

[Nicholas Kitchen](#)

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Ending 'Permanent War': Security and Economy under Obama

Nicholas Kitchen

Nicholas Kitchen is Assistant Professorial Research Fellow in the United States Centre at the London School of Economics.

Introduction

In my contribution to *Obama's Foreign Policy: Ending the War on Terror* (Kitchen 2013), I argued that the domestic war-weariness of the American public had enabled Obama to jettison the war on terror as a strategic concept and to re-focus on the structural realities of the global economy, most obviously with the rebalance to Asia. At the same time as concluding that in the Obama presidency we were witnessing a reorientation the geographic focus of American foreign policy, I offered the tentative suggestion that we might also be at the beginnings of a change in the nature of American primacy itself: from unipolar dominance to a form of divested hegemony, where allies and partners were increasingly called upon to contribute to the provision of global public goods. If pursued, this deeper strategic shift, I predicted, would be met with political and bureaucratic resistance within the United States, a resistance reinforced in public discourse by America's cultural reverence for its military institutions.

This chapter revisits this theme, at the end of Barack Obama's second term in office, and prompted by a remark in the President's 2014 State of the Union address. "America", Obama said, "must move off a permanent war footing." This statement had clear implications for the conduct of the United States' campaign against violent extremism, completing the strategic refocusing and political rebranding of the Global War on Terror (GWOt). But Obama's rhetoric has deeper implications for the conduct of American foreign policy, since 'permanent war' has been the strategic norm for the United States for the past seventy years. Has Obama's time in office laid the groundwork for such a significant strategic shift in American foreign policy, or will the legacies of the Cold War and the War on Terror continue to loom large over US strategy?

Establishing Permanent War: the United States after 1945

Permanent war is not a natural condition for the United States. Geographically secure since the European powers had been warned off the American hemisphere, the United States had neither the pressing need nor the political desire for sustaining significant federal military structures, and of course, the Constitution permitted the federal government only limited war-making powers. Despite being the world's largest economy by the outbreak of the First World War, Woodrow Wilson's reticence to involve the United States in Europe's cynical and self-interested power politics was supported by the majority of his countrymen. Of course, the United States had gone to war for reasons of power and interest in the past, and would do so again in 1917, but following the war, as on previous occasions, the military establishment required for the task was in large part dismantled. From having had over 4 million men under arms at the end of the war, the US demobilised 3.25 million within nine months, and by the end of 1919 the army had been reduced to around 250,000 enlisted men. Military spending returned to pre-war levels of around 1% of GDP by 1923.

If the 1920s and 1930s would later become characterised as a period of isolationism in US Foreign Policy, the Japanese attack on the American navy at Pearl Harbour laid to rest the debate between neutrality and interventionism. The United States entered the war with far greater designs on the nature of postwar order than those had accompanied the country's entry into World War 1. However, in completing the interwar period's unfinished transition from British to American hegemony, it was far from clear that would mean permanently maintaining the kind of significant military establishment usually associated with hegemonic powers. Although the United States emerged from the Second World War with overwhelming preponderance – as Mikael Gorbachev would later lament, 'the only big country that had waxed fabulously rich on the war' (Kimball 1992) – American planners had approached the end of the war with a vision of order-building that embedded its power in a system of multilateral institutions (Ikenberry 2001, pp.163–214). Drawdown proceeded unfettered, with military spending dropping from a peak of \$83 billion in 1945 to \$9 billion in 1948, with active duty personnel falling from 12 million in 1945 to 1.4 million in 1950.

The speed and depth of the United States' postwar drawdown might be considered surprising, particularly since US strategists appear to have reached consensus that power of the Soviet Union represented a compelling threat in the first months of 1946.¹ Yet drawdowns of this sort were the norm in the American experience (Boot 2012). War was very much a temporary condition, and wartime dispensations granted by legislators to the executive branch were treated as strictly limited exceptions. But by the time of the Korean War, after which active-duty service personnel fell by nearly one-third, much of this could be accounted for by Eisenhower's New Look strategy that prioritised nuclear forces, and overall defence spending was maintained.

What had happened was that NSC-68, 'the first comprehensive enunciation of American security policy' and a document that amounted 'to a an American declaration of permanent Cold War', had begun to be implemented (US National Security Council 1950; Brands 1989). Defence spending had increased from just under 5% of GDP in 1950 to double-digit levels during the war, and would average almost 9% from the end of the war through to the end of the 1960s, a period in which the US economy grew by an average of 6.5% a year. If NSC-68's purpose had been, in Dean Acheson's phrasing, "to so bludgeon the mass mind of 'top government' that not only could the President make a decision but that the decision could be carried out" (Acheson 1969, p.374), its success was evident in the debate around whether investment in defence capabilities should trump the requirement to balance the federal budget.

Yet the requirements of strategists could only be met if the political conditions would permit them. Containment was constructed as much as an expression of the universal nature of American values as the necessary requirements of the zero-sum logic of a security dilemma (Jervis 2001). The political conditions that enabled containment resulted from

¹ The key elements in the Western strategic assessment of the Soviet Union happened in the space of seventeen days in February and March 1946. The discovery of Soviet spies in the Manhattan Project was swiftly followed by George Kennan's Long Telegram, which was the first systematic intelligence appraisal of the USSR's attitudes and intentions. Less than two weeks later, Churchill, with the tacit approval of Truman, set out with typically vivid imagery the Communist challenge to liberal civilisation.

domestic coalition-forming that tacked together Dean Acheson's Europe-first internationalists with the Asia-first school of Robert Taft in order to sustain general support for American internationalism, particularly among Congressional opinion (Snyder 1991, pp.255–304). Driven by the likes of John Foster Dulles and Dean Rusk, a global anti-communist consensus, rooted in strategic ideas such as domino theory and monolithic communist expansionism, demonstrated how the 'cross-currents of uniqueness and universality' in American identity could be simultaneously integrated into grand strategy (Foley 2007, p.435).

For over forty years containment would swing between activism and détente, a reflection of the balance of power and ideas between hawks and doves (Gaddis 2005). The experience of Vietnam raised doubts about American ideals on the one hand and American capabilities on the other, animating American politics from the Presidential candidacy of George McGovern to the songwriting of Bob Dylan, and from the revisionist history of William Appleman Williams to Henry Kissinger's concerns about overextension that underpinned détente (Nelson 1995). In response to a perceived collective failure of nerve by the Nixon and Carter administrations, neoconservatives argued for a revival of moral purpose and the assertion of American material power (Halper & Clarke 2004, pp.55–58). Such arguments were heated, and produced significant changes in strategy, but they were shifts of degree. Throughout the Cold War, the goal of containing the Soviet Union, and the need for the United States to maintain a state of perpetual readiness for war, remained constant. Containment became a basic assumption of American political life, a grand strategy that defined not just American internationalism, but American culture. Anti-communism energised politics in the United States from unions to universities and from movies to churches. It infected American society and culture with pathologies of nationalism, intolerance and suspicion (Whitfield 1996).

The Missing Drawdown: Failing to End the Cold War

The Cold War had expanded the American state, leaving a more powerful presidency, a more secretive government and less constraining Congress. Believing democratic decision

making to be an inherent weakness in such an ultra-secritised climate, policymakers had adopted and the public had largely accepted unprecedented privations of traditional American liberties (Maynes 1990). The power of the military-industrial complex; the designation of enemy ideologies; the annexation of constitutional powers by the executive from Congress; the culture of classifying information; the secret institutions of the national security infrastructure; all had redefined the American people's relationship with their government to the detriment of their constitutional rights (Halperin H. & Woods 1990).

Some in the political commentariat saw the end of the Cold War as an opportunity for a peace dividend at the end of the Cold War. In this reading, the Cold War was an anomaly, the bulk of a "seventy year detour" from the main road of American diplomatic history (Moynihan 1990). The editor of *Foreign Affairs*, William Hyland, wrote that 'for the first time in half a century, the United States has the opportunity to reconstruct its foreign policy free of the constraints and pressures of the Cold War' (Hyland 1990). 'The peace dividend', wrote his counterpart at *Foreign Policy*, was 'not just about the money that will be freed up' but also 'the categories of thought that will finally be opened up' (Maynes 1990).

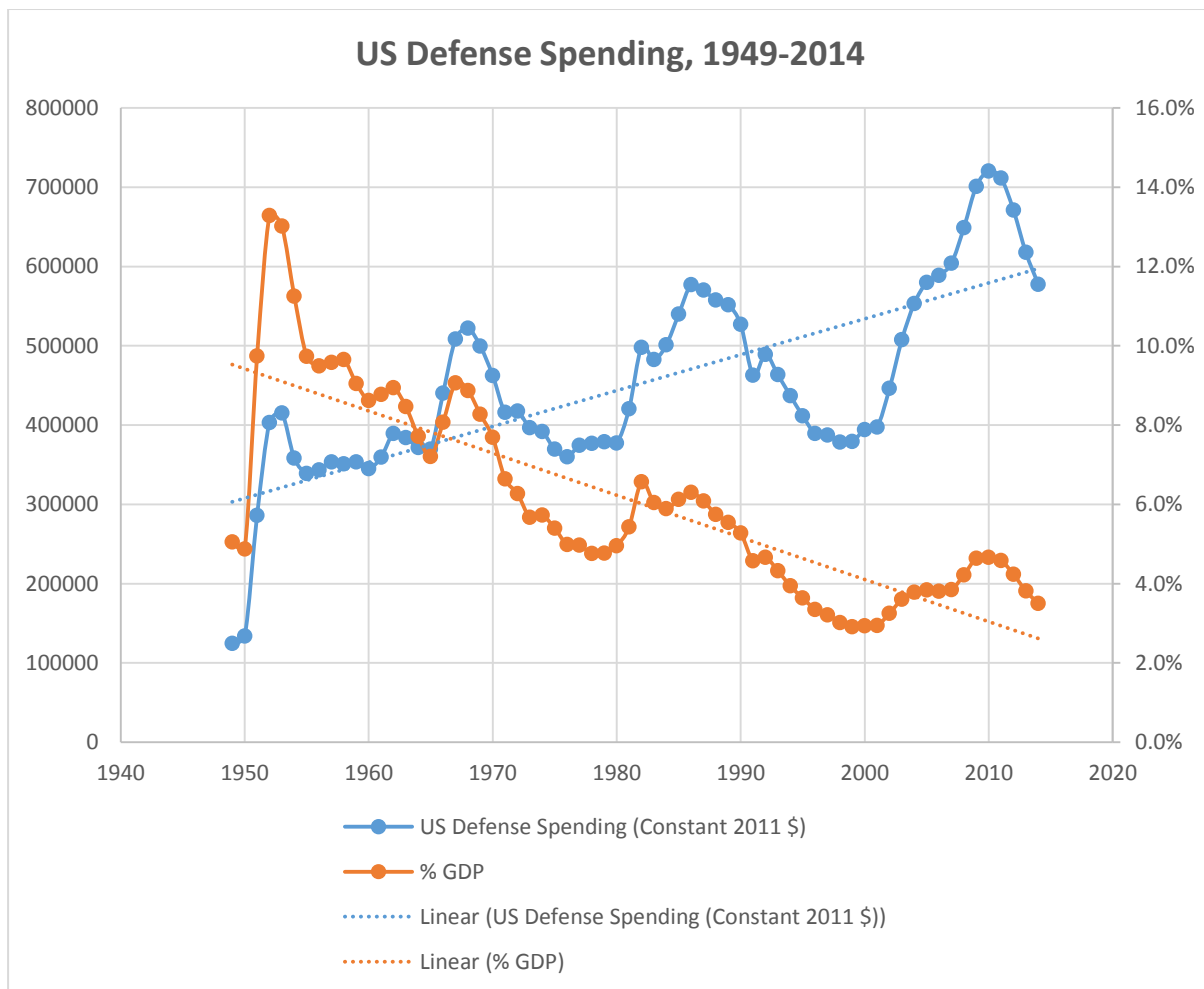
This approach in many ways mirrored the views of the American public, a reality that was reflected on either side of party-political divide in the Presidential primaries in 1991 and 1992. Democrat Paul Tsongas focused on the scale of the budget deficit necessitated by high military spending, arguing that "if our security needs have lessened, our level of military spending should reflect that change." (Clymer 1991) For the Republicans, Pat Buchanan made a serious challenge for the sitting President's party nomination, a campaign that made possible Ross Perot's independent candidacy in the general election itself, in which the latter would define himself as an economic nationalist committed to balancing the federal budget.²

So as the Soviet Union fell, both Washington insiders and the country at large felt the need to debate the balance of American political life: the roles of the executive branch, the media

² It is easy to forget that Perot was the early front-runner, achieving as high as 39% in the polls in June 1992 with 49% believing he could win the election in July when he dropped out of the race (Eldersveld & Walton 2000).

and the military, the balance between government secrecy and freedom of information, and the need to restructure domestic liberties and industrial organisation as part of a clear transition from war to peace (Moynihan 1992; Pessen 1993). Yet there is little evidence that these kinds of questions were seriously addressed in government itself, or within the foreign policy bureaucracy that owed its twentieth century growth to the grand strategy of anti-communist containment. Among the major foreign affairs think tanks, those outliers such as the CATO Institute and Heritage Foundation that did take retrenchment seriously, and academic voices such as Eric Nordlinger (Nordlinger 1991; Nordlinger 1995) were marginal to the debate, their advocacy of a drawdown dismissed by the new President's National Security Advisor in a major foreign policy speech, as "the rhetoric of Neo-Know-Nothings" (Lake 1993). In the 1990s, American governing elites were concerned not with how to dismantle containment, but with what to replace it with.

Defence spending did fall somewhat in the 1990s as certain Cold War commitments were scaled back, but levelled off by the middle of the decade and by the end of the Clinton presidency had begun to rise again. The Clinton administration's proffered grand strategy – democratic enlargement – essentially sought to globalise the Western order that had been built in opposition to the Soviet bloc, with the President likening the strategy domino-theory in reverse: encouraging and supporting rather than preventing a succession of mutually reinforcing societal changes that were in the interests of the United States (Brinkley 1997). Whilst such a strategy was motivated by and reflected a set of liberal goals deeply influenced by ideas of democratic peace and globalization, underpinning it was the simple, brute fact of American dominance.



[NOTE: GRAPH POSITIONING IN TEXT NOT ESSENTIAL – CAN BE MOVED FOR TYPESETTING PURPOSES WITH AUTHOR TO CONFIRM POSITIONING]

What IR theorists began to describe as structural unipolarity was a curious condition, particularly as it appeared to be reinforced rather than eroded during the course of the 1990s (Layne 1993; Layne 2006; Thompson 2006). But for those in the policy establishment here was confirmation that what they tended to refer to as primacy could be sustained (Wohlforth 1999). Perversely, a consequence of such dominance might be to reduce a state’s sense of its own security – the extent of its perceived limits means that all sorts of disturbances can threaten it (Jervis 2006). Permanent war was therefore maintained in the 1990s not because the United States itself continued to be threatened by foreign enemies, but because American policymakers came to identify the unipolar structure of the system, and America’s place in it, as the object of defence.

In practice, this resulted in a security discourse that was both expansive and vacillated with events; a nervous hyperactivity that reflected a definition of American interests that was global in scope and which therefore apparently regarded each and every occasion where America's interests were not met in full as representing a reduction of American power. Revisionist great powers, rogue states, failed states, WMD proliferation, ethnic conflict, civil war, genocide and mass atrocities, violations of human rights, drugs, organized crime, resource conflicts, migration, pandemics, natural disasters: in American political discourse it seemed any number of issues could be securitized and advanced as threats to national security, requiring the United States to remain ever-alert (Buzan 1998).

For some, this was perfectly reasonable: a safety first approach to a dangerous world. As Robert Kagan put it, 'there is no certainty that we can correctly distinguish between high-stakes issues and small-stake issues in time to sound the alarm' (Harries 2000, p.28). For Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the level of uncertainty as to the threat you might face meant 'putting it in the mind of an opponent that there is no future in trying to challenge the armed forces of the United States' (House Armed Services Committee 1992). Indeed, maintaining forces into the post-Cold War world recognized that the main threat to the United States arose from its being perceived abroad as weak and irresolute (Gaffney Jr. 2000). Therefore, however challenged, the United States had to be able to respond emphatically. Powell again: 'I believe in the bully's way of going to war. I'm on a street corner, I got my gun, I got my blade, I'ma kick yo' ass (Gates Jr. 1995).

In the face of this approach, conservatives and realists in this period complained of a "frantic" search for new missions and visions for United States foreign policy, efforts that the CATO Institute concluded "are so wide ranging as to constitute a campaign of threat procurement" (Carpenter 1992). Permanent war had created inertias and path-dependencies that had a deep influence on strategic debate. The very language of foreign policy debate was inherently internationalist (Clarke & Clad 1995, pp.49-63), and the notion that United States might not be engaged in an enduring battle to sustain world order was not one that foreign policy professionals were minded to admit. Just as academic Sovietologists had not been able to conceive of the subject of their discipline ceasing to exist

(Cox 2009), so America's foreign policy experts remained resolutely unable to detach themselves from notions of credibility and leadership, despite the radical structural shift in the United States' strategic environment (Steel 1995, pp.113–114). The Cold War may have ended, but the United States proved unable to end the Cold War.

Purpose Renewed: the Global War on Terror as Grand Strategy

The Global War on Terror was in many ways a strategic concept explicitly constructed to fill the vacuum that anti-communist containment had left during the 1990s. Indeed, such was the determination of former Cold Warriors within the Bush administration to solve the threat-deficit problem of the prior decade, that they sought to explicitly cast the War on Terror as a 'long war', a defining struggle that would act as a lode star for the conduct of US foreign policy: in short, a grand strategy for the United States.

Whilst the United States strategic environment hadn't changed, the events of 9/11 shifted society and policymakers' perception of threat in a way that allowed the country and the foreign policy elite to coalesce around a defined purpose for American foreign policy (Holland 2009). Part of the explanation for the nature of the post-9/11 shift lies with the personnel in the administration's senior foreign policy team, a mix of neoconservative democratic globalists and assertive nationalists, a number of whom had been hawkish Cold Warriors in the Reagan era and who were intensely comfortable with the notion of permanent war. And for a period, as Americans rallied round the flag and domestic politics created incentives for threat inflation, the Bush administration's 'vulcans' seemed to have finally settled on a new guiding principle for America's military might (Mann 2004).

The result was that counterterrorism was expanded through the Iraq war to encompass an attempt to comprehensively reorder the Middle East. This new overarching imperative of US foreign policy was pursued with overwhelmingly military tools, unsurprisingly, given the extent to which the Cold War security architecture had been maintained. At the same time, those means were not immediately clearly suited to addressing non-state actors, hence the early identification of terrorists with their state allies. The overthrow of the latter would

inaugurate a fundamental remaking of the Middle East, draining the swamp of motivation for a disaffected Muslim youth long denied the benefits of political and economic freedom by their post-colonial authoritarian rulers.

Perhaps the most significant consequence of the War on Terror was the geographic focus it placed on the Middle East, particularly as the invasion of Iraq shifted resources and attention away from Al Qaeda's Afghanistan base. But the War on Terror both re-established norms and processes of permanent war in American politics and society and inaugurated new ones. Congress' 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force granted the President authority to use all necessary and appropriate force against those whom he determined 'planned, authorized, committed or aided' the 9/11 attacks – providing the overarching authority for military campaigns against an almost unlimited range of individuals and groups. International affirmation was forthcoming, with the language of post-9/11 United Nations Security Council resolutions reinforcing the legal basis for American military action that could potentially be carried out in anticipation of terrorist attacks (Byers 2002). Alongside the obvious shifts in the rhetorical tone of foreign policy – Bush was unashamed to be a 'war president' – the bureaucratic restructuring of the American national security apparatus amounted to a comprehensive updating of architecture of permanent war for a new era. The administration created a new Department of Homeland Security, strengthened the money-laundering controls of the US Treasury, and reallocated responsibilities between the various domestic and foreign intelligence and security services whilst empowering them with new powers of surveillance and detention.

The Bush administration also threw money at the War on Terror. The Department of Homeland Security was budgeted \$43 billion, almost as much as the State Department. The seventeen agencies of the 'intelligence community' came to command a collective budget in excess of \$80 billion. And the 'regular' defence budget, which excludes the 'exceptional' costs of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, doubled in a decade from \$267bn in 2000 to £533bn in 2010. Andrew Bacevich's concern that such extensive growth of the national security state might put the United States on the 'path to permanent war' if anything underplayed its impact, since it built upon a Cold War architecture of permanent war that had never been dismantled (Bacevich 2010). Such concerns were even shared by Secretary of Defense

Robert Gates, who warned that “America's civilian institutions of diplomacy and development have been chronically undermanned and underfunded for far too long... when it comes to America's engagement with the rest of the world, it is important that the military is – and is clearly seen to be – in a supporting role to civilian agencies” (Tyson 2008).

Gates may have been preparing to leave the Pentagon when he made that statement in July 2008, but by November had agreed to stay on under the incoming Democratic President, whose campaign had been explicit in rejecting many of the Bush administration’s counter-terrorism tactics, and tapped into the public’s war-weariness seven years on from 9/11. Ultimately the Global War on Terror failed to sustain itself as grand strategy in the way its proponents had hoped. Such an outcome was perhaps unsurprising, requiring a feat of ‘macro-securitisation’ that was always likely to be herculean task, given its reliance on terrorists’ capacity to continue to carry out large-scale attacks, the willingness of allies to accept a war paradigm, and Al Qaeda and its ilk’s inability to pose a genuine ideological alternative to liberal order (Buzan 2006). Having said that, the war on terror was responsible for two of the United States three longest wars in its history, and sustained significant increases in defence, homeland security and intelligence spending, all on top of a missing drawdown from the United States’ last major conflict. The American economy may have seemed able to sustain it, but the long-term trend in America’s military commitments continued steadily upward.

Pushback: Dumb Wars and Debt

Obama’s election was made possible by the financial crisis of 2008, a crisis that made America’s leaders appear feckless and the United States’ political and economic model inoperative. The clarion call of Obama’s campaign rested on the hope that change was possible. Yet Obama’s proposals for change were clearer and better developed in the sphere of foreign policy than in economic affairs. Here, candidate Obama ran hard on his opposition to the discredited Iraq War, contrasting the dumb war in Iraq with the necessary war in Afghanistan, and more generally proposing to return American foreign policy to a more consensual, multilateral variant, less reliant on the tools of military force.

Once in office, the administration's first steps were largely symbolic, designed to 'signal to the world that he is the unBush' (Freedland 2009). In a first hundred days of détente, Guantanamo Bay, the symbol of American lawlessness in the War on Terror, would be closed and torture repudiated; troops would be withdrawn from Iraq; former pariahs including Venezuela, Cuba, Iran and Syria would be offered the chance to come in from the cold; moderate Muslim opinion would be cultivated and international institutions re-engaged (Kitchen 2011).

At the same time, Obama was far more cautious than his predecessor in articulating doctrine at such. Bumper stickers for Obama's approach to strategy have been left to anonymous officials who pronounce an administration that 'leads from behind' or believes the key task of foreign policy is 'don't do stupid shit'. When pushed, the President has been willing to offer a 'strong belief that we don't have military solutions to every problem' (Yglesias 2015). This has been evident in the administration's willingness to push diplomatic and multilateral approaches to problem solving – most obviously with Iran – and to tone down exceptionalist rhetoric, usually with a hedge to the universalisability of American values which emphasizes that different cultures may apply liberal norms differently.

The administration's caution is bound up in a sense of the limits of what American power can achieve. Whilst unwilling to describe himself as a realist, Obama is on record as admiring how the arch-realist foreign policy team of the George H.W. Bush administration managed the dying breaths of the Soviet Union between 1989 and 1991 (Brooks 2008). Such an approach indicates that Obama's administration conceives of the United States' role in the world in profoundly different terms to its post-Cold War predecessors, which were prone to simply assert the righteousness of the United States' claim to international leadership. Obama has certainly paid lip-service to American idealism, but the conduct of his diplomacy continues to suggest that disparate issues need not be conflated for the purposes of moral clarity (Cohen 2009).

Some argue that behind the more limited ambitions of the Obama administration lies the reality of more limited means (Quinn 2013). Such arguments point to the level of US

indebtedness incurred from persistent deficits – particularly since the Bush administration chose to combine its War on Terror security largesse with unprecedented tax cuts; sequestered military spending; and greater constraints on US unilateral action imposed by a less unipolar balance of power. And indeed, Obama himself has emphasised that his is “a US leadership that recognizes our limits in terms of resources, capacity” (Zakaria 2012). However, the reality of such constraint is far from clear. Federal debt as a percentage of GDP has been falling since the beginning of 2014, and federal borrowing is cheaper than at any time in history. And whilst defence spending has fallen from its 2010 peak, it remains higher than at any point during the Cold War, and greater than the total of the next nine states combined (IISS 2015). Few would suggest that should Obama’s successor wish to return the United States to a more activist military approach to foreign policy, that they would not be able to do so. Even Obama himself makes the point about resources with the caveat that “the United States continues to be the one indispensable nation in tackling major international problems” (Zakaria 2012).

It therefore may be more accurate to understand the administration’s talk of limits as political shorthand for its more circumscribed approach to the use of military force that rests on an analysis of the basic operation of international relations; an analysis which differs markedly from that of its predecessor. If the Bush administration saw American unipolarity as an inherently permissive condition that meant the United States could use its military dominance to impose its will, a basic cost-benefit analysis of its attempts to do so in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrate the manifest falsehood of that belief (Stiglitz & Bilmes 2008). In an international system where conventional interstate war has been rendered obsolete as rational policy (Mueller 1990; Tertrais 2012), conflict is instead characterised by transnational contestation by state and non-state actors, processes which serve to blur both notions of territorial integrity and sovereignty, as well as the distinctions between different types of actors. While some have theorized this evolution of the security environment as occurring within the context of unipolarity’s demise (Haass 2008), the United States’ military position, defined in terms of the usual metrics, remains dominant. Rather than the balance of power being at issue, it is the general capacity of states to exert control over this more disorderly security environment that underpins the United States’ strategic thinking in the aftermath of the Bush doctrine (see Rogers 2000).

Obama's approach to international security is therefore characterised by a general scepticism of what it is, in practice, that large-scale military actions can achieve. From the very beginning of the Obama administration, this approach was set out in terms of 'smart power', an approach to international leadership that stressed the needs of followers to translate elements of hard and soft power into legitimacy and authority (Nye 2008; Nye 2011). Emphasising the 'softer' tools of diplomacy and statecraft do not imply rejecting the use of force: a point Obama made himself in his Nobel acceptance speech and which has been confirmed by his willingness to use special forces, air power and drones – with the latter use of hard power in particular precipitating significant costs in terms of soft power (Boyle 2013). Bearing in mind that such trade-offs between means and ends are the very stuff of strategy, it is possible to isolate a number of ways in which the administration would at least claim that its approach reflects those 'smart' principles.

First, the use of drone technology has enabled the administration to turn the United States' approach to counter-terrorism from one of problem solving to issue management. Under Obama, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) have been deployed against terrorist targets in Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, Libya, Iraq and Syria. Whilst it is true that the drone campaign raises significant questions of its moral and legal status, not to mention its wider effectiveness in reducing the terrorist threat to the United States (McCrisken 2011), it is also the case that it has allowed the administration to present itself as directly addressing the terrorist threat without having to resort to the types of large-scale boots on the ground undertakings that characterized the Bush administration. But although some regard the use of drone technology as a 'surrogate' (Krieg 2016), there can be no doubt that drones are perceived as the direct application of military force, both by the communities that have been regularly targeted by UAVs (Friedersdorf 2012), and by the operators themselves (Chatterjee 2015).

Second, and conditioned by the experience of the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, is a profound scepticism about the utility of American military capabilities to solve political problems, particularly in the Middle East. Military power can be used for containment of situations (as in the case of the use of airpower to arrest the territorial expansion of ISIS), or

for signalling and structuring purposes – as has been the case in the South China Sea. But the administration has consistently demurred when it has been suggested that American military force may be used to extract compliance from, or compel behaviour change in, either state or non-state actors.

Third, the administration has sought to focus on deeper strategic issues in terms of system management, than on tactical battles against asymmetric enemies. In this reading, the War on Terror had been a strategic ‘detour’, which blinded American policymakers to the underlying reality of structural change in the international system that was dictating that Asia would be the key geopolitical arena of Obama’s tenure and beyond (Lizza 2011). Behind this lies a return to Clinton-era ideas that geoeconomics rather than geopolitics is ultimately determining of (inter)national success, evidenced by the amounts of domestic political capital the administration has been prepared to spend to secure deals on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP).

Fourth, and a corollary out of these latter two points, has been the administration’s confidence in the capacity of economic tools to deliver political outcomes. Sanctions regimes, of course, are slow, gradual tools, and require political commitment to sustain, though American diplomats regularly point out in private that military routes have yielded a similar experience in the recent past. Certainly most experts agree that the multilateral sanctions imposed on Iran since 2010 contributed significantly to the increasing Iranian flexibility on its nuclear programme that led to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action agreed in Vienna in July 2015 and adopted in October (Katzman 2014). The sanctions imposed on Russia in the wake of its annexation of Crimea and actions in Eastern Ukraine will be still harder to sustain to effectiveness, but there can be little doubt that they have added significant costs to Russia’s endeavour, contributing to an annualised decline in Russian growth of 4%, and massive capital flight.

These trends – the shift from problem solving to issue management; scepticism about the utility of force as an instrument of compellence; a focus on deeper structural issues in the global economy; and confidence in economic tools of statecraft – suggest that the Obama administration’s sense of the limits of power should be understood not in terms of

American capabilities, but in terms of the kind of outcomes it is practically possible for any state's individual capabilities, directly applied, to deliver in international politics. Madeleine Albright notoriously questioned what the point of American military forces was if they weren't to actually be put to use, but the Bush administration's misplaced confidence in war as a tool of strategy drove home the reality that military tools can only achieve so much. The Obama administration has taken that message very much to heart.

Critics have argued that, taken together, this represents a curtailing of commitments and shifting of burdens that amounts to a dangerous grand strategy of retrenchment, particularly in the Middle East (Drezner 2011; Gerges 2012). Realist advocates of retrenchment have been at pains to point out that the administration's policies fall far short of such a disengagement (Posen 2014; Walt 2014), and it is perhaps more appropriate to see the US shifting – progressively, as not all of the change has occurred under the Obama administration – from a relatively short-lived bout of unilateral world-making back to a more traditional internationalism. Under Obama that internationalism has been increasingly characterised by a strategy of divested hegemony in which the United States eschews direct American action in favour of engaging and facilitating allies and proxies. In the Asia-Pacific, that has involved encouraging its traditional partners – particularly Japan – to make more of a contribution to their own security, with the United States offering symbolic shows of strength in the South China Sea and renewed commitment to regional trade and governance structures in return.

In the Middle East, the original geography of the War on Terror that Obama had sought to reroute the United States away from was renewed post-Arab Spring in a new and shifting map of the region. In Egypt, Hosni Mubarak, a former bastion of (relative) stability and a reliable security partner, was jettisoned (see chapter 10); a process made possible by the depth of American patronage within the Egyptian military. As the region has descended into widespread instability and conflict, the Obama administration has increasingly applied American capabilities indirectly with the goal of shaping the evolution of conflicts, in contrast to the approach of the early years of the War on Terror, where the explicit and direct involvement of US forces was tasked with attaining particular outcomes.

This more indirect application of American power has two distinctive features. First, is the divesting of hegemonic responsibilities to regional allies. This was evident as early as 2011, when Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council GCC was tasked with propping up the ruling monarchy in Bahrain, the home of the US 5th fleet. Later, in the Libya intervention, where an anonymous administration official characterised the administration's approach as 'leading from behind' by (Lizza 2011), the United States acted in support of France and the UK in a NATO context, although the nominal 'leaders' were reliant on US support for basic operational tasks such as air-to-air refuelling (Barry 2011). Since 2015, Saudi Arabia has led a coalition of nine Arab states seeking to influence the outcome of the Yemeni civil war, a campaign for which the US provides intelligence and logistical support, as well as supplying the necessary munitions.

Second, the administration has also preferred to engage proxy forces on the ground, limiting the direct US ground force presence to covert and special forces. In Libya and Syria, rebel forces have been supported by Gulf States with American approval, at the same time as the US has engaged in directly training and equipping Syrian forces in Turkey and Qatar, and providing the Kurdish *peshmerga* with advanced weaponry. The administration has even employed Iranian forces as the necessary ground complement to US air strikes against ISIS in Iraq (Krieg 2016, p.106).

By divesting its hegemony in this way, the United States has sought to reduce its exposure to crises, and in particular, to blowback consequences from the actions that are necessary for the management of peace and security. Free-riding by allies and others on the hegemonic public goods of the global commons was not an issue for the United States in the Cold War and post-Cold War period, since the blowback consequences of American actions to sustain a benign security environment were minor. That is no longer the case. The spread of insecurity across borders and the disintegration of the division between state and non-state actors has led American strategists to seek to inure the United States to an environment in which resistance to hegemonic control is pervasive and violent. Neither the American public nor US policymakers continue to value the privileges of unilateralism in the ways they once did.

Yet even as it attempts to divest itself of particular strategic assets and responsibilities and to supplant its exposure onto others, the United States has also sought to retain the option on ownership, and to direct the goals and conduct of operations carried out by others. With Western allies in NATO this has to a large extent worked, particularly as the administration's focus on Asia creates pathologies in European capitals.³ With others, such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the United States has had to stomach a culture of operations that, for example, is far less sensitive to Western notions of collateral damage. And support for non-state proxies, of course, has a long history of rebounding on great powers.

Conclusion

The Obama administration's relative reticence when it comes to the direct application of American military force may have avoided getting the United States into any more 'dumb wars' – so far. Obama has extracted the United States from the wars he inherited, although the ongoing conflict with ISIS in Iraq and Syria may be seen as a continuation of the events set in train by the US invasion in 2003. But the shutting down of the Bush administration's wars cannot be seen as taking the United States off the path of permanent war, since America's strategic overloading on the tools of war has its roots not in the War on Terror, but in the failure to draw down after the Cold War.

Indeed, it may be best to understand Obama's call for the United States to move off a permanent war footing less as a call to close down the national pathology of the War on Terror, than as a warning: that the Obama withdrawals don't mean that future American leaders couldn't take the United States into more ill-judged military adventures; and that the US's over-reliance on the military instrument is something the country as a whole needs to address. In this sense it echoes another President with whom history may most closely

³ The US Ambassador to NATO and the Supreme Allied Commander Europe, somewhat unsurprisingly, described the Libya campaign as a 'model intervention' (Daalder & Stavridis 2012)

compare Obama: Dwight Eisenhower, and the counsel in his farewell address to guard against unwarranted influence of the military-industrial complex, not that this administration has been any more reticent than its predecessors to sell American arms around the world (Gould et al. 2015; and see also chapter 3). The deeply embedded political and bureaucratic culture of enormous defence budgets, and a wider militarism in American society, surely mitigate against a return to the kind of civil-military relations that characterised the United States before NSC-68. But if the key lesson of the Bush administration for US foreign policy was that unipolarity does not mean omnipotence, the Obama administration's legacy in defence may be that having capabilities does not entail using them.

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