

[Steven Casey](#)

## The United States after unipolarity: Obama's alliances

### Report

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# ➤ Obama's Alliances<sup>1</sup>

Steven Casey

## INTRODUCTION

**I**n the age of Obama, the United States' commitment to its extensive alliance system appears, at first glance, to be shaky. America is beset by economic problems and domestic preoccupations. Its hegemonic position is under threat, especially from a rapidly growing China. It remains mired in a war on terror in which, from Washington's perspective, many allies have not done enough. And it is led by a president who talks about embracing alternative forms of international arrangements.

During his successful election campaign, Obama evinced few sentimental feelings for old arrangements that were originally formed to deter the long-gone communist threat. His pledge 'to rebuild the alliances, partnerships, and institutions necessary to confront common threats and enhance common security' implied that alliances were no longer a *sui generis* type of institutional arrangement. They were set for a downgrade.

Almost three years into his presidency, however, President Obama has proved much more alliance-friendly than candidate Obama. This is partly because he knows that he needs alliance support to wage costly fights in Afghanistan and Libya. But it is due, above all, to the changing contours of international politics, particularly in Asia and the Pacific, where China's rise has concentrated Obama's mind, prodding him to think about ways to both engage with and balance this strategic competitor.

## WHY US ALLIANCES STILL MATTER TO THE WORLD

Although most US alliances were born during the distant days of the Cold War, for at least four reasons they still matter. First, although power shifts may ultimately remould US alliance structures, these changes will not suddenly consign Washington to the margins – not while America still retains the largest economy and the biggest military. Second, if the United States is itself in decline, then Washington is likely to cling even more firmly to its alliances, as declining powers are even more likely than global hegemony to seek out partners in order to share defensive burdens. Third, the United States remains an attractive partner, especially for those states who share both a strategic outlook and similar values. Finally, since 1945 the United States has placed a high priority on the credibility of its alliance networks. Successive administrations have been convinced that deterrence requires projecting an image of resolve and have worried about a home-front backlash if they appear to let down an ally. This concern for appearances is likely to continue in the future.

In short, the United States has placed enormous emphasis on its allies, on occasion even seeing them as a motive – rather than just the method – for action. At a time when many other states view America in decline, it is likely that, if anything, Washington will be even more determined to keep up appearances, standing firmly behind allies to demonstrate to rivals that it still means business.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is extracted from a longer paper produced for the Lowy Institute for International Policy, [www.lowyinstitute.org](http://www.lowyinstitute.org)

## OBAMA'S CONCEPTION OF ALLIANCES

Since his sudden arrival on the national scene in 2008, Obama has promised change. One reason is his background. Obama is not simply the first black man elected to America's highest office. He is also the first president of Kenyan ancestry, the first born in Hawaii, and the first raised partly in Indonesia. 'The Pacific Rim has helped shape my view', Obama declared not long after taking office. His mental map, he thereby implied, was far removed from the Eurocentric focus of so many of his predecessors.

Obama, moreover, is self-consciously part of a new, post-Cold War generation, which came of age after the collapse of communism and in the midst of the war on terrorism. 'I am probably the first president', he told one interviewer in July 2010, 'who is young enough that the Vietnam War wasn't at the core of my development. So I grew up with none of the baggage that arose out of the dispute of the Vietnam War'. A lot of the Cold War 'political frames', Obama added, 'don't really connect with me generationally'.

Nor did Obama connect with the political frames that President George W. Bush devised to wage the so-called 'war on terror'. To win his party nomination in 2008, Obama had to appeal to a Democratic base that was clearly committed to foreign-policy liberalism, and categorically rejected the ideas behind Bush's war on terror. To win the election, he then tried to turn the campaign into a referendum on the Bush years – albeit a caricatured version of those years – stressing the ills of unilateralism during the long war in Iraq.

Against this personal and political backdrop, it is scarcely surprising that Obama's 2008 conception of alliances appeared to be both new and liberal.

He argued that in a world of complex interdependence, the United States needed to look beyond traditional tools such as security alliances. Instead, the new president would have to work more closely with emerging powers such as India, Brazil, and Indonesia. He would have to improve America's relations with multilateral institutions such as ASEAN and the African Union. And he would have to create new international regimes, such as a Shared Security Partnership Program, to root out global terrorist networks.

To the conservative retort that multiplying such arrangements would constrain American choices, Obama's view was clear: the advantages of playing a leading role in a complex network of bilateral and multilateral, formal and informal arrangements, far outweigh any drawbacks. 'America is strongest when we act alongside strong partners', Obama declared. 'We helped create the UN – not to constrain America's influence, but to amplify it by advancing our values'. Obama also argued that the United States has a vested interest in upholding international rules – rather than, as Bush did, challenging them. The reason is simple: hegemony tends to create rules and institutions that support its dominance, and allow it to wield power legitimately, subtly, and affordably. In his 2006 book, *The Audacity of Hope*, he insisted that 'nobody benefits more than we do from the observance of international "rules of the road." We can't win converts to those rules if we act as if they apply to everyone but us. When the world's sole superpower willingly restrains its power and abides by internationally agreed-upon standards of conduct, it sends a message that these are rules worth following'.

While Obama's campaign rhetoric was clearly on the liberal end of the spectrum, Obama was keen to emphasise that it was not entirely new. This was vital. His personal background is so exotic that his more extreme critics have accused him of espousing policies that border on un-American. And even moderate Republicans have argued that he 'has embraced the foreign policy of an ideologue'. In this view, Obama's framework is based on a 'repudiation of American global leadership, a devaluation of alliances, and a penchant for paper agreements'. Obama, these critics add, is heir to an excessively idealistic Democratic tradition that dates back, if not to Woodrow Wilson's attempt to remake the world in 1919, then at least to George McGovern and Jimmy Carter's naïve liberalism, which was decisively repudiated in the elections of 1972 and 1980.

In response Obama has sought to place himself in the illustrious Democratic heritage of Roosevelt, Truman, and Kennedy. Take his faith in the importance and efficacy of international rules. Some critics argue that this is one of the more naïve and novel elements of Obama's foreign-policy creed, but it is, in fact, perfectly

in tune with how most Cold War-era presidents viewed friends and enemies in the international system. Similarly, Obama's interest in multilateral arrangements to deal with these complex challenges likewise fits with what his Democratic forebears tried to achieve, from Roosevelt's attempts to turn the wartime alliance into 'a political society of nations' to Kennedy's efforts to tackle economic and social problems in Latin America through his Alliance for Progress.

Yet while Obama may sit comfortably within the liberal mould, he is also a pragmatist. More importantly, he also inherited a number of awkward realities that have cast long shadows over what he can achieve on the international stage. One has been the budget deficit, which has placed him in a different position from his Cold War Democratic heroes, Truman and Kennedy. These earlier presidents had both approached alliances from a position of confidence about American strength. And they were in no doubt that the United States could afford not only to mobilise its own military power but also to cement certain crucial alliances with lavish economic and military aid. Obama has had no such luxury. His position is, in fact, closer to (although much worse than) the Republican administrations of Eisenhower and Nixon, who saw alliances largely as a way of sharing costly defence burdens at a time of domestic retrenchment.

As well as these chastened circumstances, Obama's early actions were also driven by another unavoidable reality Obama inherited from President Bush: the so-called 'war on terror'.

## **ALLIES AND THE WAR ON TERROR**

On the campaign trail, Obama had stressed that the war in Iraq (America's war of choice) had greatly distracted Washington's attention from the more important battleground in Afghanistan (America's war of necessity). Once in power, Obama had to figure out how to interact with two governments at the very heart of the struggle: Afghanistan, where the long-standing war continued, and Pakistan, where many of the terrorist training camps had now shifted.

Although neither are allies in the formal sense (Washington instead uses the term 'cooperative relationship'), making these relationships work was Obama's initial priority. Doing so would enable Afghanistan to take over more of the fight against the Taliban, and encourage Pakistan to confront the terrorist networks inside its borders. But Obama has been frustrated on both counts. There is certainly little trust between Washington and Kabul, especially when Afghan President Hamid Karzai is so publicly critical of American operations inside Afghanistan. And Obama has become increasingly suspicious of Pakistan's ambivalent attitude towards terror cells within its borders. By the spring of 2011 Washington's frustration verged on outright resentment. Most notably, Obama sanctioned the operation against Osama bin Laden without informing Pakistan, because he suspected his partner would tip off his target.

At the same time, Obama has tried to prod America's long-standing allies throughout the world to help share the burden in Afghanistan. In the wake of his decision to send 30,000 more troops, US officials worked to get these allies to increase their own involvement, in what Clinton called 'a crucial test for NATO'. Again, however, Obama was frustrated. This was partly because after the Bush years many allies face publics who are sceptical about following Washington's lead. But Obama's own laidback style has also contributed. Distancing himself from his swaggering predecessor, Obama has not been the type of president to pressure America's allies into sending more troops to an unpopular war.

## **ALLIES AND THE ARAB SPRING**

While 'AfPak' occupied Obama's attention in 2009, the Arab Spring was an unexpected shock that suddenly directed his focus to the Middle East in 2011. As the contagion of protest spread, toppling or threatening governments that had long been a fixture of the region, Obama faced the prospect of prioritising America's declared support for freedom and democracy at the risk of losing stable autocratic leaders who had been steadfast allies. Obama was initially uncertain and clumsy. But the administration eventually developed a response characterised

by caution and hard-headed liberalism. The US waited weeks before calling on Mubarak to leave and months before unveiling a general approach to the region. Both policies, when they finally came, demonstrated Obama's liberal inclinations. His May 2011 speech was the high point, with its emphasis on embracing the democratic change reverberating through the Middle East. At one point, Obama even suggested a new Marshall Plan for the region. The death of bin Laden, he claimed, together with the emergence of democratic movements, presented the United States with an opportunity to help the region's reformers by extending debt relief and enterprise funds.

Yet on close inspection, the scale of such aid will be nothing like the Marshall Plan billions of the late 1940s, not in America's straitened circumstances. And Obama's liberalism has other limits, too. He has continued to emphasise American 'humility' – letting the protests find their own solutions, without overt prodding from Washington. He has remained content to react to events, rather than seeking like Bush to drive the democratising process forward. Above all, his actions have been decidedly uneven. Like many of his predecessors, Obama has found it easier to get tough with states who are not friends: hence the bombing of Libya and the sanctions against Syria. But he has treated allies quite differently. Bahrain, for instance, which provides an important base for the US Navy's Fifth Fleet, has merely been subjected to gentle presidential pleas to open up a dialogue with its domestic opposition.

Despite this selective soft-peddling, Obama's actions have had an unsettling impact on America's surviving allies in the region. Saudi officials were clearly angry at Obama's abandonment of Mubarak, telling reporters that their government's willingness to listen to the President had now 'evaporated'. Israel appeared equally concerned, fretting that a post-Mubarak government would be much more hostile and worrying that Obama had proven himself fundamentally flaky towards key partners. Small wonder that Obama's push for renewed dialogue between Israel and the Palestinians was met with a cold response from Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu.

If the Arab Spring has had a complex – and often debilitating – impact on America's traditional allies in the Middle East, its Libyan component has shown how he would like alliance relations to develop, while also making him a sporadic Atlanticist. In Libya, Obama was keen to let other states and organisations play the key role, ceding command responsibilities to NATO as a way of demonstrating that the United States was no longer the hectoring hegemon. Above all, he was animated by an acute awareness of the domestic constraints of war weariness and empty federal coffers. In this sense, Obama revived an old American tradition of using allies – and especially European allies – as proxies to wage war when the United States is either unwilling or unable to take the lead. Recent events indicate this approach has produced results while minimising the risks and costs to the United States.

## **ALLIES IN ASIA**

While Obama has been forced to direct most of his attention to Central Asia and the Middle East, he hoped to focus on the Asia-Pacific region. According to one well-placed reporter, Obama and his national security adviser, Thomas E. Donilon, believe the United States needs 'to rebuild its reputation, extricate itself from the Middle East and Afghanistan, and turn its attention toward Asia and China's unchecked influence in the region. America was "overweighted" in the former and "underweighted" in the latter, [according to] Donilon'.

Asia is certainly the region where Obama seemed keenest to emphasise developing new partners and institutions, albeit not always in a manner that is a total break from past American practice. Take ASEAN. Under Bush, the United States' approach to ASEAN's Regional Forum (ARF) – ASEAN's effort to develop a regional multilateral security regime – had been standoffish. Obama was determined to reverse this indifference. 'America is a Pacific nation', he declared in July 2009, that 'understands the importance of Asia in the 21st century'. It would therefore play an 'aggressive role in engaging' with ASEAN and the region.

As well as deepening US involvement with such institutions, Obama also appeared to prioritise the forging of new relationships with emerging powers, such as Indonesia. His 2010 *National Security Strategy (NSS)* depicted Indonesia not simply as a friend on traditional security issues and the war on terror; rather, it was now 'an increasingly important partner on regional and transnational issues such as climate change, counterterrorism, maritime security, peacekeeping, and disaster relief'. 'With tolerance, resilience, and multiculturalism as core values', the NSS concluded, 'Indonesia is uniquely positioned to help address challenges facing the developing world'.

It would be wrong to conclude from Obama's embrace of multilateral institutions and emerging powers in Asia, however, that he sees traditional alliances as redundant. Despite his pre-presidential talk of working towards a nuclear-free world, he soon had to respond to North Korea's second nuclear test. Increasingly, he also fretted about China. Although economic interests continue to push the United States in the direction of engagement with Beijing, Obama has become increasingly concerned about China – both its growing military capabilities and a number of bellicose actions.

As a result, Obama has had a major incentive to strengthen old Asian alliance commitments. 'America's treaty alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, Thailand, and the Philippines', he declared in 2009, 'are not historical documents from a bygone era, but abiding commitments to each other that are fundamental to our shared security'. In response both to North Korea's nuclear test and Japan's unease about the strength of Obama's resolve, he pledged a 'continuing commitment of extended deterrence, including the US nuclear umbrella' to defend South Korea. Obama's Pentagon has also given Australia

a larger place in its mental map. In November 2010 the Australia-United States Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) decided to establish a force posture working group to explore enhanced joint defence cooperation. In public, both Washington and Canberra deny they are seeking to balance against China. But off the record, officials admit that the US-Australian discussions now revolve around 'the rise of China and, as China rises, what sort of force it is going to be in the world'. From the summer of 2009 North Korean sabre rattling has pushed him towards a firmer embrace of America's East Asian allies. In the summer of 2009, for instance,

## CONCLUSION

The founders of America's modern alliance system were hard-headed liberals. Like Obama, Roosevelt and Truman recognised the importance of alliances to meet international threats. Also like Obama, these hard-headed liberals often had a crowded policy agenda. With their ambitious domestic agendas, Roosevelt, Truman, and now Obama, have each been vulnerable to the charge of giving insufficient attention to certain parts of the world.

Yet, ultimately, overriding security threats drove these presidents towards forging and maintaining strong alliance networks. Although this in turn often meant giving a lower priority to issues closer to their heart, such as economic modernisation, their liberalism also left them well placed to manage alliances. True, they might often be distracted. They might also pursue certain policies that make their allies uncomfortable. But with their basic belief that alliances empower rather than constrain, and their willingness to listen as well as lead, they have all left America's alliances in a stronger position. Obama fits snugly in this tradition. ■