

# Has U.S. Leadership Been Revitalized Through Barack Obama's Innovative Use of Force?

Thomas Labouche \*

## Introduction

The United States developed as a country imbued with the belief that it held a somehow unique and unifying vocation that was best formulated in the key phrase of nineteenth-century westward expansion “Manifest Destiny,” which held that the U.S. had a divinely ordained fate to expand across the North American continent, and ultimately to redeem the Old World. While the twentieth century saw this ideology take concrete form in a nation that eventually achieved the status of a unique superpower, the first decade of the twenty-first century has often been suggested to reflect a relative decline in the United States’ global standing. Assuming that this decline is unavoidable would be to participate in a form of fatalism, allowing neither the chance for the United States’ core strengths to demonstrate the contrary, nor the possibility that geopolitical events may at some point potentially keep other countries from rising.

If, during the last Bush Administration, the United States frequently resorted to the use of hard power as a quick answer to certain issues, under Barack Obama’s presidency, some events have suggested a change in the way the U.S. resorts to hard power, eventually “re-casting the way America should approach the world.”<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, numerous cases have indicated that the U.S. is currently **more moderate** than could have been expected, based on the previous eight years. For example, President Obama announced in 2010 the plan to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan by 2014. Simultaneously, and especially in 2011, the White House exerted unusual pressure on Israel with respect to the latter’s potential action against Iran.<sup>2</sup> Parallel to that, events in Libya during the fall of the Gaddafi regime did not reflect an unquestioning willingness to resort to force; indeed, haste seems to be the last word to use to describe the White House’s approach to intervention in Syria as well. Concretely, more emphasis has been placed on diplomacy and low-profile actions, such as frequent use of armed drones, targeted elimination, and negotiation (although some of these actions have received significant media attention). Surrounding this unusual stance, a desire to clarify relations with Islam has also emerged. Manifested in President Obama’s 2009 speech in Cairo, this

---

\* Thomas Labouche is a Major in the French Army. This article is based on a core paper written for the 26<sup>th</sup> International Training Course in Security Policy at the Geneva Center for Security Policy.

<sup>1</sup> “Brzezinski Assesses Obama’s Foreign Policy,” *National Public Radio* (14 December 2009); audio available at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=121426655>.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, “Obama to Iran and Israel: ‘As President of the United States, I Don’t Bluff,’” *The Atlantic Monthly* (2 March 2012); available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/obama-to-iran-and-israel-as-president-of-the-united-states-i-dont-bluff/253875/>.

more temperate approach has perhaps helped mitigate some resentment against U.S. military interventionism throughout the Muslim world.

Obama, who was believed—at least from a European perspective—to be a much more peaceful president than his predecessor, has remained above all a Commander-in-Chief, seeing himself as elected and inclined to act to protect U.S. interests.<sup>3</sup> He seems to view the option to use military force—as reflected in the 2010 National Security Strategy—through the lens of attempting to rebalance the use of force, to render the decision somehow surprising, and less predictable than in the past.<sup>4</sup> All in all, the United States has seemed to adopt a new approach to the use of force, one combining reflective moderation and the judicious use of military assets.

Given this framework, the thesis of this article is that a new approach to the decision about whether to resort to force could give the U.S. the opportunity to revitalize its global leadership. This revitalization springs from three advantages that such an approach offers. First, moderation will mitigate the resentment triggered by previous excessive U.S. military interventionism. Second, withdrawal from the open-ended wars that are part of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) will allow energy to be refocused on the Obama Administration's other core priorities (economy, education). Third, a flexible and adaptive military culture will help deter or address current and upcoming threats. These foundations will assist the revitalization of U.S. leadership around the world. Consequently, this essay will analyze Obama's doctrine by reviewing some main events reflecting his "unspoken" foreign policy doctrine, before advocating for a more flexible military capability that will participate in returning the United States to a position of political and moral leadership, if used wisely.

### **A Doctrine Best Observed Through a Multiform Rebalancing**

Since Barack Obama has not previously clearly articulated a doctrine regarding the use of military force, analyzing some crucial decisions during his presidency may help in detecting his unspoken doctrine. They range from a responsible withdrawal of conventional forces in Iraq, to the massive use of armed drones in Pakistan and Yemen, to negotiations with elements of the Taliban, to verbal deterrence to Israel against resorting to force in Iran. To get a systemic idea of this rebalancing, we could draw an analogy to an operational design and its lines of operations. The overall strategic end-state is to regain some freedom of action, which has been for a long time drastically limited by the si-

---

<sup>3</sup> This article will not address the extent to which Obama is the lone decider in cases involving the resort to the use of force. The influence of strong actors—be they institutional, like the Congress, or from the private sector, like business elites—is obvious, but the assumption used here is that, being the president, Barack Obama definitely provides the ultimate impulse and guidance to the United States' foreign policy.

<sup>4</sup> This strategy differs clearly from the one released in 2002, which referred to military pre-eminence. The U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Susan Rice, qualified the new strategy as a "dramatic departure" from that of his predecessors. David E. Sanger and Peter Baker, "New U.S. Security Strategy Focuses on Managing Threats," *New York Times* (27 May 2010); available at [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/28/world/28strategy.html?ref=world&\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/28/world/28strategy.html?ref=world&_r=1&).

multaneous wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, wars that have tied up resources that can be used to better concentrate on projects that will improve the United States' standing in the world, along with its security.

### *A Withdrawal from Hollow Commitments ...*

This could be the name of the first line of operation. The particular issue at question here is the commitment of troops and resources in Afghanistan. The decision made in 2010 to definitively disengage U.S. personnel from Afghanistan<sup>5</sup> was made in total discordance with a counter-insurgency strategy that demands, among other conditions for success, a long-lasting presence, and certainly not a public announcement that offers hope to adversaries for whom time becomes increasingly an ally.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, this decision makes sense from the president's point of view: he cannot afford a war which to a certain extent militarily, and certainly from the perspective of state-building, is nothing more than a stalemate.<sup>7</sup> While the democratic evolution of the country (and thus the future of the Afghan people) seems to matter less in Washington than it did a decade ago,<sup>8</sup> Obama still approves the regular use of armed drones to further disrupt Al Qaeda operations.<sup>9</sup> It may sound cynical, but it is a realistic (or realist) stance. In any event, the withdrawal of U.S. troops will be imbued with mutual bitterness, but the United States will have to make the draw-down look honorable by highlighting some progress achieved, the financial assistance provided, and the blood spilt.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, more than providing "justice to Osama Bin Laden," Operation Geronimo's unilateral conduct

---

<sup>5</sup> David Jackson, "Obama: Afghanistan Troop Withdrawal Process to Start Next Year," *USA Today* (20 November 2010); available at <http://content.usatoday.com/communities/theoval/post/2010/11/obama-holds-nato-news-conference/1#.UGUJLhjlWL0>.

<sup>6</sup> According to a study of ninety insurgencies, on average fourteen years are required to achieve success. Seth G. Jones, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> In late 2007 the war in Afghanistan was estimated to be costing USD 300 million per day. See *Current News Early Bird* (17 October 2011).

<sup>8</sup> It is worth wondering what will happen to those who have worked closely with the coalition once NATO forces withdraw. It might well be reminiscent of the tragic destiny of the locals faithful to colonial empires when the latter left their colonies: in Algeria, around 70,000 *harkis* were killed after the 1962 Evian Agreement marking the end of the hostilities, and about 200,000 "boat people" knew another tragedy was on the way in 1976 when they set off from the Vietnamese coast.

<sup>9</sup> Unmanned drone attacks have been the cause of five times more casualties within terrorist cells than were achieved during all of President George W. Bush's mandate. See Victor Davis Hanson, "The President's Chosen Weapon," *Philadelphia Inquirer* (13 October 2011); [http://articles.philly.com/2011-10-13/news/30275742\\_1\\_drones-pilotless-aircraft-terrorists](http://articles.philly.com/2011-10-13/news/30275742_1_drones-pilotless-aircraft-terrorists).

<sup>10</sup> Lt. Col. Daniel L. Davis, "Truth, Lies and Afghanistan – How military leaders have let us down," *Armed Forces Journal* (February 2012); available at [www.armedforcesjournal.com/2012/02/8904030](http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/2012/02/8904030).

showed the limits of Obama's consideration for the touchiness of the Pakistanis.<sup>11</sup> This all shows a willingness to stop wasting energy where results seem uncertain, and simultaneously, to go on rooting out terrorism, which was the initial driver for the intervention in Afghanistan in the first place.<sup>12</sup>

*... Accompanied by an Uncertain Balance in Risky Areas ...*

This could describe the second line of operation, where a rebalancing is observable. In maintaining its focus on the Middle East, Saudi Arabia remains a privileged partner for the United States, and it is likely to remain so in the future.<sup>13</sup> Saudi Arabia remains of vital interest for the U.S., receiving protection in exchange for ensuring a consistent supply of oil.<sup>14</sup> It guarantees easy profits as well.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, the region remains unstable. The fact that Saudi troops were active in Bahrain in suppressing Shiite rioters during the unrest of March 2011 illustrates the risks of a regional divide. While the rioters alluded to a Saudi declaration of war,<sup>16</sup> Teheran again seized on the event as an opportunity to condemn those who "behave as Saddam and who are backed by the U.S."<sup>17</sup> Regional conflict was once again prevented, thanks to the mediation of the U.S. State Department.<sup>18</sup> The United States' relations with Israel are also potentially dangerous.

<sup>11</sup> Tom Cohen, "Obama Tells Families of 9/11 Victims that 'Justice has been done'," *CNN Politics* (2 May 2011); available at [http://articles.cnn.com/2011-05-02/politics/bin.laden.white.house\\_1\\_bin-operation-with-extraordinary-courage-defeat-al?\\_s=PM:POLITICS](http://articles.cnn.com/2011-05-02/politics/bin.laden.white.house_1_bin-operation-with-extraordinary-courage-defeat-al?_s=PM:POLITICS).

<sup>12</sup> Danny Schechter, "Special Ops now Defines the Pentagon's Expanding Wars," *Global Research* (14 February 2012); available at [www.globalresearch.ca/special-ops-now-defines-the-pentagon-s-expanding-wars/](http://www.globalresearch.ca/special-ops-now-defines-the-pentagon-s-expanding-wars/).

<sup>13</sup> This relationship was born on board the USS Quincy on 14 February 1945, between the King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud and President Franklin Roosevelt, who was coming back from Yalta. This meeting inaugurated the close cooperation between the U.S. and the Wahhabi Kingdom. See [http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abdelaziz\\_ben\\_Abderrahmane\\_Al\\_Saoud](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abdelaziz_ben_Abderrahmane_Al_Saoud).

<sup>14</sup> Lisa Romeo, "Etats-Unis et Arabie saoudite: les liens du pétrole de 1945 à nos jours" [U.S. and Saudi Arabia: The Relationship of Oil from 1945 to Today], *Les clés du Moyen-Orient* (n.d.); available at [www.lesclesdumoyenorient.com/Etats-Unis-et-Arabie-saoudite](http://www.lesclesdumoyenorient.com/Etats-Unis-et-Arabie-saoudite).

<sup>15</sup> It is measurable in terms of immaterial advantage—Saudi Arabia enjoys status as a strategic outpost in a sensitive region—as well as in financial profits. Such close relations may be crucial to understanding the indulgence shown by the U.S. towards the country that produced fifteen of the 9/11 terrorists.

<sup>16</sup> Ethan Bronner and Michael Slackman, "Saudi Troops Enter Bahrain to Help Put down Unrest," *New York Times* (14 March 2011); available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/15/world/middleeast/15bahrain.html?pagewanted=all>, and "Des troupes saoudiennes à Bahrein, les chiites parlent de guerre," *L'Express* (14 March 2011); available at [http://www.lexpress.fr/actualites/2/monde/des-troupes-saoudiennes-a-bahrein-les-chiites-parlent-de-guerre\\_971943.html](http://www.lexpress.fr/actualites/2/monde/des-troupes-saoudiennes-a-bahrein-les-chiites-parlent-de-guerre_971943.html).

<sup>17</sup> Robin Wigglesworth and Simeon Kerr, "Ahmadinejad Condemns Foreign Troops in Bahrain," *Financial Times* (16 March 2011); available at [www.ft.com/cms/s/0/5754805a-4e44-11e0-a9fa-00144feab49a.html#axzz27jGsVb3i](http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/5754805a-4e44-11e0-a9fa-00144feab49a.html#axzz27jGsVb3i).

<sup>18</sup> Manama in Bahrain is the harbor currently hosting the U.S. Fifth Fleet. Nevertheless, this does not impede Saudi Arabia from speculating on potential Iranian interference. Indeed, any insta-

Underpinned by regional common interests, and potentially amplified by the influential Jewish lobby in the U.S., they have become even more complex and sensitive, as the latest tensions between Tel-Aviv and Washington reveal perhaps a certain distancing.<sup>19</sup> It makes it interesting to explore how and why the “siege mentality” that currently shapes Israeli foreign policy may lead to a more or less rational decision that may trap the United States in an undesired and uncertain new military engagement under circumstances that would not be appropriate, or based on premises that could not be documented.<sup>20</sup> On Israel’s side, the emphasis placed on the potential threat of a nuclear Iran may be designed to draw away international media attention while continuing with settlement construction despite multiple condemnations.<sup>21</sup> The United States’ refusal to pay USD 60 million to UNESCO as a protest against the admission of Palestine cannot mask the increasing freedom in the remarks from President Obama regarding Israel. Simultaneously, one could wonder whether the so-called “Arab Spring” revolts will not have a domino effect on the relationships that the U.S. is maintaining with countries in the Middle East.

Already complex, the foreign policy game in the region has become still more confused. Facing such an intricate situation, the U.S. reaction is characterized by reflection and moderation. It reinforces the perception of an appropriate Obama doctrine.

### *... Extended to Impact the Oldest Alliance*

Finally, a reduced NATO footprint sounds like a good strategy to pursue in order to increase the Alliance’s freedom of action. While this prospect has yet to be confirmed in terms of future decisions undertaken within the framework of a review of financial burden sharing,<sup>22</sup> former Defense Secretary Robert Gates clearly underlined the disproportionate share of the costs of NATO operations borne by the United States, and stigma-

---

bility in the [Eastern](#) oil-producing provinces, mainly populated by Shiites, would profit Teheran. See Nouriel Roubini, “Middle East Turmoil and Contagion: A Geoeconomic Tsunami for the Global Economy?,” *Roubini Global Economics* (23 February 2011); available at [http://relooney.fatcow.com/0\\_New\\_9603.pdf](http://relooney.fatcow.com/0_New_9603.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> Covert actions performed by the Mossad, along with the creation of a new command structure in charge of “deep” operations, tend to irritate Washington. See “False Flag,” *Foreign Policy* (13 January 2012).

<sup>20</sup> “Israel’s siege mentality,” *The Economist* (3 June 2010).

<sup>21</sup> “Hillary Clinton: Israeli Settlements ‘Illegitimate,’” *ABC News* (18 February 2011); available at <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/hillary-clinton-israeli-settlements-illegitimate/story?id=12952834#.UGpR8hjlWL0>. “Israeli Settlements Condemned by Western Powers,” *BBC News* (2 November 2011); available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15556801>. Adrien Jaulmes, “L’UE appelle à enrayer la colonisation en Cisjordanie,” *Le Figaro* (13 January 2012); available at <http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2012/01/13/01003-20120113ARTFIG00665-l-ue-appelle-a-enrayer-la-colonisation-en-cisjordanie.php>.

<sup>22</sup> The budget cuts impacting the military spending could be a logical cause. Simultaneously, Europe has been criticized for its decreasing military budgets. David Morgan, “Gates Criticizes NATO: How Much Does U.S. Pay?,” *CBS News* (10 June 2011); available at [http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-202\\_162-20070541.html](http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-202_162-20070541.html).

tized European allies who are “willing and eager for American taxpayers to assume the growing security burden left by reductions in European defense budgets.”<sup>23</sup> The following U.S. Secretary of Defense, Leon Panetta, delivered the same message in a more oblique way, warning that “we are at a critical moment for our defense partnership.”<sup>24</sup> It is obvious that NATO has reached a crossroads: The United States will not continue to consistently shoulder the heaviest financial burden while the European members of the Alliance decrease their defense budgets.<sup>25</sup> This is simply common sense, and the buzzwords “Smart Defense” and “Pooling and Sharing,” which are geared more towards savings than efficiency, may simply arouse U.S. skepticism of Europe’s willingness to contribute its fair share.

Parallel to these statements, the United States is currently withdrawing one-tenth of their forces garrisoned in Europe, which may not be much but still reveals a reduced U.S. military focus on the region, and potentially points toward future reductions to come. More importantly, the unusually limited U.S. commitment of resources in the latest NATO operation (in Libya) sent out strong signals. Of all the reasons that could have been used to justify the fairly modest U.S. military role in the operation against the Gaddafi regime, Obama pointed to a “moral adventure” placed under the banner of the recent concept of “Responsibility To Protect.”<sup>26</sup> A strong early claim about the legitimacy of Western intervention, bolstered by regional support, could have allowed a larger U.S. commitment. However, U.S. interest was not sufficient to provide a contribution larger than the one it eventually did. Despite the media visibility of the effort and the mission-critical assets provided by the U.S., the level of support from Washington in this campaign does not bear comparison with the usual U.S. contribution in NATO operations.<sup>27</sup> Finally, this Libyan adventure again points to a favorable pragmatism on the part of the U.S. It can go on directing NATO through a comfortable “leadership from behind” role while calling for greater participation from the European NATO members.<sup>28</sup> Such a role may help curb resentment against the U.S., as well as aid in avoiding a fiasco like Mogadishu or Bagdad.<sup>29</sup> Again, this moderation stems from Obama’s strategic view.

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> “Panetta: U.S. Military Can’t Make up NATO Shortfalls,” *msnbc.com* (5 October 2011); available at [http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/44782470/ns/us\\_news-security/t/panetta-us-military-cant-make-nato-shortfalls/#.UGpQThjIWL0](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/44782470/ns/us_news-security/t/panetta-us-military-cant-make-nato-shortfalls/#.UGpQThjIWL0).

<sup>25</sup> Andrew A. Michta, “NATO’s Last Chance,” *The American Interest* 6:5 (May/June 2011): 56–60; available at <http://www.the-american-interest.com/article-bd.cfm?piece=959>.

<sup>26</sup> James Traub, “A Moral Adventure – Is Barack Obama as much of a foreign-policy realist as he thinks he is?,” *Foreign Policy* (31 March 2011); available at [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/03/31/a\\_moral\\_adventure](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/03/31/a_moral_adventure).

<sup>27</sup> Command of the operation was given to the U.S. Admiral James G. Stavridis.

<sup>28</sup> Michael Boyle, “Obama: ‘Leading from Behind’ on Libya,” *The Guardian* (27 August 2011); available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2011/aug/27/obama-libya-leadership-nato>.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

Finally, it appears that the way Washington behaves in the field of international security has genuinely evolved. First, not all opportunities are used or instrumentalized to justify a massive use of force. Second, the U.S. no longer feels responsible to intervene where others may expect them to intervene simply because of their traditional interventionism or military supremacy. Third, if the decision is made to consider an issue as a security matter, the manner of addressing it does not translate inevitably into a quick resort to a massive use of force. Rather, it takes shape in a much more reflective way that may lead eventually to an unusual mix of soft and hard power, applied in proportions that may be counterintuitive when considering past U.S. security decisions.

It is obvious that President Obama does not want to let political capital, U.S. troops, and financial resources become swallowed up in ill-considered large, long, and costly interventions. On the contrary, standing back from some of the main foreign policy flash points, or using traditional ways of addressing them, results in an increased freedom of action for Washington. In order to foster its global leadership, the U.S. may at times be required to forgo the use of a remarkably effective military tool.

### **Doctrine and the Improvement of a Military Tool Through Effective Capitalization on Unseen Experience**

A doctrine that seeks to take as much advantage as possible of its hard power raises some questions. The first one is whether lessons have been learned from past applications of hard power. The next step is to be sure that learning from the past does not spring only from current pressures; otherwise, in periods in the future that generate less pressure, the tendency would be to simply return to the former outdated doctrine. It is worth considering as a *sine qua non* how the military culturally assimilates this doctrine.<sup>30</sup>

#### *Genuinely Learn from Past Experiences ...*

One of the key elements of any military doctrine is that received experience—the lessons of the past—should be better exploited.<sup>31</sup> Throughout U.S. military history, numerous lessons have been identified and a myriad of books written to analyze what has been done in past military encounters. The problem may be that, ranging from the American Revolution to the U.S. Civil War and through the Indian wars, the First and Second World Wars, the interventions in the Philippines and Korea, the rebuilding of Germany and Japan, as well as the Somali and Kosovo experiences and the rebuilding of Iraq, lessons have often been drawn from a perspective that did not effectively question the intellectually established military culture and its resulting mindset. Indeed, the assumption

---

<sup>30</sup> For the sake of this article, it is assumed that the cultural field is key to any other changes in the military. Therefore, other elements, such as equipment, recruitment, etc., will not be addressed here.

<sup>31</sup> “With two thousand years of examples behind us we have no excuse, when fighting, for not fighting well....” T.E. Lawrence, letter to Basil H. Liddell-Hart; see Liddell-Hart, *Lawrence of Arabia* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1989).

that one always learns more from defeats than victories seems to be ignored. Therefore, simply going back to the U.S. experience in Vietnam is instructive. The use of the term “Vietnam syndrome” highlights the impact this war had and still has upon the United States’ military culture.

Vietnam was a complex case because it combined a conventional war fought in the north with a simultaneous counter-guerrilla war being fought within South Vietnam.<sup>32</sup> The war was conducted by a cadre of generals drawn from to the generation of colonels that had defeated the German *Wehrmacht* and the Japanese Imperial military two decades before. Their experiences and culture led them to resort to a massive use of force, which proved unsuccessful<sup>33</sup> – a decision that was made despite numerous opposite views ranging from the advice of British officers to bottom-up proposals.<sup>34</sup> However, awareness at even the highest political level did not manage to influence the predominant military mindset.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the simultaneity of the Cold War, with its conventional culture, and the failure in Vietnam—which was considered as an accidental, time-limited case—naturally fostered an enduring wariness toward unconventional warfare.<sup>36</sup> Eventually, the *Blitzkrieg*-type war that defeated Iraq’s armies in 1990 and 2003 gave additional credence to this trend. However, the second phase of the second Iraq war, involving a conflict with a growing insurgency, as well as the war conducted in Afghani-

---

<sup>32</sup> When speaking about Vietnam, one has to overturn some popular beliefs. It has to be made clear that the war in Vietnam was partly lost because of two simultaneous fights: one against North Vietnam’s conventional forces, and the other against the Vietcong insurgency in South Vietnam. It has been said about the increase in the scale of conventional warfare during the war that the Communists chose that route because the insurgency was about to fail. It actually led to the spring and summer offensive of 1972, aimed at “offsetting the pacification progress met in South Vietnam.” In *Military Review* (October 2006): 90.

<sup>33</sup> 50% of the bombs the US dropped on Vietnam fell on South Vietnam. See A.J. Coates, *The Ethics of War* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 230.

<sup>34</sup> Appropriately using the experience gained by British officers in the *Malayan Emergency* would have helped remove the temptation for U.S. generals to rely almost exclusively on bombings and mass infusions of additional troops. These bottom-up approaches include CORDS (Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support, a pacification program) and the “strategic hamlets” approach, among others.

<sup>35</sup> For evidence of this awareness, see President John F. Kennedy’s speech at West Point on 6 June 1962, warning about a new type of war “new in its intensity, ancient in its origin, . . . war by infiltration instead of aggression, seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him . . .,” a war that would demand “new strategy and new kind of training.” Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7WSHVh-ZtMs>.

“The history of the U.S. Army in Vietnam can be seen as the history of individuals attempting to implement changes in counterinsurgency doctrine but failing to overcome a very strong organizational culture predisposed to a conventional attrition-based doctrine.” John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>36</sup> See the deep analysis of the U.S. doctrine conducted by Walter E. Kretchik in *U.S. Army Doctrine: From the American Revolution to the War on Terror* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2011).



stan, confronted and challenged this conventional culture with asymmetric threats representing the new paradigm,<sup>37</sup> for counterinsurgency efforts do not adhere to any fixed standards as conventional warfare does.<sup>38</sup> It is more about adapting to the changes in a given insurgency, which is itself a type of counter-warfare. Therefore it is much less intellectually comfortable than conventional warfare, since it may often lead to questions about what has been taken for granted so far. The field of definite knowledge and unchallenged operational art which used to dominate military thinking yields the floor to an absence of always-applicable rules, where success relies on acknowledging the importance of counter-intuition, and where global understanding and innovation are the main efficiency multipliers. The experience acquired by the U.S. military during the last decade has permitted the emergence of this new school of thought, which has resulted in better approaches about how to resort to force. Its most prominent pioneer may be General David Petraeus who, having studied the Vietnam War in detail, has been able to ensure that the essence of this traumatizing experience is not forgotten.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, he managed not to abandon his judgment of current conditions to his knowledge of history. It has resulted in him always placing the emphasis on gaining a comprehensive understanding before taking any action, and privileging the spirit behind a doctrine rather than the doctrine itself. Cultural independence has paid dividends.

... *Should Be Fostered by Current Constraints* ...

Today's many resource constraints should help this new culture to endure. However, a danger exists if the doctrinal and intellectual shift outlined above is merely a reaction to a situation that turns out to be only temporary. There remains the possibility that, should current pressures only be momentary, and decrease in the near future, the main trends of the former culture might come back.

---

<sup>37</sup> Symmetry characterizes a confrontation where opposing forces have about the same standards in terms of doctrine, size, and equipment. Dissymmetry could define the type of war where an unbalance exists in one or more of the previously mentioned domains. Finally, asymmetric warfare reflects a confrontation where the forces, strategies, and tactics of both parties differ significantly. The intent is then to bypass the other's superiority in given domains. "The communist strategy of protracted war succeeded in part because it correctly identified the American centre of gravity as public opinion." In Jeffrey Record and W. Andrew Terrill, *Iraq and Vietnam: Differences, Similarities and Insights* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College, 2004). Underlying these distinctions are the challenged definitions of words such as *force*, *victory*, *defeat*, *success*, *legitimate*, and *combatant*, within legal, cultural, and international frames.

<sup>38</sup> See Christopher Sims, Fernando Luján, and Bing West, "Both Sides of the COIN: Defining War After Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2012); available at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/136960/christopher-sims-fernando-lujan-and-bing-west/both-sides-of-the-coin>.

<sup>39</sup> Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, for instance, in "Building Critical Thinkers: [Leader Development Must Be the Army's Top Priority](#)," *Armed Forces Journal* 148:7 (February 2011): 12–15.

On one hand, we may assume that the decade-long wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have shaped the military mindset with an emphasis dedicated to counterinsurgency, which as a result may become the dominant feature of military culture. Indeed, the lieutenants and captains who have fought in Fallujah and struggled to stabilize Helmand Province will be the colonels and generals of 2025. On the other hand, assuming that the main emerging threats of the future might best be addressed through conventional means points to a possible resurgence of the culture that emphasized conventional warfare (and conventional thinking). Simultaneously, cuts to the U.S. defense budget will take place in parallel with the development of still existing threats, whether they be global terrorism, conventional militaries, cyber attack, space militarization, etc. All will call for changes. So far, the priority in U.S. defense spending seems to be to reduce the quantity of troops and assets while not diminishing capabilities.<sup>40</sup>

Where all this will lead is unclear, although it may result in the predominance of either counterinsurgency or conventional warfare in the U.S. defense mindset. Nevertheless, enjoying an efficient military force indicates that the fundamental element of true strength lies in not picking one of them and neglecting the other, but in keeping both capabilities alive, reactive, and flexible.<sup>41</sup> Doing so is more challenging than choosing one or the other, since it will require leaders to maintain an open mind, developing a greater sophistication of thought than is required by the recent turn to an almost exclusive emphasis on counterinsurgency.<sup>42</sup> If he intends to maintain the United States' standing as having finest military in the world, President Obama may want to bear that in mind.<sup>43</sup>

### *... And Eventually Mitigate the Military's Inertia*

Changing or adapting one's mentality is not easy; changing an institution's mentality is even harder. And changing that of the military could be more challenging still, which is, sadly, what history repeatedly tells us.<sup>44</sup> What does this lesson imply? A new strategic political doctrine may be adopted, but the path of military implementation will take time to seep out into the institution and change individual mindsets.

A generation of military personnel has served in Afghanistan and Iraq. Meanwhile, General Petraeus has designed a new doctrine intended to disrupt Al Qaeda and its af-

---

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Donnelly, Phillip Dur, and Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., "The Future of U.S. Military Power: [Debating How to Address China, Iran, and Others](#)," *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2009); available at [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/65507/thomas-donnelly-philip-dur-and-andrew-f-krepinevich-jr/the-future-of-us-military-power](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/65507/thomas-donnelly-philip-dur-and-andrew-f-krepinevich-jr/the-future-of-us-military-power).

<sup>41</sup> As stated by former U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates: "The principal challenge, therefore, is how to ensure that the capabilities gained and counterinsurgency lessons learned from Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the lessons we learned from other places where we have engaged in irregular warfare over the last two decades, are institutionalized within the defense establishment." Quoted in "2008 National Defense Strategy," *Small Wars Journal* (31 July 2008).

<sup>42</sup> See Dempsey, "Building Critical Thinkers."

<sup>43</sup> As stated in the 2008 National Defense Strategy and reflected in the 2012 State of the Union's speech.

<sup>44</sup> This is the thesis of John Nagl's book, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*.

filiates while mitigating the alienation of the local population.<sup>45</sup> It is certainly difficult to recover confidence in this human field and to “win hearts and minds,” particularly in light of initial mistakes made by Western forces in the region. Nevertheless, it has been possible to meet with some success. These positive outcomes should not be totally eclipsed by the local cultural features that remind us how difficult it is to install centralized and respected authorities where civil societies are not mature enough to accept and foster such governance.<sup>46</sup>

Provided that flexibility becomes a cultural norm within the U.S. military, it must not be limited to the current counterinsurgency campaigns. Indeed, the required flexibility lies not only in mastering counterinsurgency strategies, being innovative in implementing them, or designing new ones. It also resides in the ability to carry out counterinsurgency operations—and to adjust the approach when required—without losing the ability to plan, conduct, and adapt strategies to deal with conventional threats at the same time. This is without question highly challenging, since it is much easier to restrict one’s expertise to one or the other field. But current security challenges, just as those that might occur in the future, demand from military leaders broader knowledge and unrelenting mental flexibility.

The U.S. military has acquired huge wealth. The combination of the strength of their armed forces, the knowledge gained from the experiences of the last decade, and their dominance of the full spectrum of assets represents a potential for a still enduring and unchallengeable military power. Nevertheless, keeping a flexible and skillful mindset will allow them to wage the type of wars they will face and not those they wish to face. By working to not become intellectually constrained, the U.S. military can continue to distinguish itself as the world’s finest, and can serve United States’ foreign policy in the utmost manner.

Even if the military institution is better attuned culturally, and thus has an improved potential for increased efficiency, it could still be rendered useless if the political leadership misuses its capability. Indeed, political leaders should not succumb to the temptation to resort more frequently to hard power simply because it has reached a higher level of efficiency. On the contrary, greater success in foreign policy will result ultimately from combining the sensible use of a more efficient force with a more subtle political sense. This could deter adversaries through the respect or fear that armed wisdom inspires.

---

<sup>45</sup> In its approach to counterinsurgency, the revised *U.S. Army Field Manual* gives significant space for reflection, adaptability, cultural awareness, and **proportionality – numerous** issues that were before not so common in doctrine. *Counterinsurgency: The U.S. Army Field Manual*, No. 3-24 (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, December 2006).

<sup>46</sup> “It must be remembered that Afghanistan has for centuries been rather a geographical expression than a country.” George Alfred Henty, *For Name and Fame; or, Through Afghan Passes* (London: Blackie & Son, 1886); full text available at <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/2/1/9/7/21979/21979-h/21979-h.htm>.

## **A Doctrine Whose Efficiency Ultimately Depends on the Wise Political Use of an Efficient Military**

### *Adapting Culture to Meet Required Wisdom ...*

Wisdom in using the military in an appropriate manner is paramount. Up to the end of the military phase of the second Iraq war and the defeat of Saddam Hussein's forces in 2003, a massive commitment of conventional forces had been the main feature of the use of force. The drawbacks of common, brutal, and hasty approaches to the application of military power have opened the room for reflection. The latter should precede all military commitment for, once forces are engaged, it is too late to reverse the decision. For instance, in the case of Afghanistan in 2001, one might ask whether an initial lighter and sharper footprint wouldn't have been enough to disrupt the Taliban and Al Qaeda. And if it had failed, pouring more troops in later would still have been a possible option. In contrast, an initial large footprint does not leave many alternatives in the case of failure: any downsizing or withdrawal before tangible progress is achieved will be perceived as weakness, and the result of the intervention will be interpreted as failure.

Culture becomes a particularly important topic for discussion when decisions made go against the traditional philosophy of impatience, aggressiveness, and hubris.<sup>47</sup> Obama has been repeatedly criticized for the mode of the United States' participation in Operation Unified Protector over Libya. This expressed frustration stemmed from impatience that was rooted in two facts: not having targeted Muammar Gaddafi immediately, and having performed a proportionate and graduated response to Libyan shelling.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, many had expected a greater use of air power to defeat Libya's leadership and organized military as quickly as possible. In the view of Obama's detractors, the U.S. military involvement should have been entirely about removing Gaddafi and destroying his assets. What took place instead went against the United States' traditional model of waging war. President Obama's approval of European-type proportionate and measured action was therefore seen as a manifestation of weakness or indecision.<sup>49</sup> However, the end of the regime-sponsored killings and the gratitude expressed by the free Libyans once Gaddafi's dictatorship collapsed showed that limited action was the wisest course to follow. Whether time confirms that is another issue. Regardless, "leading from behind" or ac-

---

<sup>47</sup> See Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2003) – a book (and the article on which it was based) that gave rise to the famous formulation "Americans are from Mars, Europeans are from Venus."

<sup>48</sup> Some strikes against land-based objectives were delayed and even cancelled because of neighboring civilians or the simple vicinity of arable fields, with the intent of not alienating the Libyan people against NATO. Such a degree of nuance has hardly been seen in previous operations involving American forces. Interviews with NATO pilots, conducted by the author, November 2011.

<sup>49</sup> "Non-leader of the Free World," *New York Post* (18 March 2011).

knowledging the United States' imperfections does not flatter the general U.S. ego, but it does help reassure its allies.<sup>50</sup>

... *While Appropriately Repositioning the Ultima Ratio Regum* ...

Considering the consequences any use of force has, and especially the dramatic consequences that can result from its misuse, some questions should be addressed: Why, when, and how should force be deployed? "Why" suggests that force is a logical component required to implement a strategy (provided that one exists), one that makes sense to use either when previous actions have failed or when hard power is viewed as complementary to the full spectrum of possibilities.<sup>51</sup>

"When" implies a conceptual shift. Indeed, President Obama clearly views the use of force through a more Clausewitzian lens, where force is an extension of politics, and not a policy in itself. He intends to place military action at the end of a continuum, where diplomacy supported by multilateralism occupies the broadest range. According to this approach, force is the last option, instead of an option that can be resorted to earlier simply in order to shape the context of any negotiation to the United States' advantage.

"How" raises the question of the type of engagement to be designed and conducted. It requires the political leader to know the nature of the war he is about to engage in. The failure to demand this understanding as prerequisite for deciding on the use of force could be dramatic.<sup>52</sup> It subsequently requires that the U.S. president gain personal insight into the military domain. The institutional outsourcing to the military of the monopoly over the use of force is no excuse not to understand how it is to be done. Effectively shouldering his title of Commander in Chief, Barack Obama does not publicly trumpet decisions about the use of force, but instead aims wisely at efficiency,<sup>53</sup> notably by allowing massive use of drones and targeted elimination of individuals while increasing intelligence assets despite using a less aggressive vocabulary.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> President Barack Obama, Speech in Strasbourg, France, 3 April 2009; available at [http://www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/Remarks-by-President-Obama-at-Strasbourg-Town-Hall](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-President-Obama-at-Strasbourg-Town-Hall).

<sup>51</sup> The United States' National Security Strategy 2010 underlines the repositioning of the military as a tool, in contrast to the 2002 version; 2010 version available at [www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/.../national\\_security\\_strategy.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/.../national_security_strategy.pdf).

<sup>52</sup> "The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive." Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Eliot Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 88–89.

<sup>53</sup> Michael C. Dorf, "The 'Obama Doctrine': The Wisdom and Lawfulness of the President's Take-No-Prisoners Approach," *Justia.com* (24 October 2011); available at <http://verdict.justia.com/2011/10/24/the-obama-doctrine>. See also Roger Cohen, "Doctrine of Silence," *The New York Times* (28 November 2011).

<sup>54</sup> Greg Miller, "Pentagon Establishes Defense Clandestine Service, New Espionage Unit," *Washington Post* (23 April 2012); available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/>

... *That Needs a Sine Qua Non Framework to Succeed*

The framework surrounding the decision to use hard power influences the result. It is a mix of consensus within the political leadership and relevant military advice. President Obama has to struggle to make the political community accept the way he resorts to force, as he also fights for reasons other than those that are traditionally accepted.<sup>55</sup> Some members of a military may be concerned about these decisions as well, but their objections are understandably expressed in a more discreet manner.<sup>56</sup> However, the U.S. President has enjoyed special freedom of action in the wake of 9/11 – at least within the U.S. political context. Even though the killing of Osama Bin Laden was carried out with the full consent of those in the U.S. political and military worlds who were involved, and met with great satisfaction, this may not be always the case in the future for similar operations.<sup>57</sup> In such cases, members of Congress will need to be culturally inclined to support Obama’s new approach. Time will undoubtedly be required to reach the level of common understanding that is necessary.

Additionally, the military have to provide relevant advice and must be listened to, which has not been always the case.<sup>58</sup> One may wonder whether the appointment of General Petraeus as head of the CIA does not reflect the overlapping of missions between military and civilian intelligence and security agencies, and the deeper coordination it calls for. Above all, it provides a former military leader with a better platform from which to advise the political leadership. Finally, it illustrates Obama’s willingness to

national-security/pentagon-creates-new-espionage-unit/2012/04/23/gIQA9R7DcT\_story.html. See also James Bamford, “The NSA Is Building the Country’s Biggest Spy Center (Watch What You Say),” *Wired.com* (15 March 2012); available at [http://www.wired.com/threatlevel/2012/03/ff\\_nsadatacenter/](http://www.wired.com/threatlevel/2012/03/ff_nsadatacenter/).

According to the right-wing U.S. think tank the Heritage Foundation, “Obama refers to the issue of terrorism 68 percent less often than Bush did. He has slashed references to weapons of mass destruction by 91 percent. But, he speaks of democracy 74 percent less often than Bush did, and freedom 92 percent fewer times.” Nicholas Krueger, “The 2010 National Security Strategy, By the Numbers,” *The Foundry Blog*, at *Heritage.org* (19 August 2010).

<sup>55</sup> See President Barack Obama’s 2012 State of the Union speech, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/state-of-the-union-2012>.

<sup>56</sup> Veronica Roberts, “General McChrystal Fired,” *Allvoices.com* (23 June 2010).

<sup>57</sup> Eli Lake, “The 9/14 Presidency,” *reason.com* (6 April 2010); available at <http://reason.com/archives/2010/04/06/the-914-presidency>.

<sup>58</sup> “Any future Defense Secretary who advises the president to again send a big American army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa should have his head examined.” Former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, before leaving office in July 2011. Quoted by Bing West in “Groundhog War: The Limits of Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan,” *Foreign Affairs* 90:5 (September/October 2011): 163–171; available at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/68133/bing-west/groundhog-war>.

President George W. Bush ignored similar advice before invading Iraq in 2003. Indeed, the U.S. Central Command stated in 1998 that at least 380 000 troops would be necessary to stabilize Iraq. See Lt. Col. Paul Yingling, “A Failure in Generalship,” *Armed Forces Journal* 144 (May 2007): 16–23; available at <http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/2007/05/2635198>.

shape a favorable framework within which to discuss and decide on the appropriate use of force.

Joseph Nye stated, “The required and desirable soft power stems from culture, values, and policies. They suggest respectively that the necessary culture is attractive to others, that the values are both attractive and not undermined by inconsistent practices, and finally that policies are considered as inclusive and legitimate in the eyes of others.”<sup>59</sup> This provides a brief summary of the points that President Obama regularly underlines as part of a necessary framework to reinvigorate the United States’ standing in the world.<sup>60</sup>

## Conclusion

Even if throughout U.S. history most of the nation’s security doctrines have been clearly named, eminently foreseeable, and easily characterized *a posteriori*, Obama’s doctrine—while still provisional—remains unpredictable, and consequently less comprehensible to adversaries. Whether a doctrine needs necessarily to be officially defined in order to be efficient is questionable. But regardless of this lack of official definition, and in spite of a recurrent chorus of critics, Obama’s actions have served to disconcert those who are used to referring to clear-cut strategies. In the process, it has actually helped to increase U.S. dominance.<sup>61</sup>

Obama has regularly been accused of being a weak foreign policy actor, or of continuing the Bush Administration’s foreign policy by other means. This essay has attempted to show that his doctrine is rather nonconformist, since he did not continue the Bush Administration’s asserted right to unilaterally and preemptively use force against potential threats to the United States. On the contrary, it shows that Obama has sought to reinvigorate the United States’ global leadership, at least through wiser decisions about the use of force, often enshrined in more multilateral frameworks.<sup>62</sup> His narrative may be that U.S. leadership still means systematic and ubiquitous military primacy, but his doctrine no longer calls for the systematic use of it. That statement introduces a significant area of nuance. Furthermore, unilateralism and blunt massive military commitments have been proven counterproductive today, more than ever. Obama’s sense of responsi-

---

<sup>59</sup> Terence Casey, “Europe, Soft Power and Gentle Stagnation,” *Comparative European Politics Review* 4 (2006): 402. The term “soft power” was coined by Joseph Nye, Jr. in 1990, and was invoked to criticize the Bush Administration’s unilateralism in 2002.

<sup>60</sup> Clearly expressed in Obama’s 2012 State of the Union speech.

<sup>61</sup> Clay Risen, “Obama’s Non-doctrine Doctrine,” *The New York Times* (26 August 2011); available at <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/08/26/obamas-non-doctrine-doctrine>.

<sup>62</sup> In Chris Good, “The Obama Doctrine: Multilateralism with Teeth,” *theatlantic.com* (10 December 2009); available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2009/12/the-obama-doctrine-multilateralism-with-teeth/31655>. Additionally, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov, while suspicious of many other elements of the 2010 National Security Strategy, welcomed this emerging focus on multilateralism. See “Russia Has Objections over U.S. National Security Strategy,” *RIA Novosti* (1 September 2010); available at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/usa/2010/usa-100901-rianovosti01.htm>.

bility does not make him risk-averse, but rather risk-conscious, in a country where these different notions may be misleadingly confused. Still, not being able to grasp the difference between the two is a disadvantage when facing the current challenging era, where protean and unpredictable risks have replaced simplistically considered threats. At the same time, a “more humble foreign policy will invite neither instability, nor decline.”<sup>63</sup>

Such a framework calls for positioning the military capability, by principle, in a secondary role posture, where the use of hard power is seen as a last resort rather than as a primary tool of foreign policy. It does not reflect or imply any lesser consideration for the military, but it does demand a more subtle use that will increasingly both require and challenge its efficiency. Ultimately, due to the primacy of politics, Obama himself will be judged not only on the way he shapes his military, but also on how he decides to use it. So far, some clever decisions have started to pave the path towards a reinvigoration of U.S. leadership worldwide by avoiding wasting energy when both diplomacy and moderate use of the military as initial tools are sufficient to mitigate crises.<sup>64</sup>

Whether Obama’s security doctrine will be combined adequately with advances in other fields like education, economy, and culture to genuinely achieve enduring global U.S. leadership is yet to be determined, and may be a further topic to be explored. Whatever happens, Obama’s reelection would definitely provide him the opportunity to engrave a successful doctrine in the annals of U.S. security, one that might allow the U.S. to dominate another century, provided that key decision makers can remain open-minded, and not be tempted by some kind of fatalism.

---

<sup>63</sup> Joseph M. Parent and Paul K. MacDonald, “The Wisdom of Retrenchment: America Must Cut Back to Move Forward,” *Foreign Affairs* 90:6 (November/December 2011): 32–47; available at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/136510/joseph-m-parent-and-paul-k-macdonald/the-wisdom-of-retrenchment>.

<sup>64</sup> See Graeme P. Herd, *Great Powers and Strategic Stability in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (London: Routledge, 2010).