

THE “OBAMA DOCTRINE” IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Presidential doctrines have been used to articulate America’s foreign policy and worldview since the presidency of James Monroe. However, only a few doctrines have succeeded at outlining a strategic vision of the United States’ role in international affairs. The Truman Doctrine (1947) and Eisenhower Doctrine (1957) centered on curtailing the spread of Communism and expanding America’s global influence during the Cold War. In the post–Cold War era, presidential doctrines encapsulated new strategies to meet the challenges of an unfamiliar, unipolar world and have increasingly dealt with the greater Middle East as a strategic space.

While his predecessors have articulated foreign policy doctrines that address specific ideologies or geographies, when asked to describe the “Obama doctrine,” the President has chosen not to respond directly, but explained that the United States must act with other countries. “[Mine is] an American leadership that recognizes the rise of countries like China, India and Brazil. It’s a U.S. leadership that recognizes our limits in terms of resources and capacity.”¹

After the eight tumultuous years of the Bush administration, which left the United States on the verge of financial ruin, Barack Obama has sought to chart a new course in American foreign policy that would rely not on abstract moral values, or brute military strength, but on real relationships and shared interests with other

nations: “Recall that earlier generations faced down fascism and communism not just with missiles and tanks, but with sturdy alliances and enduring convictions. They understood that our power alone cannot protect us, nor does it entitle us to do as we please.”² He starkly contrasted his foreign policy vision of realism, pragmatism, and restraint with that of President George W. Bush. America longed for normalcy, military de-escalation, and above all a refocus on the home front rather than on the behaviour of dictators in distant lands.

As challenges in the Middle East heat up in the wake of the Arab Spring, the recent anti-Islam video, a pending war with Iran, shifting tides in Syria and Afghanistan, and the recent ground-swell of protest and violence following the assassination of US Ambassador to Libya Chris Stevens, it is a good time to assess Obama’s foreign policy towards the Middle East.

Has Obama’s realism been successful in overcoming the bitter inheritance of America’s relationship with the Middle East? Has his lack of a grand strategy complicated America’s interests in the region? Does Obama’s refusal to declare a doctrine reflect an awareness of the complex and ever changing international system and America’s relative decline? In the absence of an officially declared Obama doctrine, can such a doctrine be constructed by analysts through an examination of his policies during his first term?

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IN A SINGLE MORNING: THE BUSH DOCTRINE

The Bush Doctrine presented certainty and confidence amid the chaos of September 11. It targeted the Middle East, where frustration with and opposition to US foreign policy had been rampant since the onset of the Cold War. Bush believed that the US should maintain “primacy” on the global stage and eliminate any and all future threats.

Urged to action by an anxious, justice-seeking public, he charted a foreign policy course designed to eliminate threats stemming from state or non-state actors that challenged America's preeminent role on the international stage. His doctrine thus supported the liberal use of force to affect social and political change abroad, and marked a clear break from American foreign policy in the twentieth century. It supplied the ideological foundation for the US “global war on terror,” particularly the worldwide hunt for al Qaeda, the invasion of Afghanistan and the war in Iraq.

To defeat a new kind of enemy, undeterred by the threat of prosecution and unrestricted by practical humanitarian constraints, the United States would go on the offensive and wage all-out war against real and imagined foes.³ But the Bush administration did not speak with one voice, and as it planned for the battles abroad, it also planned for the battles within the Beltway.⁴ In response to the 9/11 attacks, traditional realists argued that “police action” against terrorist organizations should be taken while strategic relationships with friendly, dictatorial regimes should be improved. Neoconservatives countered that America should not “appease terror” by negotiating with despots, because that would reward bad behaviour.⁵ In their view, the events of September 11 affirmed that America had become vulnerable to such attacks because it had failed to make full use of its unrivalled unipolar status after the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁶

Bush relied on the unilateral expression of overwhelming force to protect the American homeland, consolidate US hegemony worldwide, and engineer social and political change in the Middle East. To eliminate transnational terrorists like Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, the former president's neoconservative advisers called for toppling the tyrants who supported them. As Bush noted, “[T]he best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in the entire world.”⁷ Therefore, the full force of the most powerful nation would be deployed to institute a new “balance of power that favors freedom.”⁸

Bush believed that his “Freedom Agenda” would reinforce fragile democracies, support democratic

dissidents in countries suffering from oppressive rule, and promote human rights.⁹ In Bush's words, the strategy "was idealistic in that freedom is a universal gift from Almighty God. It was realistic because freedom is the most practical way to protect our country in the long run."¹⁰ Unfortunately for Bush and the region, his decision to link the Iraq invasion and the cause of universal human freedom had the opposite effect.¹¹ The administration of Bush and his neocons, more than any other, deepened the mistrust and animosity between America and Muslim peoples and societies.¹²

Given a choice between the *realpolitik* of his father's administration and the militant idealism expounded on by the neoconservatives, Bush proved indecisive. On the one hand, he sought to break with traditional realist theories of international politics, finding moral agnosticism out of touch with American values, and slow, patient implementation ill-suited to post-9/11 urgency. On the other hand, when eventually he encountered the difficult practical reality of implementing his lofty ideals, especially in Iraq, Bush at the end of his presidency inevitably reverted back to a realist approach toward the Middle East. The Iraq case illustrates the pitfalls of decision-making driven by an ideology and tunnel vision that does not accommodate the beliefs and aspirations of millions of people in the Middle East. During the Cold War era, realists viewed the Middle East through the prism of East-West struggle. After September 11 the neo-cons looked at the region through the prism of global terrorism. In both cases, the regionalist perspective was lost in the fog of an ideological struggle.

OBAMA'S FOREIGN POLICY AGENDA: A CLEAR ROAD OR A DEAD END?

While he has excelled at giving rousing speeches and distancing himself from Bush, Obama has not offered his own foreign policy vision, a doctrine that guides America in turbulent international waters. Conservatives lament

that the Obama administration's foreign policy approach is fundamentally reactive and defeatist. One conservative critic, Niall Ferguson, accused the President of presenting one foreign policy in his speeches, and another in his actions.¹³ The air is also thick with liberal disappointment regarding Obama's unwillingness to give closure to Bush's 9/11 wars and scars, including closing the US military prison at Guantanamo Bay and swiftly bringing US troops home from Afghanistan. Several others such as Robert Kagan and Zbigniew Brzezinski also criticized Obama for not having any clear plans.

Obama's White House aides counter by saying that the left and right's critiques overlook that the President is interested only in what works; he's an anti-ideological politician. They explain that Obama realizes that the post Cold War world is complex and requires specific approaches tailored to each situation, and argue that in contrast to his predecessor, Obama stresses bureaucratic efficiency, modesty and humility over ideology, and assertion of America's power and affirmation of its exceptionalism.¹⁴ He does not consider his own foreign policy a doctrine, and is not averse to revisiting previous decisions that he had made if political conditions and events on the ground change, and if he believes that shift serves American national interests.¹⁵

RESETTING RELATIONSHIPS: THE CAIRO SPEECH

As Obama embarked on his first year as President, he had to contend with the damage the Bush administration had inflicted on the country's relationship with Muslims globally. Instead of adopting a more constructive approach—one that drew distinctions among the many faces of political Islam—Obama's predecessors took the easier, reductionist approach of lumping all Islamists together. Mainstream and militant Islamists were seen only through the prism of Al Qaeda. This served Bin Laden's agenda by portraying all forms of Islamic fundamentalism, ranging

from Hamas to the Muslim Brotherhood as equivalent to jihadism, a violent, totalitarian fringe ideology dedicated to random destruction, global subjugation, and the defeat of the West.¹⁶

Deeply aware of the damage caused, Obama sought to rebuild trust. Successive American presidents had visited the Middle East to speak but not to listen, and repeatedly saw the region only in the globalist terms

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of the Cold War, geopolitics, Israel, and more recently the War on Terror. Obama recognized that this legacy, which had debilitated America's standing in the region, was not sustainable and he sought to use the power of the presidential pulpit to cut America's losses and begin bringing US troops home.

Throughout his Presidential campaign and his first six months in office, Obama reiterated his commitment to reaching out to Muslims and altering their negative perceptions of the United States. Time and again, the new president stressed that "the United States is not, and will never be, at war with Islam."¹⁷ In an early effort to reach out to Arabs and Muslims immediately after inauguration, Obama gave his first interview to Al Arabiya TV station.

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The speech sent a clear message:

"I've come here to Cairo to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based on mutual interest and mutual respect, and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are

not exclusive, and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles—principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings."¹⁸

He talked about his personal knowledge of Islam and pledged to educate Americans about the real Islam as opposed to the dominant, negative stereotypes.¹⁹ To further humanize America in the eyes of Muslims, Obama spoke of Islam being a part of America's story: the seven million Muslims living in the United States, he argued, have enriched the country. Unlike his predecessor, Obama did not mention "terrorism" or the "War on Terror" during his speech. This was a conscious effort by the administration to stop referring to the global War on Terror when speaking of the fight against al Qaeda, an important symbolic departure from the previous administration, which had coined the term.

Given this volatile and polarized context, Obama's new discourse of engagement, co-existence, and reconciliation between Muslims in the East and Christians in the West was a major point of departure from the Bush administration. The new tone of humility and partnership in Obama's Cairo speech raised expectations that he would change US foreign policy in the Middle East.

THE NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY OF 2010

While Obama has been reticent about declaring a doctrine in his name, he has used his National Security Strategy (NSS), as did Bush, to articulate a foreign policy strategy. His National Security Strategy of 2010 called for a rebalancing of America's global commitments away from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that had distracted the country from its more pressing 21st century challenges in Asia and the Pacific Ocean. Obama adeptly recognized that the world feels cynical about America preaching democracy. He modestly stated: "We [America] promote our values above all by living them at home." Instead of

defining what American values are, Obama suggested subtly that American values are ones that all people share and that these common values are what all of humanity seeks.²⁰ In contrast to Bush's National Security Strategies of 2002 and 2006, Obama devoted a significant section of his NSS to strengthening America at home.

OBAMA AND THE PALESTINIAN-ISRAELI PEACE PROCESS

Obama has distinguished himself from many other sitting presidents by referencing the Quran and speaking frankly about the suffering of the Palestinian people. He is the first US president to link closely the establishment of a Palestinian state to America's strategic interests. Although he did not flesh out the specifics of his vision of a two-state solution, he made it very clear that the United States would not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements in occupied Palestinian territories. "Israelis must acknowledge that just as Israel's right to exist cannot be denied," he said, "neither can Palestine's."²¹ These powerful words delivered by the President of the world's most powerful country—and Israel's most significant patron—held enormous potential if only they would be followed by concrete actions. The pro-Israel lobby, which has significant influence in US politics, attacked Obama for going too far in pressuring the right-wing government led by Benjamin Netanyahu.²² Pro-Likud voices (pro-Israel hardliners), in the United States denounced the Cairo speech as "a renunciation of America's strategic alliance with Israel."²³

Although Obama's foreign policy, if he's re-elected, is more likely to be cautious and incremental than transformational, it has the potential to achieve transformational outcomes, such as Arab-Israeli peace, but only if he is willing to fully engage with the region and invest precious domestic political capital. It is no wonder then that the Palestinian-Israeli peace process has been Obama's greatest political failure. The emergence of

Benjamin Netanyahu's staunchly right-wing government in the March 2009 election stalled any genuine steps toward peace. Netanyahu and his even more hard-line coalition partners do not recognize the need for a peaceful settlement with the Palestinians. Even though Netanyahu has met various times with President Obama in Washington, he has refused to listen to both Obama and Clinton on the settlement freezes, and Obama has backed down three times after confrontations with Netanyahu. Obama's failure to maintain pressure on Netanyahu has bitterly disappointed opinion leaders in the Arab and Muslim world, and has confirmed a widely-held belief among Arabs that Obama represents continuity more than change in US foreign policy towards the region.

Hampered by entrenched special interest groups and Bush's legacy, Obama has not been able to translate his promises into concrete policies. Although realists do not believe that domestic politics play a role in international relations theory, time and again, Israel and its supporters in the US have exercised considerable influence on the making of American foreign policy towards the Middle East. The result is that for all the goodwill he accrued in the Muslim world during the first six months, there has since been a widespread conviction that the United States is weak, financially and militarily, and crippled by a broken political system.

THE ARAB SPRING

The 2011 uprisings came as a surprise for American policymakers. The US foreign policy establishment had not seriously considered or envisioned a post-autocratic Middle East and dismissed warnings about popular dissent as a domestic problem that the region's security services could contain.²⁴ A "too big to fail" mindset blinded Obama and his predecessors from seriously taking into account the shaky ground on which many of the region's leaders had built their rule.²⁵ While Obama projected a new rhetorical posture towards the Middle East, he

also recognized that America’s core national interests—security of energy resources and stability of US traditional allies—must be preserved. Thus, it is no wonder that the Obama administration quietly embraced pro-American autocratic rulers, like Mubarak, whose help was needed in tackling terrorism, nuclear proliferation, energy security, and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. This historic blindness stems from misguided concepts and premises about the structure of Middle Eastern societies and politics—an overemphasis on elite, hierarchical politics and de-emphasis on the weight of social movements and public opinion.

Obama initially pursued a subtle and non-interventionist approach toward democracy promotion in the region.²⁶ While he voiced his preference for open governments, arguing that they reflect the will of the people—in effect an implicit criticism of Hosni Mubarak and other Arab autocrats—he did not address the widespread abuse of citizens’ rights in many Muslim countries.

After the outbreak of the Arab uprisings, White House aides stated that in August 2010 Obama sent a five-page memo to his top advisers called “Political Reform in the Middle East and North Africa” in which he urged them to challenge the traditional idea that stability in the region always served US vital interests.²⁷ Obama reportedly wanted to weigh the risks of both “continued support for increasingly unpopular and repressive regimes” and a “strong push by the United States for reform.”²⁸ According to a White House official, just as the Tunisian protest movement gathered momentum, a review requested by Obama concluded that the conventional wisdom in US policy circles was wrong: “All roads led to political reform.”²⁹

HUMAN RIGHTS CONSIDERATIONS

The Obama foreign policy team, led by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, had been pursuing a quiet, gradual, low-risk approach toward the promotion of human rights. The State Department released annual reports and

stated in their speeches the existence of human rights violations in the Middle East. However, as the Egyptian crisis reached a climax in the first week of February, Obama explicitly, not silently, called for a change of ruler. He was compelled to abandon two loyal friends in Egypt and Tunisia: Hosni Mubarak and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Throughout the heated debate among his advisers, Obama’s overriding concern was effective management of the crisis and smooth political transition. Obama and his Secretary of State feared that like other revolutions, the Egyptian revolution could be hijacked by anti-democratic Islamist forces. Islamic-based groups and movements like the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, and Hezbollah have traditionally been viewed suspiciously and considered a threat to US national interests, whereas pro-Western local

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autocratic rulers are seen as the lesser of two evils—pliant, durable, and predictable.³⁰ But unlike his secretaries of state and defense, Obama offered greater support to the protestors than Hillary Clinton and Robert Gates wished. He even displeased America’s close allies—the Israelis and Saudis—who lobbied hard, warning against humiliating Mubarak.

Saudi Arabia opposed Obama’s support of the protesters in Tunisia and Egypt and rebuffed US efforts to influence Gulf countries to institute meaningful reforms and to meet the legitimate aspirations of their people.³¹ Saudi rulers described the Obama stance as naive and dangerous.³² Bahrain provided a test of wills between

a divided US administration and a determined regional neighbour, Saudi Arabia. Initially, the Obama foreign policy team cautioned the authoritarian al-Khalifa royal family in Bahrain against using excessive force against its peoples and encouraged King Hamad to undertake serious reforms in order to avert a prolonged political crisis and violence. A Saudi GCC-led military force entered Bahrain, and the local authorities allowed these Saudi forces to suppress the protesters. The Saudis and the Obama administration justified the Saudi intervention by accusing Iran of infiltrating Bahrain's Arab Shi'a population and hijacking their political demands for geostrategic advantage.³³ After meeting King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia in April 2011—a meeting that marked the thawing of tensions, Defense Secretary Gates acknowledged that he did not even raise the question of Saudi intervention in Bahrain. Gates and the Saudi king discussed more pressing issues, such as the sale of more than \$60 billion worth of arms (the biggest arms deal signed by the United States) and the modernization of the Kingdom's missile defence system.

Another case that sheds further light on Obama's "anti-doctrinal doctrine" is Libya. With the lessons of Iraq and a pressed economy at home, the President refused to take ownership of the Libyan mission and insisted that his European and Arab allies take charge. His preference was "leading from behind", as opposed to the Bush model of leading alone.³⁴ However, in a last minute decision, Obama backed NATO's military intervention in Libya because he feared that, unless deterred, Qaddafi would carry out a bloodbath against the rebels in Benghazi.³⁵

The 2011 Arab uprisings forced Obama to reconsider his engagement with the region. On the one hand, Obama recognized the significance of the moment in the Arab world as "a time of transformations" and called on the world to respond to calls for change elsewhere in the region, particularly in Syria. On the other, he separated the Arab world's pursuit of dignity and freedom from the Palestinians' pursuit of those same ideals. By doing so, he risked being seen as hypocritical, and alienated the

very populations (those who participated in the Arab uprisings) to whom he was reaching out.

PLAYING REGIONAL CHESS IN 2011

The United States did not shape developments either in Tunisia or Egypt and found itself watching the "Tahrir" generation do its work. Obama's speech at the State Department in May 2011 fully embraced the nascent order in the two countries, but offered no Marshall Plans to help repair broken Middle Eastern institutions and economies. His offer of only a paltry amount of aid testifies both to his foreign policy priorities and America's hard-pressed economy. In contrast to his Cairo speech two years earlier, Obama's address neither elicited much public interest nor raised high expectations in the region.

The Arab uprisings forced Obama to revisit American foreign policy towards the region and recalibrate his stance on democracy promotion. Torn between pragmatism and idealism, Obama's position reflects the diversity of views of his foreign policy team, uncertainty over the meanings and effects of the uprisings, as well as his awareness of the limits to America's power in the region. As a strategic ally, Saudi Arabia in particular was not mentioned once in his hour-long speech in order to avoid lumping it with Egypt and Tunisia. Again, Obama's foreign policy insists on the recognition of differences between states, and he ranks them according to their significance to US interests. He cares less about consistency and more about successful outcomes and maximizing American bargaining power.

MITT ROMNEY AND OBAMA'S DETRACTORS

With the killing of four diplomatic officials in September, including U.S. ambassador to Libya Christopher Stevens, foreign policy, which hadn't figured much, if at all, in presidential campaigning, suddenly became a factor.

Campaign rhetoric had, until this point, been dominated by domestic concerns, particularly a weak economy. Seizing the crisis as a political opportunity, GOP nominee Mitt Romney criticized President Barack Obama's handling of the situation as apologetic and "disgraceful"—a severe miscalculation without evidence to substantiate his charge. Obama responded to Romney's criticism that the White House mishandled its response to the embassy attacks in Egypt and Libya by accusing his challenger of having a tendency to "shoot first and aim later."

As the 2012 presidential campaign has progressed, Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney has increasingly criticized President Barack Obama's foreign policies, particularly in the greater Middle East. For example, Romney asserts that re-electing Obama would result in Iran having a nuclear weapon.

On Syria, Romney faults Obama for not taking "more assertive steps" to topple President Bashar Assad,

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adding, he is not "anxious to employ military action" there. Romney has also accused Obama of tipping his hand to the Taliban by announcing a time line for withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, though Romney has said he accepts the 2014 time line.

It's worth noting that Romney's sharp criticism of Obama's foreign policy is largely outside his party's mainstream. In an interview with *Foreign Policy*, former Secretary of State James Baker undercut Romney's neocon inclination, differing with him on Syria, Iran, Russia and China. Baker has been firmly opposed to military intervention in Syria and has supported Obama's efforts to use muscular diplomacy to halt Iran's nuclear program.³⁶

According to Republican sources, a Romney administration would embrace the most hawkish of George W. Bush's "freedom agenda" interventionists.³⁷ The *Weekly Standard's* William Kristol has mentioned retiring U.S. Senator Joe Lieberman as a possible solid Secretary of State. Former Ambassador to the United Nations and neocon hawk John Bolton is one of the leading foreign policy advisors to the Romney campaign, and the foreign policy team leader appears to be Dan Senor, a "next-gen Bolton" who was the chief spokesperson for Paul Bremer, at the American proconsul in Iraq.³⁸

On October 8, 2012, Bolton made the following statement on Mitt Romney's foreign policy speech:

"Mitt Romney understands that the best way to preserve international peace and security is for America to lead from the front. President Obama believes that American strength is provocative, that we are too much in the world, and that a U.S. recession is necessary and appropriate. This is exactly opposite of what we need. It is not our strength that is provocative, but our weakness, which our adversaries worldwide interpret to mean it is safe to challenge us. We need to reverse this dangerous American decline, and return to Ronald Reagan's philosophy of 'peace through strength.' It has worked throughout our history, and it will work again under President Romney."³⁹

It is these neocon hardliners who are pushing Romney to engage more aggressively with the President on foreign policy, including his political attack on Obama in the wake of the attacks on U.S. embassies across the Middle East. Despite an intensification of criticism, Romney's foreign policy attacks on Obama are not likely to stick.

In reality, Obama's overall foreign policy strategy doesn't represent a significant departure from Washington foreign policy establishment thinking. His approach is consistent with that of moderate Republicans. Like Secretaries James Baker, Henry Kissinger and George Shultz, Obama understands the limits of U.S. power and he is on record as opposed to open-ended military commitments abroad.

Throughout his presidency, Obama has aimed at retaining the status quo with a few minor corrections. While he has reversed some of the worst ideological excesses of the George W. Bush administration's foreign policy, Obama has only succeeded in bringing the United States back to the cautious middle.

To call Obama's foreign policies in the greater Middle East "appeasement," is patently false. Romney is either posturing for political advantage or proposing policies that border on reckless endangerment.

CONCLUSIONS

Obama thus faces a significant test. He could seize this opportunity and craft his own strategy that takes into account the change occurring in the region. He could leverage this strategy to re-engage the region, and transform America's relations with the Middle East and the Muslim world. However, first Obama must come up with a clear plan. The region has changed, and Obama's "doctrine" no longer reflects reality in the Middle East. An Obama Doctrine 2.0 is desperately needed.⁴⁰

Since the beginning of his Presidency, Obama has been reluctant to use force except when US national security is directly affected, and even in these cases, he has emphasized a drawn-down approach instead of an escalation.⁴¹

- His Turkey policy has shored up ties with a rising geostrategic and geo-economics power.
- His outreach to Muslims has been largely positive, though harmed by inconsistencies.
- His Israel-Palestine policy is a dismal failure, a casualty of domestic politics and timidity.
- His Iran policy is an uncertain gamble.
- His goal of removing US troops from Iraq and Afghanistan is being implemented, even if slower than some would like.
- His responses to the Arab uprisings have been a mixed bag.

Obama has attempted to normalize America's

relations with Muslims and make a break with the Bush legacy of moral crusading and social engineering. He has recognized the complexity of social and political conditions in the region, but has not departed from the Washington foreign policy consensus.

Although Obama understands the complex issues of the Middle East on an intellectual level, he has been too timid. In May 2011, Obama announced an important policy shift, saying that the United States would, going forward, be guided by support for democratic transitions and reform.

Yet, despite many positive steps that have placed America on the right side of the historical wave of political change, Obama has not invested enough political and financial capital in assisting transitioning Arab societies

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in the development of their shattered economies and institutions through neutral multilateral, nongovernmental organizations, including the United Nations. If he made this kind of investment, he could lay to rest a widespread belief that America is omnipotent, lurking everywhere and always meddling in the region's internal affairs.

While Obama has used hard and soft power to maintain a stable course, he has not tapped into the presidency's extraordinary power, nor has he fully utilized the extraordinary events in the Middle East after the Arab uprisings, to effect change in America's dealings with the region.

While certainly, and significantly, moving away from Bush's foreign policy strategy, Obama has not pursued

a transformational foreign policy and has refrained from challenging the predominant narrative in Washington.

Regardless of who occupies the White House in the next decade, American foreign policy will have to navigate a complex multipolar order in which awakened economic and geo-strategic regional players exercise considerable influence.

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