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Safeguarding Primacy: Redefining the American Global Leadership during Barack Obama's Presidency

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to outline a twofold change in the American global leadership concept that has been taking place under the Obama Administration: the redefinition of its purpose and of its character. The purpose-transformation has been illustrated in a case study of the American "pivot to Asia". It means, basically, that the American world leadership, defined as the political and economic order developed by the USA, and grounded in its power and unique position after the Second World War (and/or the Cold War), has turned during Obama's administration into a instrument aiming at retaining the American privileged position that does not emanate directly from the U.S. power anymore. The character-transformation implies that the role conceptions of the American world leadership, have been modified or, as in one case, abandoned, in order to adjust to new circumstances. As a result, the US leadership has become more inclusive, international-institutions-centered, and reluctant to military engagement.

Keywords: *Asia pivot, Barack Obama, global leadership, role conceptions, USA*

Introduction

Barack Obama was elected the president of the United States amidst the worst economic crisis since 1929, and at the moment of the poorest reputation his country had in the world for decades. No surprise that he campaigned for change in domestic and foreign policy, as he put it, to "lead this country in a new direction"[1]. New president – who embodied the essence of the awaited change – took the office in the considerably different international circumstances than his post-cold-war predecessors faced.

Putting the financial crisis aside, the United States grappled with several challenges that were novel, although rather in scale than in nature. First, with an "imperial overstretch" in the Middle East, which was a result of a struggle to end long and costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, draining resources and impairing American reputation. Second, with the group of rising powers around the world (the so-called BRICS – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), of which especially demanding were two: China (due to its power) and Russia (mainly due to its assertiveness). These two challenges, accompanied by economic crisis as well as by the ongoing trade and budget deficits, have laid foundations for the argument asserting the American decline as the world's supreme nation. The third major challenge was the Iranian and North-Korean aspirations to acquire nuclear weapon, threatening regional balances of power and American set of alliances, as well as creating a dangerous opportunity for the terrorist groups interested in acquiring weapons of mass destruction and using them against the West. Finally, a kind of a challenge to American foreign policy was Barack Obama himself, for he lacked experience in foreign affairs. However, it was not an unusual feature among US presidents. More importantly, he was determined to bring change into the domestic politics: to overcome the financial crisis, reduce unemployment, increase American productivity, introduce healthcare reform, *etc*. In effect, he was almost

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[1] "Full Text: Obama's Foreign Policy Speech", The Guardian: US News, accessed April 23, 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/jul/16/uselections2008.barackobama.

completely focused on the United States' domestic politics, leaving much less personal attention to the foreign policy[2]. All these conditions made the US foreign policy, its strategy and doctrine change. Consequently, the concept of the American global leadership had to be redefined and adapted to the new situation and context.

This article attempts to capture the scope and nature of this redefinition that affected the purpose and character of the American global leadership. Redefining the purpose means that the American world leadership, defined as the political and economic order developed by the USA, and grounded in its power and unique position after the Second World War (and/or the Cold War), has turned during Obama administration into a instrument aiming at retaining the American privileged position that does not emanate directly from the U.S. power anymore.. In other words, the USA used its world leadership structures to prolong its primacy. Redefining the leadership's character means that it was no longer entirely exclusive. The USA encouraged other states to engage, to participate in the tasks, and to carry the burden of the "shared" global leadership.

The argument put forward in this article shall be differentiated from the "coalition-based character" of American leadership, as John Ikenberry defines it. The latter notion involves "a group of advanced liberal democratic states work together and assert collective leadership"[3]. John Ikenberry distinguishes the current international order from its antecedents in world history, putting emphasis on coalitional character of the Pax Americana. This article, however, focuses on change *within* this coalitional character. Besides, as the following section illustrates, leadership – by definition – refers to followers and formation of a coalition as a result.

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[2] Colin Dueck, *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 33.

[3] G. John Ikenberry, "The Logic of Order: Westphalia, Liberalism, and the Evolution of International Order in the Modern Era," in *Power, Order, and Change in World Politics*, ed. G. John Ikenberry (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 101.

A Concept of the Global Leadership

In the IR literature the concept of "world" and/or "global leadership"[4] is not fully settled. For the needs of this article it is, therefore, necessary to briefly outline and clarify its meaning.

"Leadership" is commonly associated with an equally vague word "hegemony". The reason for this is that the Greek original of this term (*hegemonia*) is translated as "leadership". Thus, some authors make no distinction between both terms and use them interchangeably, while referring to preponderance of material power (military and economic) and to asymmetrical influence on others exercised by the leader or the hegemon[5]. Ancient Greeks, however, used to separate *hegemonia,* which meant legitimate leadership, from *arkhe,* that referred to coercive control. In this sense, to be legitimate leadership requires recognition and consent of others, while coercion rests on the material power and the use of force. "[*H*]*egemonia* is only possible within a community whose members share core values and is limited to activities that are understood to support common identities", while *arkhe* is "based on possession of material resources [italics added – PK]"[6]. Such a distinction is easily noticeable in the contemporary IR literature, but these meanings are differently ascribed to various terms (i.e. "domination", "primacy", "leadership", "hegemony", or "empire") with a mixture of attached adjectives ("liberal", "material", "communitarised", "coalitional", "structural" *etc.*)[7]. In other words, there is neither consensus on the meaning nor any

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[4] Used interchangeably in this paper.

[5] See: Barry Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers: World Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge; Malden, MA: Polity, 2004), 56; Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 116, n. 6; Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 32.

[6] Quote after: Martin A. Smith, *Power in the Changing Global Order: The US, Russia and China* (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity, 2012), 29.

[7] See: Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, 3rd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 208; Bruce D. Jones, *Power & Responsibility: Building International Order in an Era of Transnational Threats* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2009), 34; Bruce M. Russett, *Hegemony and Democracy*, Security and Governance Series

conventional usage of the concept of "world leadership" in the IR literature. Existing definitions are at odds either in substance or in terminology.

However, there are several features of this term stemming from the overall picture that match the purpose of this article. First of all, leadership rests on power. Leader possess an asset of excessive material resources or authority, enabling him to take the initiative, stand ahead and direct the remainder. That makes him exceptional among others and indispensable for taking a collective action. As David Rapkin notes, "leading" means "being in the first place" or "to guide". The first meaning refers to certain surpluses of resources; the second indicates that "leaders perform some task, service, or function for the group/society (...) that otherwise would not be provided as effectively, plentifully, or at all"[8]. Moreover the leader creates structures and instruments – a system – in which the leader and his followers operate. Since he contributes the most, he also decides about its shape, size and frames.

Second, the leader acts for the sake of the common good. He does not volunteer to sacrifice his own interest for the others, but he accepts to bear higher costs to achieve universal goals. While taking an action, he appeals to common values and interests. He attracts followers with his righteousness, potential benefits, or by serving as an example. Again David Rapkin observes that "world leaders have served as models in the narrow sense of displaying the technical ingredients of competitive success, but also in broader, more qualitative ways as well (e.g., innovative political forms and practices, cultural

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(Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2011), 1; Joseph S. Nye, *The Powers to Lead* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), x; Steve Weber, *The End of Arrogance: America in the Global Competition of Ideas* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010), 112; Rikard Bengtsson and Ole Elgström, "Reconsidering the European Union's Roles in International Relations: Self-Conceptions, Expectations, and Performance," in *Role Theory in International Relations: Approaches and Analyses*, ed. Sebastian Harnisch, Cornelia Frank, and Hanns Maull (New York: Routledge, 2011), 117; G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order*, Princeton Studies in International History and Politics (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 67–75; John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 2001), 21; Zbigniew Brzeziński, *Wybór: dominacja czy przywództwo* (Kraków: Znak, 2004), 104, 241; Zbigniew Brzeziński, *Druga szansa* (Warszawa: Świat Książki - Bertelsmann Media, 2008), 152.

[8] David P. Rapkin, "Japan and World Leadership?," in *World Leadership and Hegemony*, ed. David P. Rapkin (Boulder: L. Rienner, 1990), 193.

patterns)"[9]. Thus, leadership generally appeals to or sets up some norms and rules that are subsequently recognized by the leader's followers.

Third, the leader has the ability to impose his will on disobedient parties. That is only another aspect of power, which touches upon the coercion issue, instead of the potential to act as in the first point. Sooner or later, and for various reasons, every leader faces defiance of one state or a group of states (but still has remaining followers). He deals with it in order to preserve community based on the set of ideas and standards as it has been indicated in the previous paragraph. He does that either by resorting to or by threatening to use force.

And last but not least, leadership does not necessarily embrace all possible areas and matters. Individual states may be either not interested or simply not powerful enough to lead in a given area (or territory). They may lead in one particular issue, while being defiant in another one. Noteworthy, as Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth observe, it does not have to affect its credibility and reputation as a leader among other states[10]. Such a diverse behavior, conditioned by a particular matter of concern (be it political, economic, geographical *etc.*), is particularly important while speaking about another facet of global leadership – the roles played by a leader in the international society.

States usually play more than just one role, and some are more complex than others. Being a leader, for instance, may be defined as one role, but it also entails a set of minor roles of a state, such as: the agenda setter, the coalition builder, the resources and goods provider, the decision implementer, the manager of the process *etc.* Hedley Bull identifies four roles of great powers that could easily match responsibilities of a leader: preservation of the general

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[9] Ibid.

[10] Stephen G. Brooks, *World out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 159.

balance, avoidance and control of crises, limitation of war, and the unilateral exercise of local preponderance[11].

As for a definition – an international role of a state embraces a system of its interactions on the international stage, determined by internal and external factors, especially by its position and identity[12]. Position refers to the state's relative potential, while identity depends on its perception of itself, as well as on the opinion and expectations of the others. So defined identity is equivalent to a "role conception"[13] – a notion employed in this article while discussing the change in character of the US leadership. Position and identity are relational and dynamic, because they are situated *vis-à-vis* other actors and thus they may change in the result of interactions with them. Further two sections will examine how both factors influenced the redefinition of the US global leadership.

Redefinition of the Purpose

The United States has redefined the purpose of the American global leadership. It means that the American world leadership, defined as the political and economic order developed by the USA, and grounded in its power and unique position after the Second World War (and/or the Cold War), has turned during Obama's administration into a instrument aiming at retaining the American privileged position that was not a direct emanation of the U.S. supremacy to the extent that it used to be. In other words, the USA instrumentally exploited its world leadership (power and authority through

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[11] Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, 201–212.

[12] Justyna Zając, *Role Unii Europejskiej w regionie Afryki Północnej i Bliskiego Wschodu* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2010), 26; Justyna Zając, "Teoria ról międzynarodowych," in *Teorie i podejścia badawcze w nauce o stosunkach międzynarodowych*, ed. Ryszard Zięba, Stanisław Bieleń, and Justyna Zając (Warszawa: Wydział Dziennikarstwa i Nauk Politycznych, 2015), 135.

[13] "*Role conceptions* refer to an actor's perception of his or her position vis-à-vis others (the ego part of a role) and the perception of the role expectations of others (the alter part of a role) as signaled through language and action". Sebastian Harnisch, "Role Theory: Operationalization of Key Concepts," in *Role Theory in International Relations: Approaches and Analyses*, ed. Sebastian Harnisch, Cornelia Frank, and Hanns Maull (New York: Routledge, 2011), 8.

institutions, rules, structures *etc.*) to remain the leader, despite its relative decline in power.

Two caveats are necessary here. First, the United States under Obama's administration has remained the wealthiest and most productive country in the world, with the strongest military, and most advanced and renowned universities in the world (see Table 1). Therefore, the image of American decline is not a matter of the USA being simply weak, fragile or losing its ground. Nevertheless, the gap is shrinking (not that fast as the protagonists of American decline might think, though), and the unipolarity is no longer an achievable option. Second reservation is with regard to instrumental use of leadership. From the outset the American global leadership was designed to be a instrument promoting US interests in the world (as the following paragraph shows), and nothing has changed in that matter. In the first place, however, it was an offensive instrument aimed at accommodating American preponderance, and at shaping the world according to the power share. Now it is the opposite. The United States defends its privileged position, using world leadership structures to remain at the top. It is a tricky task, however, because it requires to employ both containment and accommodation strategies towards rising powers.

Table 1. US share of World GDP, military expenditures and top 100 universities (%)

	2001	'02	'03	'04	'05	'06	'07	'08	'09	'10	'11	'12	'13	'14
GDP	32	32	30	28	28	27	25	23	24	23	21	22	22	22
Military expenditures	35	37	39	41	41	40	40	41	41	42	41	39	36	34
Top 100 universities	n/d	n/d	n/d	n/d	n/d	n/d	n/d	n/d	n/d	53	51	47	46	45

Source: World Bank; SIPRI; Times Higher Education[14].

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[14] "World Bank Group," accessed July 14, 2015, http://www.worldbank.org/; "SIPRI Military Expenditure Database — Www.sipri.org," accessed July 14, 2015, http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex_database; "World University Rankings 2010-11", Times Higher Education, accessed July 22, 2015, https://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/world-university-rankings/2011/world-ranking#/sort/0/direction/asc.

The logic of the argument has its roots in the origins of the American global leadership that was established in the years following the Second World War. At that time, the United States was the most powerful country in the world and the gap in the size of economies and production between the leader and the remainder had never been (and feasibly would ever be) greater. Even then, however, cherishing almost literally hegemonic advantage, America did not manage to embrace the whole world with its *Pax Americana*, and its influence differed from region to region. Nevertheless, the system of Bretton Woods, the foundation of the International Monetary Fund and of the World Bank, and making the US dollar an international currency engendered specific political and economic structures. According to John Agnew these are their key features: "(1) stimulating economic growth *indirectly* through fiscal and monetary policies; (2) commitment to a unitary global market based on producing the greatest volume of goods most inexpensively for sale in the widest possible market by means of a global division of labor; (3) accepting the United States as the home of the world's major reserve-currency and monetary overseer of the world economy (...); (4) unremitting hostility to »communism« (...); and (5) the assumption of the burden of intervening militarily whenever changes in government or insurgencies could be construed as threatening to the political status quo established in 1945 (the Truman Doctrine)"[15]. Although the Cold War is over, the aforementioned structures survive and serve the American interests (and others' too).

The same goes for a set of regional military alliances formed in Europe and Asia during the Cold War. Creating NATO in 1949, ANZUS in 1951, SEATO in 1954, and other bilateral alliances with Japan (1960), Philippines (1951), and South Korea (1953) are the result of power distribution after the Second World War. Even though the share of power has changed over decades in all these regions, the United States strives to maintain its leading

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[15] John A. Agnew, *Hegemony: The New Shape of Global Power* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 127.

position and to protect the *status quo*. As Lee Kuan Yew, the legendary prime minister of Singapore, has observed: "the 21st century will be a contest for supremacy in the Pacific because that's where the growth will be (...) If you do not hold your ground in the Pacific you cannot be a world leader"[16]. That is precisely what the famous "pivot to Asia" (now moderately called "rebalance") represents and basically is about. That is also a reason why this section concentrates on the Asian-Pacific region as a case study of an instrumental use of the American global leadership.

One can argue that China is one of the beneficiaries of the American leadership in the Asia-Pacific region (next to Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan). In favor of this argument Robin Niblett asserts that "US security alliances and commitments in East Asia have provided the benign strategic context within which China's economic rise could take place without as yet unlocking deep counter-reactions driven by its neighbours' security fears"[17]. Along this "benign context" followed, managed by the United States, open-markets-oriented international trade system that allowed China to grow annually in average 10 per cent since the end of the Cold War. In terms of purchasing power parity China's GDP overtook the US in 2014[18], and is likely to surpass it in nominal GDP by 2030[19]. China is also the largest holder of foreign exchange reserves and US treasury securities. In 2005 Chinese military spending left France behind (second in this ranking at the time), and tripled since then[20]. All those changes were possible due to the American leadership structures, and as David Lampton observes "China has thus become an ardent supporter of the existing international economic order"[21]. On the other hand, China has engaged

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[16] Quote after: Aaron L. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia*, 1st ed. (New York: WWNorton & Co, 2011), 8.

[17] Robin Niblett, *Ready to Lead?: Rethinking America's Role in a Changed World*, Chatham House Report (London, England: Chatham House, 2009), 24.

[18] "World Bank Group."

[19] Barry Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2014), 94.

[20] It might be even more, since China does not share real numbers. Yet, high and constantly rising expenditures still do not translate into the capacity to project its military power.

[21] David M. Lampton, "The Faces of Chinese Power," *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 1 (2007): 117.

in several initiatives countering the liberal American-led international system, reinforcing its position, and lowering standards of governance set by the World Bank, IMF and other international institutions. These initiatives include: the Cooperation Forums with African and Arab countries, the New Development Bank formed by BRICS countries, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), or the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership[22]. Hence, despite being a beneficiary of the US leadership, China remains its main challenger in the region.

After the Cold War China, in its strategy towards the United States and to the world more generally, formulated three principles mutually supporting each other: avoid confrontation, build comprehensive national power, and keep growing[23]. That is what David Lampton describes as a "consensus strategy" of a "nonconfrontational path in the short and medium term" aimed at eventually becoming "a major force in the world"[24]. Blackwill and Tellis in their most recent report on US strategy towards China enumerate eight goals set by China's Communist Party (CCP), which are the following: "replace the United States as the primary power in Asia; weaken the U.S. alliance system in Asia; undermine the confidence of Asian nations in U.S. credibility, reliability, and staying power; use China's economic power to pull Asian nations closer to PRC geopolitical policy preferences; increase PRC military capability to strengthen deterrence against U.S. military intervention in the region; cast doubt on the U.S. economic model; ensure U.S. democratic values do not diminish the CCP's hold on domestic power; and avoid a major confrontation with the United States in the next decade"[25].

Excluding the last point, the US strategy towards China was precisely the opposite. In the 1990s, when China was just setting off, US policymakers, according to Aaron Friedberg, made steps "intended not to »contain« China's

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[22] Robert D. Blackwill and Ashley J. Tellis, *Revising U.S. Grand Strategy toward China*, Council Special Report 72 (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2015), 16.

[23] Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy*, 144.

[24] Ibid., 153.

[25] Blackwill and Tellis, *Revising*, 19.

rise, but to preserve the favorable balance of power in East Asia in spite of its growing capabilities"[26]. Those steps included three types of actions: bolstering military power in the Pacific, strengthening alliances and quasi-alliances, and slowing the growth of Chinese military power[27]. When Barack Obama assumed office, the US administration returned to that strategy. Not from the beginning, though.

The new officials accepted inevitability of China's rise and its growing importance[28], and that the period when the United States had enjoyed a degree of global dominance became history[29]. As a result, at first the Obama Administration was seeking China's engagement and "win-win cooperation"[30], that in fact was furthering American interests and emphasizing its leadership role. This approach concerned issues of climate change, nuclear nonproliferation, financial crisis and cybersecurity, as well as temporary blindness to the abuse of human rights for the sake of good relations. Chinese counterparts, however, remained basically unresponsive to these initiatives. They evinced little interest in reduction of carbon emissions at the Copenhagen climate change summit in 2009, offered no assistance in dealing with North Korean nuclear program, and continued cyber-theft targeted at American enterprises. Moreover, China more assertively engaged in territorial disputes in the South China Sea, that raised military tensions and mobilized opposition to China in the region. Therefore, the United States moved towards strategy mentioned before, which consists of "implicit containment, balancing, or deterrence"[31].

The "pivot to Asia" was proclaimed in 2011 during Barack Obama's trip to Indonesia for East Asia Summit. The US secretary of state, Hillary Clinton,

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[26] Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy*, 101.

[27] Ibid., 102–112.

[28] George W. Bush did it too by approaching China as a "responsible stakeholder". See: "Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility?," accessed July 23, 2015, http://2001-2009.state.gov/s/d/former/zoellick/rem/53682.htm.

[29] Martin Indyk, *Bending History: Barack Obama's Foreign Policy*, Brookings Focus Book (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2012), 65.

[30] Ibid., 30.

[31] Dueck, *The Obama Doctrine*, 72.

explained very plainly the reasons for the Asian pivot. She claimed that "[a] strategic turn to the region fits logically into our overall global effort to secure and sustain America's global leadership"[32]. As for Tom Donillon, the national security advisor, the pivot's main objective was to "sustain a stable security environment and a regional order rooted in economic openness, peaceful resolution of disputes, and respect for universal rights and freedoms"[33]. To achieve that goal the United States had to: strengthen and adapt its alliances in the region; increase its security presence by opening new military bases and deploying US forces; finally, engage in multilateral institutions, and economic projects. Every single of these acts was directed against potential challenges imposed by China. Even the TPP was designed to eliminate China from agreement's prospective signatories[34].

The US set of alliances in the region is arguably a unique asset, especially in comparison with fairly alienated China. The anchor of the US presence in Asia for the last decades has been its relationship with Japan, where approximately 50,000 American troops are stationed. In April 2015, both countries deepened their partnership by completing a revision of the Mutual Defense Guidelines (first codified in 1978 and updated in 1997), accounting for "developments in military technology, improvements in interoperability of the U.S. and Japanese militaries, and the complex nature of security threats in the 21st century"[35]. Additionally, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe introduced legislation reinterpreting the pacifist clause in Japanese constitution. The bill, if passed,

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[32] Hillary R. Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy*, no. 189 (2011): 58.

[33] "Keynote Address: Obama in China: Preserving the Rebalance - Council on Foreign Relations," accessed December 9, 2014, http://www.cfr.org/china/keynote-address-obama-china-preserving-rebalance/p33778.

[34] Michael Mastanduno, "Order and Change in World Politics: The Financial Crisis and the Breakdown of the US-China Grand Bargain," in *Power, Order, and Change in World Politics*, ed. G. John Ikenberry (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 178.

[35] Emma Chanlett-Avery et al., "Japan-U.S. Relations: Issues for Congress" (Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, 2015), 20.

would allow Japan to involve in the overseas conflicts "when a close ally is attacked and the result threatens Japan's survival[36]".

South Korea is another major non-NATO ally of the United States. Some analysts argue that under Obama's administration relations between two countries have been "at their best state" since the formation of the alliance[37]. Indeed, it was considerably upgraded in response to the North Korean nuclear threats, but resulted in little progress in improving the South Korean defense capacities. Moreover, South Korea was not that eager to taking actions that irritated China, and appeared reluctant to the expansion of Japanese military potential.

Meanwhile, a considerable progress has been made in security relations between the USA and Philippines. In 2014, accelerated by the aforementioned Chinese maritime territorial claims, the two states finalized the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement. Since the US forces had withdrawn from the country's military bases in 1992, the new framework agreement allowed to increase presence of "US military forces, ships, aircraft, and equipment in the Philippines on a nonpermanent basis and greater U.S. access to Philippine military bases"[38].

Another long-time regional ally of the United States is Thailand. In 2012, they singed the 2012 Joint Vision Statement for the Thai-U.S. Defense Alliance fostering security cooperation, military exercises and bilateral interoperability[39]. However, the subsequent Thai coup d'état of 2014 disrupted and significantly slowed down the progress in strengthening the bilateral alliance – the USA suspended foreign assistance and canceled military exercises[40].

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[36] "Japan Self-Defence Laws Reform Backed by Cabinet - BBC News," accessed July 23, 2015, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-32735359.

[37] Mark E. Manyin et al., "US-South Korea Relations" (Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, 2014), 1.

[38] Thomas Lum and Ben Dolven, "The Republic of Philippines and U.S. Interests" (Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, 2014), 15.

[39] "Defense.gov News Release: 2012 Joint Vision Statement for the Thai-U.S. Defense Alliance," accessed July 24, 2015, http://www.defense.gov/releases/release.aspx?releaseid=15685.

[40] Emma Chanlett - Avery and Ben Dolven, "Thailand: Background and U.S. Relations" (Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, 2014), 2.

Evetually there is Australia, enjoying very robust bilateral relationship with the United States. Due to evolving geopolitical dynamics in the region, Australia began a major military buildup and looked forward to strengthening security ties with the USA. In November 2011, Barack Obama visited Australia and announced a deployment of 2,500 marines in Darwin.

As Hillary Clinton declared, the USA were also "building new partnerships to help solve shared problems" by outreaching other countries[41]. Thus, developing security relations and enhancing military presence in the region included Singapore (the deployment of coastal warships), India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam and even Myanmar. The 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review states that by 2020 60 percent of U.S. Navy assets will be stationed in the Pacific[42].

Along the consolidation of security infrastructure in the region, the "pivot" envisaged engagement in regional multilateral institutions, such as – for long neglected by the USA – the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC), as well as in economic initiatives, especially Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Although it did not directly relate to the exploitation of existing structures of the US leadership, there are two reasons worth mentioning: first, it follows the general US policy of branding the United States as a "Pacific nation", which dispels its image of being just another "outside power"; second, it helps the intra-institutional balancing of China desired by the United States[43]. The US joined the ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) as early as it was possible under the new administration (in July 2009). A year later it became the first non-ASEAN country to establish a dedicated Mission to ASEAN in Jakarta[44]. Strong commitment on the ASEAN forum in political, security and

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[41] Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," 59.

[42] "The Quadrennial Defense Review 2014" (U.S. Department of Defense, 2014), 34.

[43] Ryo Sahashi, "The Rise of China and the Transformation of Asia-Pacific Security Architecture," in *Bilateralism, Multilateralism and Asia-Pacific Security: Contending Cooperation*, ed. William T. Tow and Brendan Taylor (New York: Routledge, 2013), 155.

[44] "U.S. Engagement with ASEAN", ASEAN - United States Mission, accessed July 24, 2015, http://asean.usmission.gov/mission/participation.html.

economic related issues as well as annual East Asia Summits (President Obama has personally attended two so far) effectively elevated the US presence in the region.

Enhancing cooperation through the APEC and opening new markets to the US products was just another aspect of intensifying diplomatic and economic ties within the region. The most notable example is TPP, a free trade agreement between twelve Pacific Rim states (excluding China at the time[45]), responsible for 40 percent of global GDP and a third of world trade. Beside economic benefits, the TPP had a strategic significance. As one US administration official argued, the "TPP is the avenue through which the United States, working with nearly a dozen other countries (and another half dozen waiting in the wings), is playing a leading role in writing the [trade] rules of the road for a critical region in flux"[46]. In this line President Obama added: "If we don't write the rules, China will"[47]. What is notable, the TPP, to a certain extent, was built on the US partnership framework already in place. Six countries had free trade agreements with the USA beforehand, while four enjoyed a status of American treaty allies. States outside these groups had either very close relationship with the USA (New Zealand) or a fairly cooperative one (Brunei, Malaysia, and Vietnam). Hence, the TPP could as well be considered as a result of instrumental use of American leadership.

Redefinition of the Character

American global leadership has also changed in terms of its character. Among other reasons stated earlier, this change was also the result of the way

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[45] When writing this article, the TPP was yet to be concluded. See: "Obama's Trade Agenda Moves Passed Key Senate Hurdle - CNNPolitics.com," accessed July 24, 2015, http://edition.cnn.com/2015/06/22/politics/obama-trade-deal-congress-tpp-tpa.

[46] Ian F. Fergusson, Mark A. McMinimy, and Brock R. Williams, "The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) Negotiations and Issues for Congress" (Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, 2015), 5.

[47] Gerald F. Seib, "Obama Presses Case for Asia Trade Deal, Warns Failure Would Benefit China," *Wall Street Journal*, April 27, 2015, sec. US, http://www.wsj.com/articles/obama-presses-case-for-asia-trade-deal-warns-failure-would-benefit-china-1430160415.

how the new administration perceived the role the United States played in the world. In President Obama's words, it was "ready to lead once more"[48] by "renewing American leadership"[49]. This renewal concerned redefinition of the role conceptions – broad foreign policy guidelines stemming from state's identity – introduced in the first section of the article.

The point of reference for this particular analysis is Hanns Maull's listing of central themes in the US foreign policy role conceptions for the years 2000-2010. He identifies a degree of continuity in the following five themes: "(1) an exclusive international leadership role (...) (2) the pursuit of US global power and purposes, based on broad domestic political support and the willingness to commit substantial national resources; (3) propagation of democracy, human rights, rule of law, and market economics – the »American ideology« – as a universally applicable and a morally and practically preferable social order; (4) pragmatically internationalist policies that emphasize efficiency and effectiveness, resulting in a functional rather than a principled approach to multilateralism; and finally (5) a propensity for military intervention and, if deemed necessary, unilateral action - as an enforcer of international/regional/national »order« as defined by the United States"[50]. Even though the list above embraces two years of the Obama Administration, neither of these points fully matches its approach, and each of them needs some clarification.

First, American world leadership under Obama's administration was no longer completely exclusive. Certainly, the US general primacy allowed for resistance not to be bound and determined by others, but at the time it was not a leading principle of its conduct in the international affairs. Having said this, there are two facets of leadership inclusiveness. One is burden-sharing, which basically stands for other states joining the USA initiatives and contributing to

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[48] "Barack Obama's Inaugural Address," *The New York Times*, January 20, 2009, sec. U.S. / Politics, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/20/us/politics/20text-obama.html.

[49] Barack Obama, "Renewing American Leadership," *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 4 (2007): 2–16.

[50] Hanns Maull, "Hegemony Reconstructed? America's Role Conception and Its 'leadership' within Its Core Alliances," in *Role Theory in International Relations: Approaches and Analyses*, ed. Sebastian Harnisch, Cornelia Frank, and Hanns Maull (New York: Routledge, 2012), 170–171.

joint actions. This aspect will be expanded in the next point, while discussing American reluctance to "go it alone". Second facet, much more important here, is about the United States doing what other states want it to do as the first among equals. Such a position (as well a leadership role) implies certain responsiveness to expectations and requests raised by others. In effect, it also occasionally entails relinquishing the initiative on their behalf, handing over agenda setting, or simply contributing to others' endeavors.

Such an approach was adopted during the Arab Spring in 2011 in the case of Libya, when President Obama said that "American leadership (...) means shaping the conditions for the international community to act together"[51]. In a nutshell, the United States handed over initiative to European powers (France and Great Britain), which advocated an intervention in Libya. The so-called "shaping the conditions" included securing adoption of the UN Security Council resolution (on March 17, 2011 it authorized an international coalition to "take all necessary measures" to "protect civilians" in Libya), and handing over the mission command to NATO soon after initial intervention ended. At each stage the USA proved to be an indispensable contributor[52]. Later on, such policy has been labeled, not necessarily accurately, the "leading from behind".

Within the context of leadership inclusiveness, Obama's administration also recognized a need to adjust institutional economic arrangements. Along the promotion of the G-20 forum, during financial crisis hoisted to the main platform of economic and financial cooperation of the major advanced and emerging market economies[53], there were steps taken toward reforming the IMF. Accepted by the Fund's Board of Governors in December 2010, the reform package addressed two major problems faced by this institution:

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[51] "Remarks by the President on the Situation in Libya", Whitehouse.gov, accessed July 28, 2015, https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/18/remarks-president-situation-libya.

[52] Bartosz Wiśniewski, "Stany Zjednoczone wobec interwencji wojskowej w Libii," *Biuletyn PISM*, no. 35 (784) (2011): 2414–15.

[53] Marek Rewizorski, "G-8, G-20 i kształtowanie się globalnego zarządzania," in *Instytucje międzynarodowe w dobie globalnego zarządzania*, ed. Marek Rewizorski (Warszawa: Dom Wydawniczy Elipsa, 2015), 227.

significant decline of its resources as a share of global GDP, and underrepresentation of the emerging and developing countries in the institutional vote share, due to their increasing contribution to the world economy[54]. The latter proposal, more important here, included 6 per cent shift in quota, and 5 per cent in voting share to emerging countries (in particular China, India, Russia, Brazil, Mexico and South Korea), increasing their financial contributions to the IMF and their voting power in the Executive Board. The reform stroke mainly European powers (Germany, France, Great Britain and Italy), additionally due to reduction of their representatives in the Board. The United States, underrepresented in the IMF (quota share smaller than its share in global GDP), suffered minor decrease in voting power (fall from 16,72 to 16,47 per cent), but maintained its veto power for major policy decisions, where 85 per cent supermajority is required. Therefore, from the US perspective, it was both the global balance of power adjustment shift from Europe to the developing world[55], and an attempt to engage emerging countries as responsible stakeholders of the American-led order, and at the same time gaining some legitimacy. However, to be concluded the reform required the consent of the US Senate, which – despite the Obama Administration's endorsement – has not ratified the reform package yet (as for July 2015).

Second, claiming that under Obama the US global power and interests were based on broad domestic political support and on the willingness to commit substantial national resources is only partially true. It is correct about the domestic support, whether it is bipartisan consent for foreign engagement, American business's pursuit of open markets and of cheap labor, or public opinion's approval for taking an active part in the world affairs by the USA. On the whole, nothing has changed here. Regarding the commitment issue, however, it is mostly a matter of scale. Certainly, there is no question that the United States spends an unmatched fortune on its global posture: overseas

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[54] "Press Release: IMF Executive Board Approves Major Overhaul of Quotas and Governance," accessed July 30, 2015, http://www.imf.org/external/np/sec/pr/2010/pr10418.htm.
[55] Paola Subacchi, "The Role of the US in the Post-Crisis Economic Order," in *America and a Changed World*, ed. Robin Niblett (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 270.

military and diplomatic deployments, international institutions, or foreign aid. According to SIPRI, the US military spending during Obama's presidency was relatively high, although since 2010 it has continuously fallen. As for the share of GDP it fell from 4,7 per cent (2010) to 3,5 per cent in 2014, which was a level last seen in 2002. To some degree it was just a return to normalcy after two long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, wherefrom troops were gradually withdrawn. This drop in military spending, however, was also caused by budget sequestration and doctrinal adjustment to the new security landscape. Instead of long endorsed "two-war" doctrine (being prepared for two overlapping regional conflicts), the Department of Defense put greater emphasis on special forces capabilities to conduct quick raids into enemy territory[56]. This shift, along with "no boots on the ground" doctrine, applied to the cases of Libya and of Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (where American interventions were confined to air operations, or to training and advisory missions[57]), indicated that there was a limited readiness to commit national resources, especially the lives of American soldiers. Correspondingly, when in 2013 President Obama withdrew from his "red line" declaration to engage militarily, if the Assad regime utilized chemical or biological weapon[58], and sought unnecessary Congress authorization for intervention instead, he explained himself by pointing to "the absence of a direct or imminent threat to our security"[59]. Besides, he also appealed to Congress facing little public support for the use of force in Syria[60]. Eventually, due to diplomatic efforts to

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[56] "The Obama Doctrine - Council on Foreign Relations," accessed July 28, 2015, http://www.cfr.org/elections/obama-doctrine/p27295.

[57] As of June 2015 it was approximately 3100 US military personnel in Iraq. See: Christopher M. Blanchard et al., "The 'Islamic State' Crisis and U.S. Policy" (Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, 2015), 16.

[58] "Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps | Whitehouse.gov," accessed July 28, 2015, https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/08/20/remarks-president-white-house-press-corps.

[59] "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Syria", Whitehouse.gov, accessed July 28, 2015, https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/10/remarks-president-address-nation-syria.

[60] 36 per cent in favor, 51 per cent against. See: "U.S. Support for Action in Syria Is Low vs. Past Conflicts," accessed July 28, 2015, http://www.gallup.com/poll/164282/support-syria-action-lower-past-conflicts.aspx.

prevent the Assad regime from using chemical weapons in the future, the vote in Congress was deliberately postponed and forgotten.

Third role conception, the propagation of "American ideology", is certainly a significant element of US global leadership, and, therefore, it is indeed the least controversial point on Hanns Maull's list. Human rights, democracy, rule of law, free trade and open markets are constitutive elements of Woodrow Wilson's idealism that have been long present in American foreign policy. Most recently they resurfaced vividly in George W. Bush's agenda to democratize Arab countries by imposing liberal standards. Abysmal outcomes of such policy in Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine undermined the idea, which suffered further from the Bush administration's selective approach to idealism that neglected President Wilson's another essential principle to empower international institutions. Obama's administration offered different approach and reinterpreted this type of Wilsonianism.

On the one hand, it put less focus on democracy promotion. In 2009, in his speech at Cairo University President Obama stressed US commitment to democratic values, but distanced himself from the policy of his predecessor, saying that "[n]o system of government can or should be imposed by one nation on any other"[61]. Worth mentioning is the overall reaction of the US government toward massive protests against authoritarian regimes in several countries during the Arab Spring. When it came to bottom-up pursuit of democratic values in the region, the United States hesitated and gave priority to strategic considerations: events in Tunisia were underestimated, and president Ben Ali was overthrown practically without any US engagement; in Egypt US officials long backed president Hosni Mubarak, until the transfer of power was secured by the Egyptian military; in Yemen main US concern was stabilizing rather than democratizing a country, wherein Al-Qaeda of Arabian Peninsula groupings operated; in Bahrain the United States decided to sustain *status-quo* regarding its alliance with Saudi Arabia and Sunni royal family in

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[61] "Remarks by the President at Cairo University, 6-04-09", Whitehouse.gov, accessed July 28, 2015, https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09.

Manama, rather than to risk with Shiite revolution and with a prospective rise of Iranian influence on this side of the Persian Gulf; finally, in case of the Syrian civil war, having taken everything into consideration, arguably there was no good and effective solution to bring an end to this conflict. Among aforementioned cases Libya could be an outstanding example of democracy and human rights promotion, because intervention of international coalition helped to defeat regime of Muammar Gaddafi. However, shortly after sectarian conflicts erupted and Libya plunged into chaos.

On the other hand, reinterpretation of Wilsonianism implied greater commitment and enhancing multilateral institutions. Not only does this remark point to the dissemination of universally applicable American order (as discussed), but also it contradicts the fourth point made by Hanss Maull about "functional rather than a principled approach to multilateralism". Supposedly, President Obama is a very pragmatic politician. One account observes that "Obama has emphasized bureaucratic efficiency over ideology, and approached foreign policy as if it were case law, deciding his response to every threat or crisis on its own merits"[62]. In turn, David Rothkopf notes that when President Obama defended himself for being indecisive in the case of Syria, he declared that a guiding principle of his foreign policy was just not doing "stupid" things[63]. Nevertheless, his approach to multilateral institutions reveals something more than mere functional internationalism. In symbolic fashion President Obama restored the cabinet-level rank of the US ambassador to the UN and nominated his close aide, Susan Rice, to this position. He was also the first US commander-in-chief chairing the UN Security Council (in 2009 and 2014, advancing the agenda of nonproliferation and terrorist fighters respectively). The Obama Administration engaged also in advancing and supporting multilateral treaties, including signing UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, joining the UN Human Rights Council in spite of

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[62] Quote after: Robert Singh, *Barack Obama's Post-American Foreign Policy: The Limits of Engagement* (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), 41.

[63] David J. Rothkopf, *National Insecurity: American Leadership in an Age of Fear*, First edition. (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2014, 2014).

deep reservations towards its effectiveness, and declaring to "immediately and aggressively pursue U.S. ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty"[64]. The latter did not happen though, to some degree due to the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty ratified by the end of 2010. Earlier that year, however, Obama's administration initiated international Nuclear Security Summits aimed at containing and eliminating nuclear materials. In Libya's case Obama postulated to enforce UN resolution with military intervention to avoid situation when "[t]he democratic values that we stand for would be overrun" and "the words of the international community would be rendered hollow"[65]. Together with engagement in other multilateral initiatives (i.e. climate change and carbon dioxide reductions), it was a significant change in comparison to his predecessor.

Fifth, as previous paragraphs have demonstrated, Obama's administration demonstrated an approach contrary to a notion of propensity for military intervention and unilateralism. Although both US National Security Strategies (NSS) of 2010 and 2015 stipulate the right to act unilaterally, should American nation and its interests be threatened, the latest NSS develops this doctrine only with a caveat, that any decision to use force must "reflect a clear mandate and feasible objectives", as well as it must be "effective, just, and consistent with the rule of law". Furthermore, such decision "should be based on a serious appreciation for the risk to our mission, our global responsibilities, and the opportunity costs at home and abroad" (see "don't do stupid things" principle). And finally, "[w]henever and wherever we use force, we will do so in a way that reflects our values and strengthens our legitimacy"[66]. These guidelines were not particularly reflected in the counterterrorism strategy, involving drone strikes and targeted killings in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia, which escalated during Obama presidency, and reached

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[64] "Remarks by President Barack Obama in Prague as Delivered", Whitehouse.gov, accessed July 28, 2015, https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-prague-delivered.
[65] Ibid.
[66] "National Security Strategy" (The White House, February 2015), 8.

an estimated number of about 2,500 kills[67]. Paradoxically, however, this significant rise resulted from aforementioned unwillingness to engage militarily with ground forces, and hence, the expansion of special operations missions followed. They were cheaper, less exposed to public scrutiny, and involved fewer casualties on the American side.

Except targeted killings, that were occasionally conducted without previous notification or consent of the country on which territory they took place (i.e. operation "Neptun Spear" in Pakistan against Osama bin Laden in 2011), there was no other instance of strictly unilateral use of force by the United States under President Obama. Moreover, as Libyan case demonstrated, the USA sought the broadest possible multilateral support for military intervention, engaging not only the UN and NATO allies, but – most importantly – Arab League countries. Similarly with respect to ISIL, the United States led coalition of over 60 state and non-state partners along five lines of effort: (1) providing military support to its partners; (2) impeding the flow of foreign fighters; (3) stopping ISIL's financing and funding; (4) addressing humanitarian crises in the region; and (5) exposing ISIL's true nature[68]. This comprehensive approach taken by the American-led coalition was a result of preferring long-term solutions from immediate but unstable outcomes. Although the deployment of American soldiers could have temporal positive results, there were legitimate concerns that enduring stabilization required strong Iraqi security forces taking responsibility for their country. In addition, once President Obama had withdrawn US troops from Iraq in 2011, he was not eager to sending them back to fight ISIL. In effect, the military support included, as for July 2015, over 5000 strikes in Iraq and Syria (launched from air and sea), as well as intelligence, training missions, and equipment supplies

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[67] "Almost 2,500 Now Killed by Covert US Drone Strikes since Obama Inauguration Six Years Ago", The Bureau's Report for January 2015, The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, accessed July 29, 2015, https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/2015/02/02/almost-2500-killed-covert-us-drone-strikes-obama-inauguration/.

[68] "Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL," accessed July 29, 2015, http://www.state.gov/s/seci/.

for local forces fighting on the ground. By no means it could be counted a propensity for military intervention.

Conclusion

The United States under Obama's administration has not relinquished a leadership role. It has rather adjusted the American world leadership to new circumstances by amending foreign policy goals, and by modifying strategies and instruments accordingly. The twofold change involved redefinition of leadership's purpose and rationale, as well as modifications in role conceptions. The case study of pivot to Asia (a rapidly emerging and thus – from the perspective of global primacy – an increasingly important region) illustrated how the US institutional, political, military and economical presence there (originating in the post-War share of power) was adapted to accommodate and contain the rise of China, and to sustain the American preeminence and comprehensive leadership. The purpose-transformation of the American leadership, from advancing US preponderance (currently decreasing) to defending its privileged position by resorting to its institutional structures and alliances, has also brought change to the way how the United States has been contested. For instance, China challenged these structures by questioning American legitimacy to lead, by claiming greater share in decision making (in the IMF), or by initiating and establishing separate institutions, *inter alia*, the AIIB and BRICS's the New Development Bank. A broad international interest and participation in the AIIB – manifested also by close American allies from Europe and Asia – reveals the remarkable potential of similar challenges to the US-led economic order in the future.

The Obama Administration considerably remodeled the role conceptions of the American leadership that transformed its character. Contrary to Hanns Maull's findings, this change occurred not only *within* the role conceptions, but also included shift *of* a particular role conception. Changes *within* include:

departing from exclusiveness and allowing the increased portion of others' engagement; decreased willingness and/or ability[69] to commit substantial national resources abroad; reinterpreting Wilsonianism towards less ambitious promotion of democracy, as well as greater emphasis on multilateralism and on strengthening international institutions. The role conception that Obama's administration seems to have entirely abandoned is the propensity for military intervention and unilateral action. Cases of Libya and Syria (or Arab Spring in general), as well as of Ukraine and Iran (though not examined in this analysis), demonstrate clearly great reluctance rather than propensity for military engagement. On the one hand, some of these changes might be temporary, resulting from the specific political personality of the current president. On the other hand, they appear to be more structural and multifaceted, concerning – above all – shifts in global share of multilayered power, and transitions in regional institutional architecture. Therefore, in respect of redefining the American leadership, Obama's administration has been rather a catalyst than a cause.

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[69] Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014).

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