likely be discarded by his successor in the White House but may be continued overseas:

*In a joint news conference [in Berlin/Germany in November 2016], Obama and Merkel stressed the need for a strong NATO, free trade and action on climate change, as Western leaders brace for potentially radical changes after Trump moves into the Oval Office.<sup>20</sup>*

## EVALUATING OBAMA'S OVERSEAS SCORE CARDS

From the study of individual countries across the globe, a picture emerges of an Obama administration that was greeted initially with much enthusiasm. As the realities of international affairs settled in, states and peoples woke up to disillusionment, without, however, losing their sympathies for the president and the particular idea of America he wanted to represent.

Also, Obama scored well on initiating change but often enough fell short on seeing things through. Looked at from abroad, he steered the US in the right direction but failed to pull through to the finish line. During his tenure, many bilateral relations improved, but none was lifted to a higher level of partnership. He prepared the groundwork for America's strategic shift to Asia, but began the rebalancing only timidly. The question then is whether such a record ranks as success or amounts to failure, whether the glass is half full or half empty.

Moreover, even if Obama's actual record is evaluated positively, the question remains whether he could have done more, a question Parmlly asks loudly in his analysis of Cuban-American relations. Obama certainly needs to be applauded for taking on what a long line of predecessors had avoided, disentangling the US-Cuban relationship. And he took the critical first step of normalizing bilateral relations. Much work still needs to be done to overcome a decades-long history of animosity and distrust, but beginning a process was not a small feat. At the same time, one has to wonder if he could have gone further, pushing the agenda, strengthening the process and making irreversible, lifting the embargo, and adding to more symbolism to his policy. In addition, he failed—by his own admission—in shutting down once and for all the US prison in Guantanamo Bay. He managed to reduce it in size, but in his eight years in office, failed to fulfill a core campaign promise.

Beyond Cuba, the Americas were not a priority for Obama and one wonders if more could have been done. Overall, Obama's regional record tells a story of caution and restraint and, in the case of Cuba, bold first steps. There, he broke a new path and pushed the door to friendly relations with Cuba wide open, but did not complete the project or, arguable, pushed it as far as he could have.

Africa was not a top priority for Obama, and his record is viewed as somewhat disappointing. Kenyans did not see the US president paying particular attention to his father's homeland. Instead, Obama's policy took a pragmatic turn and focused on traditional matters of security, trade,

and development assistance. He refused to push for a deeper, transformational agenda of good governance. Much the same is true for US policy toward Nigeria. Advances were made, to be sure, but these were largely restricted to economics and counterterrorism. There was certainly no turn to Nigeria, and many felt disappointed over, as Nigerians perceived it, Obama's underappreciation of their political achievements and his more prominent dealings with other states in the region.

The rift between initial expectations and, arguable, opportunities and eight years of foreign policy praxis of the Obama administration come clearly to the forefront in the case of Egypt. Early in his first term, Obama gave a highly inspirational speech in Cairo. After that, his policies followed a cautious, conservative, and traditional path. Under Obama, US–Egyptian relations were marked by a mutual understanding of the necessity of security cooperation, but little else. From the perspective of Egypt, the president's initial enthusiasm for transformation had shrunk quickly to pragmatism and a bilateral relationship largely limited to the necessities of strategic security interdependence.

As in the Americas, it is not difficult to imagine a more engaged President Obama pushing a more ambitious and transformational agenda in Africa. Even if one corrects for unfounded expectations and naïve hope of a US president nurturing bilateral relations on the basis of his family tree, Obama's rigorous turn away from transformational propaganda as a candidate to traditional pragmatism as president is remarkable.

In Europe, Obama's record is solid, but not transformational, either. He was neither a strong, convicted transatlanticist nor an isolationist. His record reflects that. His most significant achievement is easy to overlook and thus underappreciate, though. He largely succeeded in repairing the high level of transatlantic trust between America's traditional European partners and NATO allies and the US. Under his leadership, the US regained the image of a reliable leader of the transatlantic community of states. However, beyond returning to the traditional normal, the relations between the US and Europe were left largely untouched, as the case of France illustrates.

From the French perspectives, the US under Obama returned to its proper place the aberration of the preceding Bush administration. Under Obama, the US was seen as team player again, not as a bully anymore. Beyond that, few things changed fundamentally. Much of his persistent popularity in France and in Europe generally must be attributed to his personal appeal to the peoples in Europe. Thus, whether Obama's mending of transatlantic relations went deep enough to withstand future challenges remains to be seen.

The Obama White House deserves credit for taking on the difficult-to-decipher at times and complex field of US–Russian relations. The attempt to “reset” relations and start with a clean slate in 2009, however, failed miserably. High hopes for a transformed bilateral relationship were unfulfilled, disillusionment settled in, and disappointment emerged on both sides. Obama US lamented Russia’s unwillingness to respond in kind, while many in Russia critiqued Obama for given up too early. The Russian perception of the US did not recover under Obama. Instead, his image suffered, even though America in the abstract remained attractive for many in Russia. The Obama White House turned out to be helpless in US–Russian relations, which were increasingly driven and steered by Russia’s leader Vladimir Putin.

Obama was similarly unsuccessful in creating close relations between his White House and Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Not only did the Israeli leader prove to be as immune to Obama’s charm, but their personal relationship started out poorly and kept deteriorating. More importantly, under Obama the US was drifting away from its unquestionable support for Israel. From the Israeli perspective, Obama was overly insistent on the wider Palestinian issue and made a nuclear deal with Iran that ran counter to Israel’s security concerns. For Israel, Obama made things worse and put doubts in the minds of Israelis regarding American reliability. However, as Ronnie Olesker reminds us above, US–Israel relations were bound to deteriorate in any case since the two countries’ strategic outlooks are disaligning regardless of their leadership. Still, Obama made few if any efforts to halt that process but arguably accelerated it. From an Israeli perspective, his legacy is distressing at the least and probably highly problematic.

Turkey’s experience during the Obama era repeats Africa’s. After much hope for a new level of relations between America and Turkey, it was “back to square one” at the end of his two terms in office, as Müge Kınacıoğlu and G. Aylin Gürzel Aka (above) report. The hope for change Obama encouraged and the expectations for transformation in the region he allowed to build up did not penetrate the political realities in and around Turkey Obama had to learn and recognized as president. In the end, his administration returned to a solid and traditional partnership with Turkey.

Together with Obama’s success in Cuba, his nuclear deal with Iran counts as his era’s second signature achievement. He averted a mounting crisis and planted the seeds for long-term improvements in US–Iranian relations. To achieve this, he accepted two compromises, though. First, he

agreed on a transactional deal, focused exclusively on Iran's nuclear weapons ambitions. He failed to advance any transformative agenda items. Second, he broke a path for future leaders to pursue and broaden, but whether this opportunity will be picked up by succeeding leaders in Washington and Teheran remains uncertain. Overall, Obama deserves much credit for breaking the stalemate and creating a diplomatic opening, but he failed in securing this advance against opposing forces on both sides.

Vis-à-vis China, Obama repositioned the US properly, but bilateral relations suffered from a conceptual disconnect as Gaye Christoffersen argues above. What the Obama White House presented of America's turn to the new, Asian center of the twenty-first-century global world order was perceived in China as Cold War-style containment plain and simple. To Obama's credit, he laid the groundwork for America's pivot. He aligned the US with regional wait-and-see attitudes toward China's further rise. But his efforts did not go much further than largely symbolic acts. Instead, he focused on building up US soft power in the region. Given the magnitude of China's rise and its still unpredictable implications, both regionally and globally, Obama did well in returning US attention to Asia. A true transformation of US-China relations was politically unrealistic and structurally implausible.

On the Korean Peninsula, Obama's "strategic patience" towards North Korea failed and left America's ally South Korea out hanging. During Obama's two terms, North Korea transitioned from a rudimentary nuclear weapons state to an established, albeit unrecognized, nuclear power. Surprisingly, however, the US-South Korean alliance remained strong and Obama popular in South Korea. This may be due to his personality, but leaves now rapidly worsening security challenges to his successors in the White House in DC and the Blue House in Seoul.

In US-Pakistani relations, Obama's legacy is rather unimpressive as well. He failed to transform an uneasy alliance he inherited from his predecessor in the White House. He continued an arrangement that was based on only partially aligned interests. Parts of US security interests in the region ran counter to Pakistani's interests and vice versa. A vicious cycle of distrust continued, and in Pakistan, Obama did not enjoy personal popularity to fall back on. However, in light of frequently opposing interests, the Obama administration deserves credit for managing a complex but vital relationship with Pakistan. In this case, the continuation of the status may well amount to success.



In contrast to neighboring Pakistan, Indian relations with the US saw noticeable improvements. Unfortunately, Obama did not exploit the opportunities to strengthen ties even more. India welcomed Obama's initiative to re-orient the US toward Asia. India looked forward to a stronger American engagement in Asian security in particular. However, disappointment set in when Obama's strategy of America's rebalance did not produce many tangible results. Indians were disillusioned when Obama made the right strategic decision but failed to follow through. In their eyes, Obama was correct on policy but disappointed in its implementation. For Indians, much more could and should have been done. In hindsight and with the benefit of geographic distance, the contemporary Indian assessments still hold.

In ways similar to Kenya, President Obama was overburdened with expectations due to his personal connection to Indonesia. Both sides had high hopes for US–Indonesian relations, and both sides fell victim to overly ambitious hopes and expectations. Nevertheless, US relations with Indonesia improved and Obama enjoyed personal popularity among many Indonesians. However, many high hopes had to be disappointed. After all, the underlying political issues, national interests, historical legacies, and domestic pressures cannot be resolved quickly and easily, no matter who resides in the White House. And, as Prashanth Parameswaran reminded us above, at least on the international stage, personality and ambition of a leader and his inner circle remain insufficient instruments to overcome deeply embedded, structural dynamics.

The broader findings summarize the global verdict of the Obama era. First, soon after entering office, President Obama relinquished much of his original, ambitious international agenda. It seems that he quickly got frustrated over the resistance he faced, the obstacles that he needed to overcome, and the compromises he needed to agree on. The world did not turn out to be as accommodating as Obama had assumed. In addition, Obama was distracted by domestic challenges, an acute economic crisis, and an increasingly hostile legislature. In the end, Obama had to recognize the limitations placed on the presidency by the US constitution and the structural restraints imposed by the international political environment. In response, he focused on the possible, even at the expense of the desirable. Much of what had been particularly appealing about candidate Obama was deserted when he became president, leaving a fairly global sense of disillusionment and disappointment behind.

Second, much of Obama's legacy is shaped by his foreign policy style. While international political and economic record is strong, it was helped much by the major improvements in perception and image he achieved for the US. His leadership showed that individuals and personality still matter in international affairs. He built up US soft power, a particularly notable achievement in light of the decline in sympathy and support under his predecessor. His popularity helped him and the US. Whether these achievements will be maintained, however, depends much on his successors' policy styles and overall strategies.

Third, and most importantly, Obama's legacy consists much of important initiatives he started but never completed. In many areas and on many issues, he began turning things around, repositioning the US, and correcting past mistakes. What is missing, though, is the follow-through. When he left the White House, many of his achievements remained unfinished. To be sure, completely overhauling US–Cuban relations, resetting US relations with a distrusting Iran, and fully repairing transatlantic friendship were far too much to expect. But he began a process, and that deserves much credit.

Obama failed in reining in a re-energized Russia under an ambitious leader, and had to accept Chinese hostility to his pivot to Asia. In both cases, Obama found himself in a lose-lose situation. More accommodation in either case would have run counter to US interests and would have left partners and allies in doubt over US commitments.

Still, the Obama administration's efforts and policies were generally appreciated. His Obama's personality and engaging style made him widely popular and translated into soft power for the US. In many cases, the rejection of the bullying policy style of the preceding US administration under George W. Bush was truly appreciated and his emphasis on cooperation seen as an improvement. Critiques about his lack of leadership in responding to the Syrian civil limit but do not nullify his achievements in this regard.

Obama belonged to those US presidents who firmly believed in their foreign agenda, which was infused with his own ideas, moral convictions, and his understanding of "the good."<sup>21</sup> In the end, he found the world "indifferent"<sup>22</sup> and "disappointing."<sup>23</sup> And despite his overall very solid record, the world viewed his presidency as disappointing when he left office in 2017. Much of this is due to unrealistic expectations in 2008/09 and structural limitations placed on any US president. The world might thus look more kindly on the Obama era as time goes by.

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