

Jul 5 2010

Liberal Interventionism R.I.P.

LSE Ideas

By **Gregorio Bettiza**

While conducting fieldwork in Washington DC this summer, I was struck by the many complaints about President Obama's lack of interest in pursuing liberal values abroad. "Those working in the 'democracy sector', haven't seen many resources coming their way from this administration", one critic told me in private. Others quibbled about Obama's deafening silence on international human rights issues. Let alone the tsunami of TV commentators debating whether the President was keener on allegedly importing European-style big-government socialism rather than promoting, at home and abroad, America's entrepreneurial spirit and free-market ethos.

Wondering whether these narrow policy complains reflected broader shifts in American strategic thinking, I turned to Obama's newly released (May 2010) [National Security Strategy \(NSS\)](#) in search for clues. And I found them. Indeed, what I found was that America's liberal interventionist grand strategic approach, which had come to define much of its foreign policy thinking and practice since the end of the Cold War, had all but faded. Roughly speaking, liberal interventionism is the belief that the active promotion of liberal values worldwide – such as free markets, human rights and democracy – are instrumental to maintaining international peace and stability and a vital U.S. security interest. Its advocates have generally proposed that the U.S. use its power to pursue and protect these values through direct intervention – even military if necessary – in the domestic affairs of foreign countries.

Take human rights and democracy promotion for example. At a close look of Obama's NSS, riddled it is with the language of engagement, building cooperation and investing at home to renew American leadership, while impulses of intervening on humanitarian grounds or to spread liberty internationally seem to have gone. Compare Obama's NSS, for example, with [Bush's 2002 NSS](#) and [Clinton's 1998 NSS](#). One has to go to page 36, to have a hint of what Obama's strategy to uphold "universal values" would be:

"The United States supports those who seek to exercise universal rights around the world. We promote our values above all by living them at home...America will not impose any system of government on another country...More than any other action that we have taken, the power of America's example has helped spread freedom and democracy abroad." (p.36)

Contrast this 'exemplarist' stance with Bush's highly interventionist freedom agenda, which took center stage in his NSS. Indeed the document opened with the following lines:

"The United States possesses unprecedented – and unequalled – strength and influence in the world. Sustained by faith in the principles of liberty, and the value of a free society, this position comes with unparalleled responsibilities, obligations, and opportunity. The great strength of this nation must be used to promote a balance of power that favors freedom." (p.1)

The 2002 NSS' first key strategic objective was to "champion aspirations for human dignity" (i.e. democratic institutions and human rights). This logic then became a central ideological component in pursuing strategies of democracy promotion in the Middle East, build support in the run up to the war in Iraq as well as driving state-building activities in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

So too there are few echoes in Obama's strategy of anything like the Clinton era concept of "democratic enlargement". Nor are there many openings for possible humanitarian interventions, which instead peppered the 1990s decade. Clinton's 1998 NSS also articulated a more explicit activist approach to "promoting democracy and human rights", than Obama's current one, explicitly indicating it as the third core objective of its national security strategy.

"We must sustain our efforts to press for political liberalization and respect for basic human rights worldwide, including in countries that continue to defy democratic advances." (p.34)

On the economic front, as well, the self-confidence in the necessity of advancing a liberal economic order internationally has evaporated from the 2010 document. Out of the post-Cold War era administrations, Clinton's was the one which most vigorously articulated a foreign policy vision around the universal expansion of markets. Indeed he appeared at times to elevate economic interests at the same level of more traditional national security concerns. Globalization was the word of the day, while key American priorities were to extend open markets and free trade worldwide alongside building and beefing-up international liberal economic arrangements such as NAFTA, APEC and the WTO. During the 1990s, The Bretton Woods organizations were also given a freer hand in their lending and in advocating for a markedly neoliberal approach to poverty reduction and economic growth.

Similarly bullish was Bush's NSS about the need to intervene internationally to advance neoliberal economic policies. A stated objective in the 2002 NSS was to "ignite a new era of global economic growth through free markets and free trade". The 2002 NSS also tied economic liberty to the President's freedom agenda:

"A strong world economy enhances our national security by advancing prosperity and freedom in the rest of the world. Economic growth supported by free trade and free markets... reinforces the habits of liberty. We will promote economic growth and economic freedom beyond America's shores." (p.17)

Then contrast this cavalier attitude of previous decades towards liberal economic prescriptions with Obama's call for more state-led fiscal stimulus during the latest G20 meeting in Canada. In parallel the 2010 NSS has few words to spare for the universal application of liberal economic principles. It instead concentrates primarily on the notion of rebuilding the domestic foundations for American 'prosperity', by:

"Strengthening education and human capital, enhancing science, technology and innovation, achieving a balanced and sustainable growth" (p.2).

I'll leave it to more rigorous academic analysis than this simple blog post to try and explain why such a shift away from liberal interventionism has happened. One can simply speculate that both international structural and domestic forces are at play here. The slow end of unipolarity with the rise of regional powers along with the soft balancing of an international public opinion which has repercussions on how far national governments can support a highly interventionist American foreign policy, may be at work here. Also domestic forces within the US, such as the high economic, military and human costs of repeated and protracted foreign adventures, could have dampened passions for more of the same. Furthermore, particular policies have been delegitimized given their partial or complete failures. For example, the realization that protecting human rights abroad through military means is hopeless when there is no functioning state, as in the case of Haiti and Somalia. Similarly, the realization has taken hold democracy isn't built in a day, as neoconservatives hoped for in Iraq and Afghanistan, and requires a more sustained commitment than interventionists might have previously assumed. Likewise, the 2007-2008 financial cataclysm appears to have deflated enthusiasms for neoliberal economic recipes. Given this scenario, liberal interventionism, which has defined much of American foreign policy strategy for the past two decades, has now been put to rest.

Gregorio Bettiza is a PhD candidate in International Relations and IDEAS Centre Stonex Scholar at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He serves as Programme Assistant on the LSE IDEAS Transatlantic Programme.

This entry was posted in [Liberalism](#), [Obama](#), [United States](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).