



THE OBAMA DOCTRINE AND THE USE OF AMERICAN MILITARY POWER IN THE MIDDLE EAST

DOKTRYNA OBAMY I WYKORZYSTANIE
AMERYKAŃSKIEJ POTĘGI MILITARNEJ
NA BLISKIM WSCHODZIE

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— ABSTRACT —

This article examines the use of American military power in the Middle East during the presidency of Barack Obama. While some have characterized those responses as confusing, inconsistent, and/or inadequate in number, this study argues that there is a way to understand and explain Obama's decisions, the "Obama Doctrine". The article develops and applies the Doctrine to America's use of force, or not, in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, and elsewhere.

Keywords: Barack Obama, American military interventions, drones, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Islamic State

— ABSTRAKT —

Przedmiotem artykułu jest analiza wykorzystania amerykańskiej potęgi militarnej na Bliskim Wschodzie w czasie prezydentury Baracka Obamy. O ile dla niektórych działania te były niespójne i/lub niewystarczające pod względem ilościowym, o tyle przeprowadzona analiza dowodzi, że można znaleźć dla nich uzasadnienie. Artykuł rozwija i stosuje doktrynę do analizy wykorzystania/niewykorzystania amerykańskiej siły militarnej w Afganistanie, Iraku, Syrii, Libii i innych państwach.

Słowa kluczowe: Barack Obama, amerykańskie interwencje militarne, drony, Afganistan, Irak, Libia, Syria, Państwo Islamskie

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Barack Obama made a number of confusing and seemingly contradictory decisions on issues of war and peace, especially in the Middle East. As an illustration, consider the events of December 2009. On the tenth of that month, the President accepted the Nobel Peace Prize, given for his efforts to create a “new climate in international politics”, one in which “[d]ialogue and negotiations are preferred as instruments for resolving even the most difficult international conflicts” (The Nobel Peace Prize, 2009). Nine days earlier the President had acted differently, sending 30,000 additional U.S. troops to Afghanistan (he had dispatched 20,000 previously). Yet the dispatch of those troops was tempered by the President’s decision that they would begin to leave that country in July 2011. This pattern would prevail throughout Obama’s presidency. Sometimes he would use American military power, but in other cases, he would not – even in apparently similar cases or in a second case occurring in a country where he had previously used military power. While inconsistency is present in many administrations, it seems especially true in Obama’s case. For instance, he acted differently in the two wars he inherited. In Afghanistan, as indicated above, Obama increased the number of American soldiers in 2009 but promised to withdraw at least some of them in 2011. Almost all U.S. troops were withdrawn by late 2014, with only about 10,000 remaining at the end of his term. If the pattern in Afghanistan was an increase in the number of troops soon followed by withdrawals, the pattern in Iraq, the other war Obama inherited, was a more rapid withdrawal until all U.S. forces had left by late 2011. But then Obama authorized a new military effort in 2014 to fight the Islamic State.

Or consider the cases of Syria and Libya, essentially similar and concurrent cases in which the ruling government killed large number of citizens calling for its removal. In the Libyan case, the United States participated in a United Nations-sponsored effort to protect civilians, a mission that soon expanded to include the overthrow of Muammar Qaddafi’s government. However, later, when the security situation in Libya deteriorated because no group was strong enough to establish a national government, the U.S. responded differently, deciding not to use military power. In contrast, the U.S. did not employ its military power against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, even though his government killed more Syrians than Qaddafi had killed Libyans and even though Assad’s regime used chemical weapons. In still another twist, while Obama did not intervene against Assad, he did intervene in Syria against the Islamic State (ISIS) beginning in August 2014.

Other examples of the use of military power, or not, include the widespread use of drones against terrorists in, especially, Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia.

Obama did not seriously contemplate military against Iran's nuclear program, preferring sanctions and negotiations as the means to deal with that threat, nor was any thought given to military intervention in response to the humanitarian crisis in Yemen.

The analyst is thus left with apparently confusing responses to a wide variety of situations. This study argues that, contrary to surface appearances, there was a logic and consistency to Obama's decisions about the use of the American military. It will identify four tenets of the "Obama Doctrine" based on Obama's thoughts and actions both before he assumed office and in eight cases during his presidency when he contemplated military action. The cases are organized into three categories: wars he inherited, i.e., in Afghanistan and Iraq; wars he initiated, i.e., against the Islamic State, humanitarian intervention in Libya, and the use of drones; and cases in which the U.S. did not intervene militarily, i.e., in the Syrian civil war, following the Assad government's use of chemical weapons in 2013, and in response to Iran's nuclear weapons program.

The tenets of the Obama Doctrine center around answers to four questions:

In what circumstances should the United States use its military power?

Would the intervention require the use of ground troops?

What was the extent of international and regional support?

Is there a very good chance of success?

The bulk of this article will illustrate and apply these guidelines. The conclusion will demonstrate that their application clarifies and makes more consistent Obama's application of American military power.

IN WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES SHOULD THE UNITED STATES USE ITS MILITARY POWER?

The logical place to start is Obama's thinking about these questions prior to when he became President. Obama was not, as some of his early supporters hoped or his critics feared, opposed to all wars. The first substantive sentence of his now famous 2002 speech expressing opposition to the Iraq war was, "I stand before you as someone who is not opposed to war in all circumstances" (Transcript, 2009). While more philosophical in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Obama made the same point, asserting a "hard truth": "We will never eradicate violent conflict in our lifetimes. There will be times when nations – acting individually or in concert – will find the use of force not only necessary but morally justi-

fied”. This was “not a call to cynicism”, but rather “a recognition of history, the imperfections of man and the limits of reason”. Nonetheless, while sometimes necessary, “war at some level is an expression of human folly” (White House, 2009b). That is, Obama had a bias against the use of force, a bias reinforced by his interpretation of the American experience: “Since World War II, some of our most costly mistakes came not from our restraint but from our willingness to rush into military adventure – without thinking through the consequences” (White House, 2014a). Thoughts such as these violated what Obama identified as the “Washington playbook”, i.e., a way of thinking prominent in the foreign policy community that was “characterized by a preference for military action over diplomacy, a mindset that put a premium on unilateral U.S. action over the painstaking work of building international consensus” (White House, 2015). To cite a specific example, the playbook emphasized the importance of American credibility and following up on threats with military action, a critique often articulated after Obama failed to bomb Syria following its use of chemical weapons. Obama, on the other hand, would argue that “dropping bombs on someone to prove that you’re willing to drop bombs on someone is just about the worst reason to use force” (as cited in Chollet, 2016).

It is ironic, therefore, that despite this bias against the use of American military power, Obama was the first two-term U.S. President who was fighting a war somewhere on every day of his presidency. This is largely overlooked because of the nature of the wars Obama fought, in Afghanistan, in Libya, using drones, and against the Islamic State, each of which had fewer risks and lower costs for Americans. That is, while he engaged, literally, in continuous war, none of these wars bore any resemblance to the Iraq war, something the Obama Doctrine was determined to prevent. Obama, himself, reflected on this irony, reportedly telling an aide in 2011, i.e., relatively early in his presidency, “Turns out I’m really good at killing people. Didn’t know that was gonna be a strong suit of mine” (as cited in Zenko, 2017).

Obama identified two types of situations in those early speeches where the use of force might be appropriate, wars to defend and protect American security interests and certain humanitarian situations. Like all previous Presidents, Obama endorsed the use of American military power in situations where the security of the United States was threatened. For instance, he approved of the American Civil War and World War II. He also supported the war in Afghanistan that followed 9/11: “our campaign to take out Al Qaeda base camps and the Taliban regime that harbored them was entirely justified” and if necessary in

the future, “I will not hesitate to use military force to take out terrorists who pose a direct threat to America”. Obama even endorsed the preemptive use of force in certain circumstances, believing the U.S. had the “right to take unilateral military action to eliminate an *imminent* threat to our security” (Obama, 2007; emphasis in original). Force might also be used in response to certain humanitarian tragedies. As he argued in the Nobel Prize speech, “I believe that force can be justified on humanitarian grounds, as it was in the Balkans, or in other places that have been scarred by war. Inaction tears at our conscience and can lead to more costly intervention later” (White House, 2009b). Still, he did not endorse all such interventions: while there is a lot of tragedy in the world, “we’ve got to be hardheaded at the same time as we’re bighearted, and pick and choose our spots... There are going to be times where we can do something about innocent people being killed, but there are going to be times where we can’t” (as cited in Goldberg, 2016). This distinction between actions taken to protect American security and actions taken to promote humanitarian goals is an important one for understanding when and how Obama applied American military power. Any humanitarian intervention had to meet all of the other criteria of the Obama Doctrine, while actions taken to protect U.S. security had to meet fewer of them.

Obama’s thinking about the appropriate circumstances for the use of American military power can be illustrated by different policies regarding the wars he inherited. As indicated above, he believed the war in Afghanistan was a necessary and legitimate one. Throughout his term, he believed the United States was “compelled” to fight in Afghanistan, because the “security of the United States and the American people were at stake” there (White House, 2009a). Given those sentiments, Obama increased the American troop commitment, nearly doubling the size of the American combat force in 2009. While the number of troops would be reduced throughout Obama’s presidency, they would never be reduced to zero (Livingston & O’Hanlon, 2017). The U.S. and Afghanistan signed a new Status of Forces Agreement in late 2014 that allowed approximately 10,000 U.S. forces to remain until the end of 2016. As the 2016 deadline approached, there was another agreement that allowed American forces to remain in the country beyond that date. Obama justified these continuing commitments because, “I believe this mission is vital to our national security interests in preventing terrorist attacks against our citizens and our nation” (as cited in Landler, 2017; New Afghan Government..., 2014).

Contrast those decisions with what Obama did in Iraq, the other war Obama inherited. He had been critical of the Iraq war from the beginning, describing it

as a “dumb war” and a “rash war”, because “Saddam poses no imminent and direct threat to the United States or to his neighbors”, i.e., the American intervention was unnecessary from the perspective of American security interests (Transcript, 2009). Given that belief, he sought to reduce the American role in Iraq from his first full day in office, convening a meeting of the National Security Council to discuss timetable to implement the withdrawal agreement President Bush had concluded with the Iraqis. Some in both the U.S. and Iraqi militaries had hoped that a residual number of troops might remain in the country after December 2011, the scheduled date for total withdrawal, and negotiations were initiated to do so. For many reasons, however, those talks did not come to fruition. One reason was the apparent lack of interest from the administration about extending the U.S. troop presence. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta lamented that the White House was “so eager to rid itself of Iraq that it was willing to withdraw rather than lock in arrangements that would preserve our influence and interests” (Panetta, 2014).

The protection of America and Americans was an important rationale used in two of the wars Obama initiated, the more extensive use of drones and the fight against the Islamic State. The use of drones was necessary because “our nation is still threatened by terrorists” and “we must... dismantle networks that pose a direct danger to us and make it less likely for new groups to gain a foothold...” (White House, 2015). The U.S. had to re-enter Iraq in 2014 because of the security threat posed by the Islamic State: “If left unchecked, these terrorists could pose a growing threat beyond that region – including to the United States” (White House, 2014b). The third intervention authorized by Obama, the humanitarian action in Libya in 2011, was done even though he recognized that “this [was] not so at the core of U.S. interests...” (as cited in Goldberg, 2016). He did not, however, agree to a subsequent intervention in Libya, in 2012. Reasons for these different responses will be examined below.

Of all of the cases of American inaction, Syria has probably received the most criticism. There were many reasons why Obama did not endorse military action there. An important one was his belief that the U.S. had few vital interests in the country, reflected, perhaps, in the fact that the U.S. had severed diplomatic relations three times since that country’s independence, most recently in 2014. Syria was the most prominent foe of Israel, but its military power paled compared with that of the Jewish state. There was only limited Syrian-American trade, averaging just \$642 million per year in the five years preceding the outbreak of the Syrian civil war (Jervis, 2017).

Thus, Obama was willing to use American military power when American security interests were threatened. This is a step toward understanding his decisions about the use of military power. Yet threats to American security, alone, did not guarantee American military action, a conclusion illustrated by the Iranian case. Obama had no doubt about the security threat of an Iranian nuclear weapon: it would “spark an arms race in the world’s most unstable region and turn every crisis into a potential nuclear showdown”, “pose an unacceptable risk to Israel”, and more broadly, “unravel the global commitment to nonproliferation that the world has done so much to defend”, yet he resisted calls for military action (White House, 2015). Nor, as the Libyan intervention in 2011 demonstrates, was the absence of security threats an absolute bar to the use of American military force.

WILL MILITARY ACTION REQUIRE AMERICAN GROUND TROOPS?

If the answer to the initial criterion of the Obama Doctrine must be answered in probabilities, i.e., Obama typically used military power in response to security threats but typically did not in cases of humanitarian tragedies, his answer to the second question was unequivocal. If ground troops were required to realize U.S. aims, then Obama would not authorize the use of American military power. He had good reasons for this. An obvious one was the material and human costs. In terms of soldiers’ deaths, 4,487 Americans were killed in Iraq between 2003 and 2011, and 2,392 were killed in Afghanistan between 2001 and May 2017. The U.S. spent more than \$3.5 trillion on these wars between 2001–2016 (O’Hanlon & Campbell, 2012; Livingston & O’Hanlon, 2017; Crawford, 2016). Obama also believed the dispatch of large numbers of combat troops could have adverse consequences on the ground. Iraq had demonstrated that an “ill-advised U.S. military incursion into a Muslim country, which in turn spurs on insurgencies based on religious sentiment and nationalist pride, which in turn necessitates a lengthy and difficult U.S. occupation, which in turn leads to an escalating death toll on the part of U.S. troops and the civilian population”. As if those consequences were not enough, Iraq also showed that the use of ground troops “fans anti-American sentiment among Muslims, increases the pool of potential terrorist recruits, and prompts the American public to question not only the war but also those policies that project us into the Islamic world in the first place” (Obama, 2007).

Yet he inherited wars in Iraq and Afghanistan where large numbers of American troops had already been deployed. In both, he tried to reduce the American combat presence as quickly as he could. In Afghanistan, the number of combat troops was actually increased from fewer than 40,000 when he assumed office in 2009 to 100,000 by early 2010, but only briefly. The number of troops was reduced after 2011, first gradually and then with greater speed: to 90,000 by early 2012, 70,000 in 2013, 40,000 in 2014, and to approximately 10,000 by early 2015. In Iraq, there was a much more rapid withdrawal, from 142,000 at the start of the administration to approximately 50,000 by the summer of 2010 to zero by December 2011. Not only were the numbers of U.S. forces reduced in these countries, but their mission changed; they devoted less time to actual combat and more to counter-terrorism efforts and training indigenous forces. The impact of the reduced numbers and changed missions is reflected in U.S. casualty figures. In Iraq, 822 American servicepersons had been killed in 2006, 908 in 2007 and 314 in 2008, but with the onset of the changes initiated by Obama, the numbers were far smaller: 149 in 2009, 60 in 2010, and 54 in 2011. U.S. troop fatalities did increase in Afghanistan in the early years of the Obama administration following the 2009 surge – to 312 in 2009, 499 in 2010, and 418 in 2011 – but following the summer 2011 decision to reduce the size of the American combat presence, the pattern was broadly similar to that in Iraq: 128 killed in 2013, 55 in 2014, 22 in 2015, and 14 in 2016 (O’Hanlon & Campbell, 2012; Livingston & O’Hanlon, 2017).

Yet another way to demonstrate Obama’s reluctance to use American ground troops, even in deployments to protect American security, is to examine the most novel aspect of his military policy, the use of drones. A major advantage of drones was that their use avoided the kinds of dangers Obama identified with the dispatch of combat troops or Special Forces. Even when it might be possible to deploy a team of Special Forces to kill or capture terrorists, e.g., the May 2011 raid against Osama bin Laden’s compound, doing so “would pose profound risks to our troops and local civilians – where a terrorist compound cannot be breached without triggering a firefight with surrounding tribal communities, for example, that pose no threat to us; times when putting U.S. boots on the ground may trigger a major international crisis” (White House, 2013). The centrality of drone strikes to Obama’s military policy is illustrated by his decision on January 23, 2009, i.e., just his third day in office, to launch two strikes on Waziristan, Pakistan. Yet another way to demonstrate their importance is to note that there was at least one occasion when an American citizen, Anwar al-Awlaki, was targeted

and killed. This was the first time since the Civil War of the mid-19th century in which an American citizen was targeted and killed without a trial (there were other instances in which Americans – including al-Awlaki's son – were killed, but they had not been targeted; Zenko, 2017; Shane, 2015). According to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, the U.S. conducted 1307 drone strikes in Afghanistan during Obama's presidency, 373 in Pakistan, 142 in Yemen, and 32 in Somalia. There were also reports of drone strikes targeting Libya, Syria, and Iraq. Obama's use of drones was so extensive that one scholar has argued that "Obama's embrace and vast expansion of drone strikes against militants and terrorists will be an enduring foreign policy legacy" (Bureau of Investigative Journalism; as cited in Zenko, 2016).

The Obama-initiated war against ISIS also did not rely much on American combat troops. At the end of Obama's administration, there were approximately 500 personnel permanently stationed in Syria and 5,000 permanently stationed in Iraq. Not only were the numbers of ground forces low, but their mission was a relatively safe one, i.e., to advise America's allies rather than engage in direct fighting. Rather than ground troops, the primary American military role against the Islamic State is bombing; as of June 21, 2017, the U.S. had conducted a total of 18,117 strikes in Syria and Iraq, 9,235 in Syria and 8,882 in Iraq (Sisk, 2017; U.S. Department of Defense, n.d.).

If Obama was hesitant to deploy combat troops in cases undertaken to advance U.S. security interests, he was even less willing to do so in cases of humanitarian intervention. One of the reasons he authorized U.S. intervention in Libya in 2011 but not in 2012 was that the U.S. role would be limited to the use of air power in the initial case, while any intervention in 2012 would need to be much more robust, requiring the use of ground troops to bring order to a chaotic situation involving fighting between multiple Libyan militias.

Concern about the need to dispatch ground troops also helps explain the unwillingness to use American military power in Syria, either as part of a humanitarian mission or in response to the Assad government's use of chemical weapons. Providing air support to defend humanitarian safe havens in Syria, for example, would require a large troop commitment. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Martin Dempsey, argued in July 2013 that establishing a no-fly zone would require the deployment of "thousands" of American forces and create risks such as "the loss of U.S. aircraft, which would require us to insert personnel recovery forces". Given those needs, Obama rejected humanitarian intervention in Syria. He also rejected military action in response to Assad's use of chemi-

cal weapons once he learned that Pentagon contingency plans to capture the weapons concluded that at least 75,000 troops would be needed to do so (as cited in Lubold, 2013). As he later argued, “The notion that we could have – in a clean way that didn’t commit U.S. military forces – changed the equation on the ground there was never true” (as cited in Goldberg, 2016).

WHAT IS THE EXTENT OF INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL POLITICAL SUPPORT?

As a general rule, Obama believed it was important for the U.S. to have international support for its military actions; “it will almost always be in our strategic interests to act multilaterally”, because doing so “allows the United States to carry a lighter load when military action is required and enhances the chances for success”, plus the “painstaking process of building coalitions forces us to listen to other points of view and therefore look before we leap”. However, in cases of threats to U.S. security, while international support was always preferable, “our immediate safety can’t be held hostage to the desire for international consensus...” (Obama, 2007). This desire for political support extended to domestic forces within the target country as well. These requirements were crucial to his approval of humanitarian interventions and important, but not essential, in cases of intervention on the basis of security threats. The reasons for the distinction are clear. Where the U.S. acted to protect its interests, its concerns superseded those of the international community, local government or local population. In humanitarian interventions, in contrast, the U.S. was acting on behalf of the civilian opponents of an abusive government, and, in practice, seeking its overthrow. Yet if that goal was achieved, the question as to what followed was an important one. Was there an organized, competent, and pro-American – or at least not anti-American – movement that could quickly assume power? The U.S. “had learned the hard way” in Iraq, according to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, “that it’s one thing to remove a dictator and another altogether to help a competent and credible government take his place” (Clinton, 2014).

Let’s apply these general points by examining how Obama responded to the three types of cases identified above. Regarding wars he inherited, the war in Afghanistan had always had international support, sometimes rhetorical and sometimes real, while the war in Iraq never did. With respect to local political forces, the U.S. had difficulties with both the Afghan and Iraqi leaders. Afghan

leader Hamid Karzai was particularly difficult. Obama's Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, described the Afghan leader as "incompetent" (as cited in Chandrasekaran, 2014). Karl Eikenberry, the ambassador in Kabul, told Clinton that "Karzai is not an adequate strategic partner", and he "continues to shun any responsibility for any sovereign burden..." (as cited in Nasr, 2014). By 2011, these doubts had been validated. Karzai had interfered massively in the 2009 presidential election, was publicly critical of Obama's surge of combat troops, and periodically lashed out at the United States. Difficulties in Kabul likely reinforced Obama's decision to begin to reduce the size of the American military presence (Jervis, 2015).

The pattern with the Iraqi leader Obama inherited, Nouri al-Maliki, was similar. Poor local governance provided another reason to withdraw American forces. One insider described Maliki as "both ineffectual and dictatorial", "deeply sectarian", and someone who had "not amounted to the kind of leader" that Iraq needed (Nasr, 2014). The American ambassador, Christopher Hill, was also critical of the Iraqi leader: "Maliki was far from my ideal candidate" in the March 2010 Iraqi elections (Hill, 2014). A major problem for American observers was Maliki's sectarian rule. These sectarian policies had manifested themselves prior to the departure of American troops, but their final departure in December 2011 was followed by even more extensive restrictions on Iraq's Sunni population, something that contributed to the rise and success of the Islamic State. Obama believed Maliki had "squandered" gains made during the American occupation, because of his "unwillingness to reach out effectively to the Sunni and Kurdish populations". As a result, Obama insisted that Maliki be removed before the U.S. returned to Iraq to fight the Islamic State (as cited in Goldberg, 2015). The importance of local and regional support was reflected in Obama's speech outlining his anti-ISIS strategy: while American efforts could make a "decisive difference", the U.S. "cannot do for Iraqis what they must do for themselves, nor can we take the place of Arab partners in securing their region" (White House, 2014b).

There were mixed answers regarding the political support question in the two of the wars Obama initiated. The drone war was very unpopular internationally and, one can surmise, in the countries in which drones were being used. A Pew Research Center report in 2014 found that majorities or pluralities in 39 of the 44 countries surveyed opposed the use of drones; in 27 of those countries, more than 70% of the public opposed American policy (Pew Research Center, 2014). Despite that, the U.S. continued to use drones, because Obama believed they were

being used to protect America's security and were more effective than alternative military actions. The fight against the Islamic State, on the other hand, has widespread international and regional support. More than seventy countries are participating in the current war against the Islamic State, although far fewer are involved in military activities (U.S. Department of State, n.d.).

A factor contributing to Obama's decision not to use military strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities was that there was little international support for doing so. Rather, there was strong global support for the Joint Comprehensive of Action, a diplomatic solution that the U.S., Iran, and several other states agreed to. According to the President, "every nation in the world that has commented publicly, with the exception of Israel, has expressed support", as had to United Nations Security Council (White House, 2015).

Logically and in practice, there was a need for widespread international support in cases of humanitarian intervention. One reason Obama endorsed the 2011 humanitarian intervention in Libya was that it had widespread international and local support. Both the United Nations and the Arab League formally supported military action, and some members of the Arab League promised to participate. While the North Atlantic Treaty Organization did not give formal approval, two of its members, Great Britain and France, promised to take the lead militarily and fourteen of the organization's twenty-eight members eventually contributed to the military effort (Daalder & Stavridis, 2012). There was also domestic support in Libya and support from apparently competent and pro-American people. Before deciding to support intervention, Clinton had met with Mahmoud Jibril, head of the Libyan opposition. Philip Gordon, one of Clinton's aides, later noted that Jibril "said all the right things about supporting democracy and inclusivity and building Libyan institutions, providing some hope that we might be able to pull this off. They gave us what we wanted to hear" (as cited in Becker & Shane, 2016). In practice, however, the Libyan opposition was not able to deliver competent government or security once it came to power, something made apparent by the September 2012 attack on the American diplomatic compound in Benghazi and the murder of Ambassador Christopher Stevens. Any effort to restore order to the country would require sending ground troops that would fight the many Libyan militias. Obama had no appetite for doing so. Nor did many of those who had supported the earlier intervention. By 2012, international support had largely evaporated; the Europeans, who had been prime movers in 2011, were distracted by the EU's financial crisis and it was clear that the United Nations would not endorse any further military action, given Russia's anger that

the 2011 resolution to protect Libyan civilians had, in effect, become a means to bring about regime change.

The absence of widespread international and regional support helps explain Obama's decision not to involve the U.S. militarily in Syria. Both the international community and Syrian political forces were divided. The United Nations Security Council would never endorse intervention in Syria, because Russia was allied with the Assad regime. In Syria, itself, there was disagreement about the desirability of foreign military intervention, and the domestic opposition was "hopelessly factionalized", a result of both internal disagreements and different foreign supporters (Lynch, 2016). The absence of international support also helps explain Obama's decision not to retaliate following the Syrian government's use of chemical weapons in 2013. Among the NATO allies, France supported military action, but Germany did not, and the expected British support was dashed by a negative vote in the House of Commons. In the region, Turkey and Saudi Arabia expressed verbal support, but would not participate in any strike. Other Arab governments were silent (Chollet, 2016).

IS THERE A GOOD CHANCE FOR SUCCESS?

A final thing often inhibiting Obama's use of military force were doubts about what military force could accomplish. If, as noted earlier, Obama worried about the adverse consequences of the use of American military power, the concern here is that its use would not realize American objectives. This sentiment was expressed in two ways; sometimes it served to prevent American military action and in cases where the U.S. decided to act, it required that military force be limited and supplemented by other elements of American power.

Consider the wars Obama inherited. With respect to both Iraq and Afghanistan, he believed there was not a military solution. In Iraq, after a decade of war, American troops had achieved many victories, but "Iraq remains gripped by sectarian conflict, and the emergence of al Qaeda in Iraq has now evolved into ISIL" (White House, 2015). Rather, military efforts needed to be supplemented with political, diplomatic, and economic initiatives, so as the number of combat troops was reduced, the use of other elements of American power increased. This is most clear in the Afghan case. While Obama had authorized a large increase in combat troops in December 2009, the troop increase was to be supplemented by a number of non-military components: increased foreign aid, a "civilian surge"

to accompany the military one, and diplomatic efforts to ease tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Reflective of these changes, non-military spending in Afghanistan increased by 80% between fiscal years 2009 and 2010 and remained above FY2008 levels through FY2013 (White House, 2009b; Belasco, 2014). In Iraq, the argument was somewhat different, i.e., that the military had achieved what it could – reducing violence and the threat posed by al-Qaeda – but that many other needs remained. This was Obama’s message in February 2009, when he announced the timetable for U.S. troop withdrawals from the country. As the troops left, the U.S. would continue “a strong political, diplomatic, and civilian effort” to “advance progress and help lay a foundation for lasting peace and security”. To do so, non-military spending in Iraq increased 50% between FY2009 and FY2010 (Obama’s Speech..., 2009).

The fight against the Islamic State was similar to both Iraq and Afghanistan in that Obama recognized that success would be based on more than military power. Although that effort remains largely military, the website of the Global Coalition Combating ISIS identifies tasks such as re-establishing and improving public service in areas re-captured from ISIS, combating its ideology, and restricting the flow of foreign fighters to the region. The drone war is less relevant in this context. It is a very narrow effort with one, primarily military, purpose: kill terrorists. Still, Obama recognized that killing terrorists was not enough to end terrorism. As a result, his fight against terrorism would include diplomatic, political, economic, and public diplomacy efforts (The Global Coalition; Stern, 2015).

Obama did prepare military options to deal with the Iranian nuclear issues, but his preference was for a negotiated solution. He used “diplomacy, hard, painstaking diplomacy, not saber rattling” to unify global opinion against Iran and in favor of a negotiated solution. This was a preferable approach because, as he later argued, “military action would only set back Iran’s program by a few years at best”, “would likely guarantee that inspectors are kicked out of Iran”, and “would certainly destroy the international unity that we have spent so many years building”, while “a negotiated agreement offered a more effective, verifiable and durable resolution” (White House, 2015). To those preferences was added a practical problem: as late as 2010, the U.S. did not have the assets in place for a military strike nor the plans to carry one out (Chollet, 2016).

The two Libyan cases also illustrate the importance of the military utility question. In 2011, when this issue first arose, Obama’s advisers gave him two alternatives – do nothing or support British and French calls for no-fly zones. Obama rejected both, because neither would be sufficient to protect civilians:

“This notion that we’re going to put some planes in the air to fly over a massacre just doesn’t make a lot of sense. We could feel really good about ourselves, on the right side of history, and people would still get killed” (as cited in Mann, 2013). Instead, he endorsed a more robust UN resolution that allowed for air attacks on Libyan ground forces. But in 2012, he rejected a second, more demanding intervention, because he knew from Afghanistan and Iraq that American forces, or even multinational forces as in Afghanistan, would have a very difficult mission establishing and preserving order following intervention in Muslim lands.

Justifying non-intervention in Syria, Obama told West Point graduates in May 2014, that “As frustrating as it is, there are no easy answers [in Syria], no military solution that can eliminate the terrible suffering anytime soon” (White House, 2014a). This was true regarding any of the interventions that were proposed. No-fly zones to protect Syrian civilians would not work, according to Dempsey of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, because the Syrian government relied largely on land-based weapons when attacking civilians. Obama also doubted the utility of a military response to the Syrian government’s use of chemical weapons. He later argued that “our assessment” was, that “while we could inflict some damage on Assad, we could not, through a missile strike, eliminate the chemical weapons themselves”, with the resulting “prospect of Assad having survived the strike and claiming he had successfully defied the United States, that the United States had acted unlawfully in the absence of a UN mandate, and that would have potentially strengthened his hand rather than weakened it” (as cited in Goldberg, 2016; Lubold, 2013).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In summary, the Obama Doctrine explains why, when, and how the President made decisions about the use of American military power. Those decisions were actually quite consistent. This conclusion applies the tenets of the Doctrine to what superficially appear to be inconsistencies in Obama’s approach to issues of war and peace.

Iraq and Afghanistan

Obama took fundamentally different approaches to the wars he inherited in Afghanistan and Iraq, increasing troop levels – if briefly – in the former and reducing troop levels from the start in the latter. That he believed the war in

Afghanistan to be in U.S. security interests and the war in Iraq to not be in American interests helps explain these differences. Also relevant is that the war in Afghanistan had some grudging international support, while the war in Iraq had little.

Despite the different American policies, the trend in both cases was a significant reduction in the level of American combat troops. These two cases provided strong evidence of the limited utility of military force, at least military force not supplemented by other components of American power. Yet despite that, Obama was willing to have the military return to Iraq to fight the Islamic State. As noted above, the war against ISIS had global and regional support and would not require the use of large numbers of combat troops. Moreover, relevant for Iraq but not Syria – and Iraq was always the more important of the two for the U.S. – there was a government in Baghdad that the Americans had confidence in at the time of the 2014 intervention.

Syria and Libya

That the U.S. participated in a humanitarian intervention in Libya but not Syria, despite the fact that both situations began at roughly the same time and that the Syrian catastrophe became much worse can be explained by noting that the Libyan intervention had widespread global, regional, and local support, while none of these were present in the Syrian case. Moreover, Obama believed, erroneously as it turned out, that a successful intervention in Libya could occur without using American ground troops but that achieving success in Syria would be difficult even with the dispatch of American troops.

The tenets of the Doctrine also help to explain why the U.S. did not later intervene in Libya but did intervene later in Syria. By 2012, any intervention in Libya would have required ground forces and an uncertain prospect of success. Intervention in Syria in 2014, in contrast, had widespread global and regional support and would not require the use of large numbers of American ground troops. Moreover, Obama deemed ISIS to be a security threat to the United States, itself, something that the Syrian civil war was not.

ISIS and Iran

While Obama was willing to use American air power in response to the threats to American security created by ISIS, he was not willing to do so against the Iranian

nuclear program, perhaps a greater long-term threat to American security. The tenets of the Obama Doctrine help explain this apparent contradiction. While neither mission would require American ground troops in large numbers, military action against ISIS – supplemented with other elements of U.S. power – had greater chances of success than an attack on Iranian nuclear facilities. Moreover, military action against the Islamic State had broad global support, while military action against Iran had little.

Drones

The final case is the easiest to explain. Obama authorized drone strikes on a regular basis because he believed they advanced American security interests without requiring the use of combat troops, the two most important tenets of the Obama Doctrine. They were also quite successful in that they killed a number of terrorist leaders (although critics argued they also killed many civilians, something that should be weighed against their success). That using drones to kill terrorists had little global support was less important in light of the way they satisfied three of the tenets of the Doctrine.

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