

# Commentary

## The Obama Doctrine Defined

Douglas J. Feith & Seth Cropsey — July 2011

The words “vacillating” and “aimless” are commonly used by both left and right to describe President Barack Obama’s approach to the Libya war. His political friends and foes alike lament that he has no clear goal in Libya—and that, by failing to articulate one, he is revealing his unease at having been dragged into the fight to oust the regime of Muammar Qaddafi.

Democratic Senator James Webb of Virginia issued a press release on March 21, 2011, noting that the U.S. mission in Libya “lacks clarity.” Former Republican Senator Slade Gorton wrote in the *Washington Post*: “We should never enter a war halfway and with an indecisive goal. Regrettably, that is where we stand today.”

The criticism has some validity, but it misses an important point: the administration’s approach has logic and coherence in the service of strategic considerations that extend far beyond Libya.

Since his campaign in 2007 and 2008, Barack Obama has declared that he wants to transform America’s role in world affairs. And now, in the third year of his term, we can see how he is bringing about that transformation. The United States under Barack Obama is less assertive, less dominant, less power-minded, less focused on the American people’s particular interests, and less concerned about preserving U.S. freedom of action. It is true that he did not simply pull the plug on the war in Iraq, as he promised he would do, and that he increased the commitment of troops in Afghanistan. But those compromises reflect the president’s pragmatic judgment about the art of the possible, not his conviction about what kind of country America should ultimately become.

Obama determined early on, as the Libyan revolt developed, that no outcome would be more important to him than keeping the United States within the bounds set by the United Nations Security Council. He refused to act on Libya until the Arab League and the UNSC gave approval. He immediately renounced U.S. leadership of the military intervention—and when, due to default by U.S. allies, his own commanders had to take charge at the outset, he insisted they promptly pass the mission to NATO, which they did.

Having accused his predecessor of being too ready to resort to regime change by force, President Obama made sure that the Security Council resolution on Libya authorized military action only to protect civilians, not to oust dictator Muammar Qaddafi. American and allied commanders admitted publicly that their mission might end with Qaddafi still in power. In an April 26 press briefing, a journalist asked Lieutenant General Charles Bouchard, the NATO commander of the Libya intervention force, if he saw the mission “ending with Qaddafi still in power.” Bouchard replied: “This mission comes to an end for me when the violence stops.”

If Qaddafi remains in power, however, Libyan civilians will remain in danger, so the intervention force might have to continue its mission indefinitely. Obama admitted as much in a CBS television interview that aired March 30, but he nonetheless opposes using military means to remove him. Meanwhile, even the narrowly scoped NATO mission is in trouble. The alliance lacks aircraft, munitions, and other resources that the

United States has but is withholding. And, lacking U.S. leadership, the allies continue to quarrel about strategy. Yet, President Obama says that success in Libya is necessary to protect global peace and security.

Under the circumstances, it is hardly surprising that critics complain about incoherence. But the administration's Libya policy makes sense in light of Obama's intention to alter America's place and function in the world. His ambition is novel and grand, though often couched in language that implies support for longstanding policies. It can be seen as a new doctrine—the Obama Doctrine.

And as the American approach to countering the Soviet menace came to be known as the “doctrine of containment,” the Obama Doctrine may come to be known as the “doctrine of self-containment.” Or, perhaps more fitting, given the echo of the foreign-policy approach that governed the Cold War, the “doctrine of constraintment.”

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The Obama doctrine emerges from the conviction that in the new post-Cold War, post-9/11, post-George W. Bush world, the United States cannot and should not exercise the kind of boldness and independence characteristic of its foreign policy in the decades after World War II. That view runs roughly as follows: traditional ideas of American leadership serving American interests abroad are not a proper guide for future conduct. They have spawned crimes and blunders—in Iran in the early 1950s, then in Vietnam, and recently in Iraq, for example. To prevent further calamities, the United States should drop its obsession with its own national interests and concentrate on working for the world's general good on an equal footing with other countries, recognizing that it is multinational bodies that grant legitimacy on the world stage.

Two large ideas animate the Obama Doctrine. The first is that America's role in world affairs for more than a century has been, more often than not, aggressive rather than constrained, wasteful rather than communal, and arrogant in promoting democracy, despite our own democratic shortcomings. Accordingly, America has much to apologize for, including failure to understand others, refusal to defer sufficiently to others, selfishness in pursuing U.S. interests as opposed to global interests, and showing far too much concern for U.S. sovereignty, independence, and freedom of action. The second idea is that multilateral institutions offer the best hope for restraining U.S. power and moderating our national assertiveness.

President Obama promoted this perspective of American history in his June 2009

speech in Cairo, which remains his presidency's most important foreign-policy pronouncement. In that carefully crafted discourse, Obama explained the poor relations between America and Muslims generally by citing "colonialism that denied rights and opportunities to many Muslims." He contrasted his own all-encompassing view of humanity with the parochialism of his countrymen in general, lamenting: "Some in my country view Islam as inevitably hostile...to human rights." Americans' response to the attacks of September 11, 2001, Obama noted apologetically, "led us to act contrary to our ideals." Suggesting that long-standing American efforts to establish standards of acceptable international behavior amount to no more than a self-interested and doomed attempt to impose our will on others, he proclaimed that "any world order that elevates one nation or group of people over another will inevitably fail." He was here condemning what he perceives as overweening and unrestricted American power and declaring independence from America's record of bad behavior.

Obama cited a significant example of that bad behavior: "For many years, Iran has defined itself in part by its opposition to my country, and there is indeed a tumultuous history between us. In the middle of the Cold War, the United States played a role in the overthrow of a democratically elected Iranian government." This implies that the hostility between the countries was the result of American action in 1953 in helping to overthrow a leftist Iranian politician whom the Iranian clergy generally despised. This reading of history (concentrating on events that predate by more than a quarter century the revolution that brought to power the ayatollahs who view America as "the great Satan") served his purposes because it depicted the United States as ultimately culpable for the major, long-running problem of Iran's anti-Americanism. It became an argument for constraining American power.

A telling passage in the Cairo speech was the quotation from a personal letter written by Thomas Jefferson after his second presidential term in 1815: "I hope that our wisdom will grow with our power, and teach us that the less we use our power, the greater it will be." Obama took the quote out of context. Jefferson wrote those somewhat paradoxical words only after, in the same letter, stating his hope that Napoleon would "wear down the maritime power of England to limitable and safe dimensions." Jefferson put his faith in naval power, not wisdom or restraint, to protect America from British forces. Jefferson was, after all, one of the fathers of the U.S. Navy and the man who ordered it to carry the Marines into action against pirates on "the shores of Tripoli" (in modern-day Libya, as it happens)—pirates who demanded that the American people convert to Islam. Indifferent to the irony of Jeffersonian policy, however, Obama invoked Jefferson to support the notion that America should act with less power in the world.

The main ideas in the Cairo speech were foreshadowed in an article Obama wrote for *Foreign Affairs* in 2007. He associated the words "freedom" and "democracy" with Bush administration rhetoric: "People around the world have heard a great deal of late about freedom on the march. Tragically, many have come to associate this with war, torture, and forcibly imposed regime change." Fighting terrorism, Obama said, requires "more than lectures on democracy."

Obama expostulated that America "can neither retreat from the world nor try to bully it into submission." And so he called for a strategy against terrorists that "draws on the full range of American power, not just our military might." Reform of multinational institutions, he declared, "will not come by bullying other countries to ratify changes we hatch in isolation." What is more, "when we do use force in situations other than self-defense, we should make every effort to garner the clear support and participation of others."

Promising to couple U.S. foreign assistance with an insistence on reforms to combat corruption, he added: "I will do so not in the spirit of a patron but in the spirit of a partner—a partner mindful of his own imperfections." The essence of these comments is so noncontroversial as to be banal. What is remarkable is the way they are formulated to portray the United States as a militaristic, patronizing bully.

In promoting that image of the United States, Obama and members of his national-security team are drawing on the large body of literature produced by politically progressive American academics and thinkers who have harshly criticized America's national-security policy—and not just that of the George W. Bush administration.

One such thinker, Samantha Power, is now a special assistant to President Obama. In a

2003 article for the *New Republic*, Power argued that since “international institutions certainly could not restrain American will,” American unilateralism was the force giving rise to the anti-Americanism commonplace in intellectual circles abroad. “The U.S.,” she wrote, “came to be seen less as it sees itself (the cop protecting the world from rogue nations) than as the very runaway state international law needs to contain.” But hers were not criticisms only of the Bush administration. The actions she regretted occurred during the Clinton administration as well and included the refusal to pay United Nations dues and being opposed to the International Criminal Court treaty, the Kyoto Protocol on the environment, the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, the land mines ban, the Comprehensive [Nuclear] Test Ban Treaty, “and other international treaties.”

Power wrote that America’s record in world affairs had been so harmful to the freedoms of people around the world that the United States could remedy the problem only through profound self-criticism and the wholesale adoption of new policies. Acknowledging that President Bush was correct in saying that “some America-bashers” hate the American people’s freedoms, Ms. Power stated that much anti-Americanism derives from the role that U.S. power “has played in denying such freedoms to others” and concluded:

U.S. foreign policy has to be rethought. It needs not tweaking but overhauling....Instituting a doctrine of mea culpa would enhance our credibility by showing that American decision-makers do not endorse the sins of their predecessors. When [then German Chancellor] Willie [sic] Brandt went down on one knee in the Warsaw ghetto, his gesture was gratifying to World War II survivors, but it was also ennobling and cathartic for Germany. Would such an approach be futile for the United States?

Thus, even at the beginning of the Bush presidency, Power saw Brandt’s apology for the Nazis’ destruction of European Jewry as the model for an American leader to seek pardon for the sins of U.S. foreign policy.

Anne-Marie Slaughter, of Princeton University, whom President Obama would later appoint as the State Department’s head of policy planning, likewise exhorted whomever would succeed President Bush to apologize for America’s role in the world. In a February 2008 article in *Commonweal* entitled “Good Reasons to be Humble,” she wrote:

[I]t will be time for a new president to show humility rather than just talk about it. The president must ask Americans to acknowledge to ourselves and to the world that we have made serious, even tragic, mistakes in the aftermath of September 11—in invading Iraq, in condoning torture and flouting international law, and in denying the very existence of global warming until a hurricane destroyed one of our most beloved cities....

[W]e should make clear that our hubris, as in the old Greek myths, has diminished us and led to tens of thousands of unnecessary deaths.

All this helps explain the remorseful tone of the Cairo speech. It also sheds light on Obama’s determination to set precedents and create institutional and legal constraints on the ability of the United States to take international action assertively, independently, and in its own particular interests. Without reference to this severely jaundiced view of American history, one cannot make any sense of the hesitation and meekness, the extreme deference to the Security Council and shyness about encouraging opponents of hostile dictators that have characterized the Obama administration’s policy toward Libya—and, for that matter, toward the anti-Assad-regime upheaval in Syria and, in 2009, toward the Green Movement anti-regime demonstrations in Iran.

In a 2007 article in *Harper’s*, Slaughter argued against traditional conceptions of American international leadership and against the importance of American freedom of action. She promoted a theory that detaches power from influence in the world. She

asserted that America is “more powerful than ever...and never more reviled.”

Stressing that “force has its limits” and that diplomacy “is a game of suasion, not coercion,” Slaughter predicted: “The more that America is respected and admired in the world, the greater will our diplomatic powers be.” That may be true in some cases, but Slaughter effectively turned the idea of leadership on its head. She argued a paradox: that leadership means not leading. In other words, by not putting itself out front on matters, America can be more effective as a leader, if leadership is understood as asking for others’ consent in advance and accepting constraints. This reasoning underlies the widely noted statement by an unnamed senior administration official in Ryan Lizza’s May 2, 2011, *New Yorker* article that Obama’s policy in Libya demonstrates the innovative principle of “leading from behind.”

The key to respect and admiration, in this view, has nothing to do with military capability, strategic vision, courage, effectiveness, economic strength, willingness to defend one’s own interests, or taking risks. Rather, the key lies in the virtues of “equality” and “humility.” Slaughter made the case that America can be a leader only if it is “the country I know and love” that “flies its flag alongside other nations, not above them”, “negotiates rather than dictates,” and “leads through self-restraint rather than by proclaiming itself free of all constraints.”

Especially noteworthy here is her implication that it is selfish and unproductive for the United States to protect its right and ability to act unilaterally to advance its national interests. She deprecated the idea by saying the U.S. was “proclaiming itself free of all constraints.” This was part and parcel of an argument that the United States should become party to additional treaties and international organizations and arrangements—including the International Criminal Court, climate-change forums, and nuclear-disarmament initiatives—and should strive to increase the voting power and influence therein not of the United States, but of other nations.

At the end of the day, the United States would have less of a voice and less freedom of action. This would be worthwhile, however, in Slaughter’s words, because of “the paradox of American foreign policy”—namely, by reducing its own profile and limiting its own sovereignty, America would gain respect around the world and thereby increase its success in winning other nations’ cooperation for efforts in the common interest.

Slaughter warned that “an entire generation of citizens around the world is being reared with no memory of the role the United States played in World War II and the Cold War but with plenty of evidence that the world’s lone superpower is arrogant, incompetent, and indifferent.” She cited a Voice of America broadcaster named William Harlan Hale, who, in 1947, described the postwar world as one “in which the United States—the greatest military and economic power and the unchallenged victor of World War II—was in danger of being seen as arrogant and imperialist.”

“Does this sound familiar?” she asked. America—as she presented it—had not fallen into international disrepute during the Bush administration. It had teetered on the edge of contemptible arrogance and imperialism since at least the end of World War II.

The ideas of Anne-Marie Slaughter and Samantha Power are in no way considered radical or daring at leading American universities. In fact, their highly critical perspective on American history is the predominant one. Their community is Barack Obama’s community. These are the people with whom he studied and with whom he worked as a faculty colleague. He drew heavily on his fellow progressive academics to fill top jobs in his administration, and it is evident they have helped shape his understanding of American history, his perception of international affairs, and his strategy for transforming America’s purpose and role in the world.

Putting a strategy into action is a difficult and messy challenge for a president. It is never easy to achieve interagency cooperation, and political pressures often force presidents to bend or violate their preferences. Obama’s national-security policies seem to be an ideological hodgepodge—sometimes philosophically “realist” (emphasizing power and practical interests) and sometimes “idealist” (supporting the spread of freedom). Sometimes he acts tough, as with his Predator strikes against terrorist targets and the courageous raid to kill Osama bin Laden in Pakistan, and sometimes he acts weak, as when he withheld encouragement to the anti-Ahmadinejad demonstrators in

Iran in June 2009, lest he offend the clerical regime and jeopardize diplomacy on Iran's nuclear program. Sometimes his rhetoric is humble, bordering on the abject, as in his Cairo speech, and sometimes he touts the importance of American leadership.

When Obama looks indecisive or inconsistent, the cause generally is not a clash of ideas, but a clash between his ideas and his political requirements. Obama embraces his ideas with conviction, but he is intent on political success and realizes that his unconventional strategic ambitions can be realized only if he preserves his carefully cultivated political persona as a nonideological figure, a moderate who bridges the old liberal-conservative divide. Accordingly, he is willing at times to conform to the conventional expectations of Congress and the public. Obama's famous pragmatism—demonstrated most notably in the prosecution of the Iraq war, which he had harshly denounced as an utter failure, and in the continued operation of the Guantánamo Bay detention facility, which he had characterized as a disgrace and promised to shut down without delay—shows that he is sensitive to the political risks of his strategy to constrain America.

President Obama is skilled in handling criticism by addressing complaints head-on and claiming (sometimes misleadingly) that he largely agrees with his critics. The way he has dealt with the chief complaints about his Libya policy illustrates this point.

First, because of his early inaction and his statement that America would not take charge, Obama was criticized for opposing U.S. leadership. As the *Washington Post* columnist Richard Cohen put it: "Amazingly, the White House wants to wait on nearly everyone to do almost anything—the United Nations, NATO, 'multilateral organizations and bilateral relationships,' in the words of [White House official Benjamin] Rhodes. This is a highfalutin way of saying that first we're gonna have a meeting and then break into committees and then report back here sometime soon...the good Lord willin'."

Effectively acknowledging the criticism, President Obama then declared, "American leadership is essential." He explained that "real leadership" means creating the conditions for others to step up. The explanation has in it an element of truth, but the term "leadership" usually refers to the act of taking initiative to drive an effort toward a valuable goal. Obama used the term to refer to ensuring a process in which other states would take on various responsibilities, whether or not they would produce a useful result. Obama thus endorsed the paradox highlighted by Anne-Marie Slaughter: American leadership requires our refusing to lead.

This corkscrew approach allows Obama to make the politically popular point that he champions American leadership in the world while remaining true to his goal of a more constrained America. In the case of Libya, it allows him to boast of his own leadership for having created a vacuum that others have attempted, albeit wholly inadequately, to fill.

And because he adamantly refused to act before the Security Council gave its permission, even at the risk of the complete annihilation of the rebel force, President Obama came under critical assault even from those who generally support him. Typical was the slap by CNN television host Eliot Spitzer, the former Democratic governor of New York: "Secretary of State Clinton reiterated that a United Nations resolution was necessary. We are hostage to the United Nations Security Council and the threat of Russian and Chinese vetoes. We have made our foreign policy dependent on the Russians and Chinese." Obama responded to the point, offering reassurance that he "will never hesitate to use our military swiftly, decisively, and *unilaterally* when necessary." There is political benefit and little downside in his accepting unilateral action in principle while his administration does whatever it can to discredit and preclude it.

The key to impeding U.S. "unilateralism"—and to implementing Obama's strategic vision generally—comes through deepening American involvement with multinational institutions. That is how Obama can bind the United States beyond his own term. He favors cooperation with the International Criminal Court and pledges "rededication" to the United Nations organization. He champions progressive treaties and has declared it a priority to win Senate approval of the nuclear Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and the UN treaty on the rights of women.

Obama is also committed to legitimating the "transnational law" movement, a vehicle for political progressives to constrain the power of democratically elected government officials. The movement works to circumvent legislatures by arguing that government

administrators and judges should adopt its ideas as “rights.” The new rights—regarding the laws of war, arms control, the death penalty, and other matters—are grounded not in national constitutions or domestic statutes but in protean notions of international “norms,” “customary” law, and “consensus” among groups of scholars, activists, and jurists. The movement creatively responds to frustrations among progressive activists that democratic legislatures often refuse to support their ideas.

A leading champion of this movement, Harold Koh, former dean of Yale Law School, has written voluminously on how “transnational norm entrepreneurs, governmental norm sponsors, transnational issue networks, and interpretive communities” can overcome political majorities in what he calls “resisting nation-states.” In a *Penn State International Law Review* article in 2006, he contrasted the views of transnationalists and their critics, whom he designates “nationalists”:

Generally speaking, the trans-nationalists tend to emphasize the interdependence between the United States and the rest of the world, while the nationalists tend instead to focus more on preserving American autonomy. The transnationalists believe in and promote the blending of international and domestic law, while nationalists continue to maintain a rigid separation of domestic from foreign law. The transnationalists view domestic courts as having a critical role to play in domesticating international law into U.S. law, while nationalists argue instead that only the political branches can internalize international law. The transnationalists believe that U.S. courts can and should use their interpretive powers to promote the development of a global legal system, while the nationalists tend to claim that U.S. courts should limit their attention to the development of a national system. Finally, the transnationalists urge that the power of the executive branch should be constrained by judicial review and the concept of international comity, while the nationalists tend to believe that federal courts should give extraordinarily broad deference to executive power in foreign affairs.

Two points are notable here. The first is that judges should use the concept of “international comity” to constrain the power of the executive branch. It is a vague and open-ended notion that allows judges to legislate undemocratically from the bench.

The second point to note is the disapproving reference to “preserving American autonomy.” Traditional American policy, with long-standing bipartisan support, has been to safeguard the president’s authority and ability to act independently to defend the country’s national-security interests. It was a Democratic president, Harry Truman, who ensured that the United Nations Charter gave the United States a veto over resolutions of the Security Council, the only UN body that can make legally binding decisions. He favored international cooperation but not at the expense of American freedom of action or of the president’s constitutional authority to act as he or she sees fit to defend the country or advance its interests. John F. Kennedy did not seek UN permission to “quarantine” Cuba, nor did President Bill Clinton obtain UN authorization for the U.S.-led intervention in Kosovo. Harold Koh, however, writes of American autonomy as a problem to be solved rather than a principle to be preserved.

Obama appointed Koh as the top lawyer at the State Department, where he has been instrumental in interpreting the laws of war and leads the U.S. delegation to multinational meetings on the International Criminal Court treaty.

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In the seven decades following World War II, when America achieved the dominant position in world affairs, realists and idealists have agreed on a number of fundamental ideas about U.S. national security. They are these: American interests, rather than global interests, should predominate in U.S. policymaking. American leadership, as traditionally defined, is indispensable to promoting the interests of the United States and our key partners, who are our fellow democracies. American power is generally a force for good in the world. And, as important as international cooperation can be, the U.S. president should cherish American sovereignty and defend his ability to act independently to protect the American people and their interests.

As we have seen, President Obama and his advisory team are skeptical of all these ideas, or have rejected them outright.

Ideas matter, and especially to intellectuals like President Obama. He is not a rigid ideologue and is capable of flexible maneuvering. But his interpretation of history, his attitude toward sovereignty, and his confidence in multilateral institutions have shaped his views of American power and of American leadership in ways that distinguish him from previous presidents. On Libya, his deference to the UN Security Council and refusal to serve as coalition leader show that he cares more about restraining America than about accomplishing any particular result in Libya. He views Libya and the whole Arab Spring as relatively small distractions from his broader strategy for breaking with the history of U.S. foreign policy as it developed in the last century. The critics who accuse Obama of being adrift in foreign policy are mistaken. He has clear ideas of where he wants to go. The problem for him is that, if his strategy is set forth plainly, most Americans will not want to follow him.

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