
**Introduction**

The inauguration of Barack Obama in 2009 presaged a rebirth of liberalism as the philosophical and theoretical foundation of American foreign policy. It was widely predicted that Obama would be the 'unBush' president, recalibrating US global power to reflect its limits. His liberal foreign policy would replace a neoconservative unilateralism with a readiness to work through international institutions. Transposing his Chicago experience to a world stage, Obama would be the global community organizer-in-chief. The argument of this chapter is that such hopes were largely misplaced. Obama has in style and tone effected a liberal foreign policy; his substantial emphasis in practice, however, has borrowed freely across paradigms, paying very little attention to the intricacies and demands of any, producing a highly pragmatic and often more typically realist approach to the world than a liberal one. Indeed, the foreign policy Obama has delivered more resembles a third Bush term than a revolution away from the Texan.

'Liberal' and 'liberalism' are inherently flexible, even slippery, labels. Many students connect 'liberal' to simple notions of progress, of fairness and equality, of deference to the United Nations, and of foreign policies, American and otherwise, that promote expansively global, as opposed to narrowly national, interests. Liberalism embraces many of these normative concerns. Liberals believe that states can and should change their policies to make 'progress' across a range of issues possible; increasingly liberalism is taken as synonymous with progressivism. In contrast, realists are sceptical that shifts in diplomacy and a foreign policy of rational enlightenment can change the underlying structure of international relations or the nature of the humans navigating it. Obama has deployed a variety of mechanisms in the pursuit of a liberal world order, often straining the boundaries of what liberals find acceptable. He has pursued liberal ends but sometimes by reliably realist means. He has made war abroad in the name of humanitarianism but has imposed supposedly realistic limits to such actions - toppling Libya's Muammar Gaddafi but refusing to intervene in the far worse - in terms of duration, intensity, and civilian deaths - Syrian war. Obama's foreign policy liberalism is a complicated one.

I have argued elsewhere that Obama's liberalism was unlikely to initiate a revolution in American foreign policy (see Lynch and Singh 2008; Lynch 2010). Rather, he would continue with the central themes that have framed America's approach to the world since the eighteenth century. As such, he was more likely to resemble his predecessor than repudiate him. Obama's liberalism was not transformative but a set of reactions, adapting itself to reality rather than reshaping it. As his presidency enters its twilight, we can assess how far Obama's liberalism has made any difference to international relations.

**Obama's Liberalism**

There are at least two ways in which we might measure the liberalism of Obama's foreign policy. The first lays stress on what I will refer to as his *ideological liberalism*, whose antecedents are in his political character and personal history. As a man of the left, Obama has necessarily adapted his core liberalism to his foreign policy agenda and vice versa. He has stressed the inherent value of cooperative engagement with America's opponents, such as Iran. He has treated seriously the role played by international institutions, such as the United Nations.
He has done this not primarily for their utility (the UN is not appreciably more useful as an instrument than it was under George W. Bush) but because the United Nations is seen as a value in and of itself, and, therefore, worthy of deference.

Despite a reputation for pragmatism, Obama came to office as the most liberal Democrat senator in the 112th Congress. He secured an almost perfect 'liberal voting score' during his years as the junior senator from Illinois, 2005-8, moving further 'left' year-on-year (see http://nj.nationaljournal.com/voteratigs/). Oppositional texts have exaggerated Obama's leftism (see Corsi 2008; D'Souza 2010; Limbaugh 2012) but these should not obscure an important feature of his political maturation. Obama has resided comfortably on the left-wing side of Democratic politics since the early 1980s (see Remnick 2011; Alterman and Mattson 2012; Merry 2013). We do not have to bias agency over structure to acknowledge that his personal-political orientation was likely to influence how he dealt with the world as president.

The second way in which Obama's foreign policy liberalism can be assessed lies in his articulation of a liberal theory of international relations. Unlike his ideological liberalism, his theoretical liberalism operates less consciously. Liberal IR theory, unlike political or partisan liberalism, is concerned not with ideology or the quest for the good life, as such. Rather, it privileges a set of assumptions about the way international relations function. As Jack Snyder observes, 'Liberalism has such a powerful presence that the entire US political spectrum, from neoconservatives to human rights advocates, assumes it as largely self-evident' (Synder 2004: 56). The definition of 'liberal' in this respect is an expansive one. Neoconservatives and Marxists are 'liberal' IR theorists. They argue that a state's character, ideology, and internal structure have a direct bearing on the foreign policy it will pursue. 'Foreign policy is a phase of domestic policy,' argued Charles Beard, 'an inescapable phase' (in Waltz 1959: 80).

It follows that if a state's character can be changed - through democracy promotion or communist revolution, for example - its external posture will change too. Liberal IR theorists believe that institutions matter - hence liberal institutionalism. Such entities can mitigate - through reasoned discourse and rational social structuring — the harsher aspects of the human condition. If properly constituted, institutions like the United Nations and the European Union can alter the national interest calculations of states. Frederick Engels and Leon Trotsky argued something similar (see Waltz 1959: 125). If international organizations reflected the interests of the working class, national interests would be irrelevant and thus war redundant. If all states could be democratic, as some neoconservatives advocate, peace would become perpetual. Of course, these political persuasions differ markedly but they share a common belief that state character determines the prevalence of war or peace in international relations.

Liberal IR theory has many variations and subsets. These include institutionalists (Keohane and Nye 2001; Dai 2007), internationalists (Reus-Smit 2004; Smith 2007), sociologists (Mann 2003, 2004; Linklater 2007), cosmopolitans (Held 2005; Kaldor 2004), cultural and critical theorists (Rengger and Thirkell-White 2007; Lebow 2008), and theorists of republican liberalism (Doyle 1997). But nearly all its proponents share a belief that progress - toward peace, equality, freedom, global cooling - is possible if only the world could be organized better. Despite the diversity of their theories, 'liberals have shared the view that institutions and rules established between states facilitate and reinforce cooperation and collective problem solving' (Ikenberry 2011: 63). Realists dismiss such claims as largely illusory.

Positioning Obama's foreign policy within this enormous body of literature invites more debate than it closes down. His particular skill as president was to appear an empty vessel into which each supporter would pour his own liquor. Obama's liberalism is a case in point. Scholars of his foreign policy divide on its essential character. The broadly sympathetic accounting offered in Indyk et al. (2012) avoids explicit mention of liberalism, ideological or theoretical. 'Once he became president,' they note, 'Obama dispensed with ideology and partisanship and became simply pragmatic' (2012: 75). His drawdown of troops in Iraq, for example, conformed
much more to military advice than to the expectations of his Democratic base or to the models of democratic peace theorists.

Much of the literature on Obama's foreign policy necessarily seeks comparison and contrast with that of George W. Bush. Distinguishing between Obama's liberalism and Bush's supposed neoconservatism is no easy task, just as monotheoretical ascriptions of his predecessor's foreign policy obscure more than they reveal (see Harvey 2010; Lynch 2010). There are at least two schools of thought on Obama's foreign policy. The first finds continuity, both good and bad, with Bush. The central case study is the counter-terrorism of both men. Obama has not been squeamish in the extra-judicial targeting of terrorists. He has killed many more of them by drone strike than did Bush (see Klaidman 2012). Obama has actually delivered, writes David Sanger, 'a modified version of Bush's pre-emption doctrine' (Sanger 2012: 252). Like Bush, he used military force to topple an Arab autocracy (in Libya) and surged troops into Afghanistan.

The second approach finds a rapture with Bush. In his diplomacy toward China, for example, according to Jeffrey Bader, Obama succeeded because he saw not an 'inevitable adversary, but rather a strategic partner in resolving critical global issues' (Bader 2012: 69). Thus, Obama's foreign policy worked because it embraced the liberal assumption of peace through engagement. Others have explicitly questioned the limits of this engagement strategy (see Singh 2012, for example) but have not queried its primacy in Obama's diplomacy — only its utility.

Three Levels of Analysis

Do either of the foregoing types help us define Obama's foreign policy liberalism? Obama, according to Indyk et al., has been a liberal hawk, 'a president who ordered US Special Operations Forces to violate unilaterally Pakistani airspace to kill Osama bin Laden and who had American drones attack other extremists at five to ten times the rate of the Bush administration' (2012: 265). But, according to James Lindsay, Obama has largely failed because he assumed that the rest of the world shared his liberal assumptions. Obama's fetish for consultation 'could not guarantee consensus. Governments could and did disagree over which issues constituted threats or opportunities... The result too often was inaction or gridlock' (Lindsay 2011: 779). If Obama's liberalism was resisted on Capitol Hill, it was similarly a complicating factor in his foreign policy.

Obama's liberalism is in the eye of the beholder. It is both the substantial cause of his success and of his failure; it renders him farsighted and naive; it commits him to war and to its avoidance. Because such binary attributions are unsatisfactory, in what follows I interrogate Obama's foreign policy liberalism at three levels of analysis: in his rhetoric, in his war-making, and in his personnel. At each level, the liberal content of his foreign policy can be measured. At each, the schizophrenia of liberalism as a guide to foreign policy is apparent.

Obama's Rhetoric

Barack Obama's liberalism is coded rather than explicit. In his presidential public speaking, Obama rarely uses the term 'liberal' or 'liberalism'. This reflects the delegitimation of 'liberal' within American political discourse (where 'progressive' in the preferred term). Obama's foreign policy liberalism resides in how he codes and illustrates certain key assumptions. The most obvious example of this is 'engagement'. While the word itself appears irregularly, its import is clear: Obama, unlike Bush, wished to realize American interests through a process of strategic engagement. Its most famous articulation was in his first inaugural: To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history, but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist' (Obama 2009b).
The extending of hands was not limited to rogue states but applied to Europe, China, and Russia as well. Each, under an Obama presidency, could expect a more collaborative style of diplomacy. The assumption underlying this cosmopolitan shift was that Bush had dealt in crudities. Obama would dispense with notions of 'new' and 'old' Europe. He would treat Beijing as a strategic partner and 'reset' relations with Moscow. Whether or not such rhetoric realized its objectives is less important that what the attempt reveals about Obama's underlying assumptions.

Obama clearly favoured a concept of liberal foreign policy that saw soft - cajoling, persuasive - power as a key tool. Since George W. Bush did so much to discredit the utility of its hard power counterpart and with the treatises of Joseph Nye (2004, 2011), soft power has become 'one of the most influential academic ideas of the twenty-first century' (Parmar 2013: 292). Obama's first secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, sought to refine it into 'smart power'. Rather than rely on a fuzzy niceness, Clinton's version was far more realist in its frame of reference. Smart power did not prioritize democracy, let alone freedom, in the manner George Bush had done. Instead, the Obama administration would privilege 'diplomacy, development, and defense' - 'the three elements' of US power, according to Clinton (2009). Each 'D' meant to reinforce the complementarity of liberalism and realism. America could have security (the object of realist statecraft) but only if it were to practise better public diplomacy and fund overseas development appropriately (both liberal preferences). Clinton used the word 'development' thirty-nine times in her Senate confirmation hearing in 2009.

However, while there is evidence of a liberalism defined as engagement so there is evidence of a more hawkish liberalism in Obama administration rhetoric. This was not simply a result of Obama's militarism in Afghanistan and Libya, and the need to justify it, but of his conscious embrace of a harder, more realistic, conception of US power enunciated before he escalated the US military presence in these theatres. His Nobel Prize speech, ironically, was the most obvious opportunity Obama took to posit the realities of being a liberal leader in an often illiberal world:

> I know there's nothing weak - nothing passive - nothing naive - in the creed and lives of Gandhi and King. But as a head of state sworn to protect and defend my nation, I cannot be guided by their examples alone. I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people (Obama 2009c).

In words that would have invited progressive scorn had his predecessor used them, Obama told his audience to:

> make no mistake: Evil does exist in the world. A non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler's armies. Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda's leaders to lay down their arms. To say that force may sometimes be necessary is not a call to cynicism - it is a recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason.

This was not a new-found reality for the president. As a candidate, Obama's belief in the efficacy of American military power was as apparent as his cosmopolitanism. In 2008, he reminded a large German audience that it was NATO and the United States that had won the cold war and provided the basis for German reunification; the United Nations got no mention (Obama 2008). If we attribute Obama's liberalism to a faith in international institutions it is a circumscribed faith. Multilateralism is not proportionate to morality. Rather, Obama has been prepared to increase or decrease the number of partners contingent on how far US interests are advanced thereby. His Libya intervention, as we will see, presented a clear case of embracing some nations - Britain and France - and rejecting the entreaties of others - Germany and Russia - not unlike the pattern of alliance formation preceding the Iraq war of 2003. Both wars led to regime change unsanctioned by the UN Security Council.
Those identifying a decisive rhetorical shift from Bush to Obama highlight the latter’s more muted eulogies to US power. Where Bush interposed ‘freedom’ into his foreign policy after 9/11, Obama asserted a more realist approach. He famously decried American exceptionalism - ‘I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism’ (Obama 2009a) - and used ‘democracy’ far less in his speeches. The character of regimes - a key determinant of their external behaviour, according to liberal IR theory - was to matter less in how Washington dealt with them. Obama assumed the mantle of George H.W. Bush - a realist president whose foreign policy was supposedly cognizant of the limits of US power. It was Bush Sr who stood aside while Saddam Hussein destroyed the opponents Bush himself had encouraged to rise up (after the 1991 Gulf War). As of the time of writing, Syria’s president Bashar al-Assad has relied on a similar reticence on Obama’s part as he seeks to put down a domestic insurrection.

Similarly, Obama’s national security rhetoric has veered in a more realist than liberal direction. His definition of the threat facing the United States and the tools he claims necessary to fight it bear a strong resemblance to those claimed by George W. Bush. The following are illustrative of the similarities between both men, and none represents a rebirth of liberalism - ideological or theoretical - within US foreign policy (see Jackson 2011). The endnotes indicate their author:

1. We must always reserve the right to strike unilaterally at terrorists wherever they may exist.

2. Today, the dangers extend beyond states alone to transnational security threats that respect no borders. These are threats that arise from any part of the globe and spread anywhere, including to our own shores - dangers like... terrorism.

3. ... the challenges of a new and dangerous world. Today’s dangers are different, though no less grave. The power to destroy life on a catastrophic scale now risks falling into the hands of terrorists.

4. Let me repeat: I am not going to release individuals who endanger the American people. Al Qaeda terrorists and their affiliates are at war with the United States, and those that we capture - like other prisoners of war - must be prevented from attacking us again... we must hold individuals to keep them from carrying out an act of war.

For a man routinely lauded for this rhetoric, in contrast with the poor syntax of his predecessor, Obama has defined risk and justified executive power in essentially identical terms. Identifying where Bush stops and Obama starts in the following is not straightforward:

5. We will not apologize for our way of life nor will we waver in its defense. These terrorists are the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the twentieth century. By sacrificing human life to serve their radical visions, by abandoning every value except the will to power, they follow in the path of fascism, Nazism and totalitarianism. And they will follow that path all the way to where it ends: in history’s unmarked grave of discarded lies. And for those who seek to advance their aims by inducing terror and slaughtering innocents, we say to you now that, ‘our spirit is stronger and cannot be broken. You cannot outlast us, and we will defeat you.’

Bush’s words stop at ‘discarded lies’ (from his 20 September 2001 address to Congress); Obama’s conclude the paragraph (from his 2009 inaugural address). Stylistically, Bush and Obama are different; substantively, they are the same.
Obama's wars

Our second level of analysis is the wars Obama has fought or been complicit in the fighting. We might not at first think of war-making as a good test of liberal credentials. And yet the historical record affords us far more examples of Democratic war-making - and thus of various forms of liberal militarism - than of Republican-conservative ones. The great Democrat presidents of the twentieth century were all war leaders: Woodrow Wilson in World War I, Franklin Roosevelt in World War II, Harry Truman in Korea, Kennedy and Johnson in Vietnam. Bill Clinton, if not great, was certainly a profligate warrior: in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Iraq (attacking the last on at least four occasions).

American liberalism as a political ideology has been tested in foreign war far more routinely than American conservatism or realism. How do we measure Obama's liberalism against this record? Consistent with the argument of this chapter, what we see in Obama's war-making is a blending of liberal and realist approaches. Obama does not - and never has - decried war, per se. He is not a pacifist. But since 2009 he has waged war cognizant of the limits - moral and logistical - of US power.

In the war on terror, despite abandoning that title, Obama has pursued a strategy consistent with his predecessor's. Indeed, Klaïdman (2012) and Sanger (2012) each acknowledged Obama's more targeted and cost-effective belligerence in comparison with the large-scale wars of George W. Bush - which Obama is in the process of concluding. After a period of prolonged deliberation (see Woodward 2010) Obama increased (or 'surged') US troops in Afghanistan, taking the total deployed from 18,000 in 2005 (under Bush), to 57,000 in 2009, to 95,000 in 2010. (The impending withdrawal through 2014 will likely leave a residual force of some several thousand. Obama withdrew all US troops from Iraq at the end of 2011.)

The central battles of Bush's war on terror were thus concluded by his successor. By deescalating, Obama was adhering as much to a realist prescription as to a liberal one. Most realists were opposed to the Iraq intervention in 2003 and repeatedly called for an end to the Afghan occupation after the Taliban revealed a determination to fight it. It seems Obama's actions in both wars met a realist test, to forsake what was unachievable, rather than a liberal one, to guarantee a democratic character to the regimes US troops would leave behind.

Obama's realism echoed that of George H.W. Bush who had resisted long-term occupation of Muslim lands. Obama's foreign policy also replicates some of the central concerns of Dwight Eisenhower. In 1953, Ike inherited a controversial war in Korea (as Obama did in Iraq in 2009). Thereafter, the new president sought to limit further large-scale military actions, successfully avoiding war over Hungary and Egypt in 1956 and Vietnam after 1954. When war came in South East Asia, it was fought by Democratic presidents (Kennedy and then Johnson) for far more liberal than realist reasons. The Ike-Obama analogy holds if we construe Obama's military minimalism (withdrawing from wars, targeting individual terrorists rather than the socio-political systems that produce them) as an effort to temper the liberal underpinnings of American interventionism.

However, Obama's wars might alternatively be construed as the next in a series of liberal campaigns by US presidents with the aim of altering or abolishing the regimes holding sway over Muslim populations. The long war with Iraq (1990-2011) intended to change the character of Arab government. In 1986, Reagan attempted regime change in Libya, which Obama was ultimately successful in achieving. This does not have to be accepted as the central motive of US post-cold war involvement in the Middle East - economic and strategic reasons undoubtedly played a part. But every president from Ronald Reagan to Barack Obama has attempted to change the character of the regimes under which significant numbers of Muslims live. From the covert war against the USSR in Afghanistan and liberation of Kuwait, to wars on Serbia and interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, American foreign policy has succeeded in overthrowing a number of problematic regimes that were suppressing Islamic interests.
Thus far, as of the time of writing, Obama has baulked at extending this inclination into the Syrian battlefield. But the pressure for him to do so remains a liberal one. Realists consistently counsel caution - John McCain is a notable exception - whereas many liberals advocate war for humanitarian reasons. The war against Gaddafi was framed in similar terms: realists against (including Obama's secretary of defence), liberals for (including his first and second secretaries of state). Obama justified his support of an ostensibly British and French intervention on the basis not of Gaddafi's threat to US safety but to 'our interests and values'. The mechanism was to be multilateral, declared Obama, 'to mobilize the international community for collective action' (Obama 2011).

The Libyan intervention was a just war in a liberal sense. It was a war not for American security but for American values. Stephen Carter argues that this is as attractive (because value-based) as it is troubling (because therefore more violent):

[Obama's] assertions of executive authority to prosecute warfare seem to me significantly broader than those of his predecessor... President Bush, to take a single example, never claimed the power to target American citizens for assassination. President Obama has. He has also expanded the battlefield, both geographically and technologically, and is prosecuting America's wars with a stunning ferocity (Carter 2011: preface).

George W. Bush's military interventionism was at least tempered by a professed humility - a signature theme of his campaign in 2000. When the United States invaded Afghanistan and Iraq, his administration deployed too few rather than too many troops. Obama, in Stephen Carter's conception, has no such handicap. He believes, as Bush never did, in the power of politics and of government. Obama has a clear sense of what constitutes a just war. His foreign policy liberalism is of the expansive and violent kind, and thus in the tradition of FDR, Truman, JFK, and LBJ rather than of George McGovern and Jimmy Carter.

**Obama's personnel**

How far does Obama's foreign policy team represent a liberal ascendancy? His first term secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, had the 16th most liberal voting record in the Senate in 2007. His second term secretary of state, John Kerry, was the 'most liberal' senator in 2003 and fifth most liberal in 2012 (see http://votesmart.org/interest-group/1868/rating/4778?of=rating#.USB1rqUtQpk and Clinton et al., 2004).

The appointment, in succession, of two powerful Democratic senators to the State Department suggest a liberal hegemony at the heart of Obama's foreign policy. However, our experience of the George W. Bush administration suggests a certain caution about finding one label to capture an entire administration's approach. Notions of a liberal seizure of control are as problematic as of a neoconservative one under Bush. The more appropriate question is what kind of liberalism informs the Obama administration's strategy? John Kerry resides on the hawkish side of the spectrum. Despite equivocations over an American military role in Syria, he has been a consistent advocate of US force: in Bosnia in 1995, Kosovo in 1999, and Iraq in 2003. In 2011, he argued for war on Gaddafi's Libya before Obama came round to this position. Although Kerry first came to national prominence as an opponent of the Vietnam war, his subsequent diplomacy displays a preference for liberal military interventionism of the sort which led to the South East Asian quagmire (see Halberstam 1969). And Hillary Clinton during this period was a Barry Goldwater Republican - the candidate who wanted to escalate the war in Vietnam more than his Democrat opponent.

Caricatures of the Obama administration as the preserve of pusillanimous internationalists miss the flexible adherence to international law which has been basic to much of its statecraft. Obama has deferred to alliances - such as Britain and France over Syria - but less so to
international law. His initial foreign policy team contained key George W. Bush administration realists, such as Robert Gates as secretary of defence, or Bush-appointed officials, such as John Brennan as CIA director and David Petraeus as commander of US forces in Afghanistan. Obama's foreign policy has subsequently been far more diffuse and diverse than ideologically doctrinaire.

American liberalism has produced highly various foreign policy forms. Vice President Joe Biden, a traditional left-wing Democrat on social issues, has been a consistent advocate of armed intervention abroad. He was key to demonizing Serbia in 1999 before President Clinton attacked it. As chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee he helped ensure public support for the 2003 Iraq war. American liberalism since 9/11 accounts for both a pacifistic Stop the War coalition but also key proponents of the US wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and possibly Syria. While the legacy of George McGovern is strong on the left-wing of the Democratic Party, its leaders in the White House and Congress reveal a liberal hawkishness that McGovern eschewed. Al Gore, seconded only by his 2000 running mate Joe Lieberman, was throughout the 1990s the most consistent and vociferous advocate of military action against Saddam Hussein. In 1998, they and Bill Clinton guaranteed passage of the Iraq Liberation Act which made regime change official government policy - fulfilled by George W. Bush. Clinton and Gore attacked Serbia in 1999 without a UN resolution, flouting international law in a manner repeated by Bush in 2003.

In several respects, therefore, it is an operating assumption of liberal IR theory which implicitly informs the diplomacy of several key Obama personnel. State character explains foreign policy and can alter the national interest calculations of states. Change that character, as in Serbia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya and interests change too. This assumption is in contradistinction to realist IR theory which tends to see interests as relatively fixed; a state, irrespective of its form of government, will have perennial interests. Russian foreign policy, for example, was changed but not transformed by the end of the Soviet Union. Socialist or post-socialist, Moscow has seen its near-abroad in broadly consistent terms: as an arena that should be as immune to US penetration - under the guise of NATO for example - as possible.

Tony Smith has argued that the greater culprit for the botched interventionism of the Bush years is American liberalism. It was liberal theorists who depicted the world as ripe for United States-led democracy promotion (see Smith 2007, 2013). Has Obama confirmed this argument? In some respects, yes. Obama did not denude his cabinet of liberal hawks. Instead, he adapted American liberalism to the realities of contemporary counterterrorism. He retained key Bush personnel and greatly increased reliance on drones to negate terrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan where Bush had tried regime change. Obama routinely decided whom to target for extra-judicial assassination in this theatre. His authority to do so was justified by the expansive grant of presidential power given to President Bush by Congress after 9/11. The New York Times referred to this as 'Obama's turn in Bush's bind' (Baker 2013) - a bind invoking much less liberal censure than when Bush was commander-in-chief. As Stephen Carter (2011) has observed, 'On matters of national security, at least, the Oval Office evidently changes the outlook of its occupant far more than the occupant changes the outlook of the Oval Office'.

**Conclusion: A Liberal Second Term?**

Defining Obama's foreign policy liberalism is not straightforward. As argued in this chapter, he is a liberal more like Ronald Reagan than like George McGovern. Obama made the connection between state character and external behaviour but, like Reagan, used a minimalist strategy to change the character of states. Reagan did not make war with the Mujahedeen against Moscow. Instead, he pursued a counter-intervention using anti-Soviet forces as a proxy. Obama did not make war on Gadaffi so much as aid and abet ('from behind') those willing to do so. He avoided full-scale war and in doing so presented himself as a foreign policy realist. But
he nevertheless intervened, betraying liberal impulses. Obama's foreign policy is thus a hybrid of competing and sometimes complementary approaches. It does not rise to the level of a doctrine but it does illustrate key parts of several prior doctrines.

His foreign policy liberalism is a blending of Reagan's policing approach with Clinton's interventionism. Reagan chose to police Soviet adventurism rather than face it in the field. He showed a remarkable capacity to engage with the Kremlin after its expansionist ardour dissipated. Bill Clinton, in contrast, was a serial interventionist - deploying 'military forces eighty-four times in eight years', by one historian's count (Herring 2008: 936). And yet both presidents were highly attuned to the nexus of state character and external action. This liberal assumption guided their foreign policies. It guides Barack Obama's in similar fashion.

There are three important constraints checking Obama's foreign policy liberalism. The first is an international one. There was an assumption at the beginning of Obama's second term that the president, unshackled from the constrictions of presidential electoral politics, could revert to type. He could become more expansively 'progressive' and create a legacy of liberal internationalism and institutionalism. Republicans feared this, Democrats hoped for it - both expected it. And yet these hopes and fears seem to have been misplaced. Obama has been no more able to render the international community useful to the cause of counter-terrorism and democracy promotion than was his predecessor. The Syrian civil war, like the Iraq civil war after 2003, revealed a United Nations unable and unwilling to halt the violence. Russia and China remain bastions of negation. Iran and North Korea have continued to defy international law.

The second constraint is historical. History suggests that presidents become more pragmatic and less ideological in their second term. Reagan, Clinton, and George W. Bush -Obama's immediate two-term predecessors - each developed highly pragmatic second-term foreign policies. Reagan went from cold warrior to champion of cooperative engagement with the Soviet Union. Clinton abandoned 'foreign policy as social work' (Mandelbaum 1996) and instead focused on achievable objectives. Bush moved from a freedom agenda to a narrower, corrective realism. We might also include in this list the one-term Jimmy Carter. His ambitious, inchoate, human rights emphasis in his first two years in office gave way to a renewed arms race with Moscow in the last two. In each case, a hopeful initial phase gave way to a more realistic and pragmatic later one. Obama may well be able to bend this tradition but he is unlikely to defy it.

The third constraint is institutional. Obama must make his foreign policy in the face of concerted domestic opposition. Unless the 2014 midterms return significant Democrat majorities - and historical precedent suggests this is highly unlikely - Obama will be obliged to craft a foreign policy legacy in partnership with a majority of legislators willing his failure. A liberal unchained is far less likely to make headway than a pragmatic president prepared to compromise with his conservative opponents. He is thus likely to become less rather than more liberal in his approach.

The irony, of course, is that this state of affairs is what liberalism as a theory of international relations reasons is basic to foreign policymaking. Realism dismisses the connection between domestic politics and foreign policy; states tend to adopt similar survival strategies regardless of their internal character. Liberalism, however, argues that the surest guide to external action is internal design and function. Democracies view the world differently from dictatorships and construct their foreign policies accordingly. Liberal relativism, on the other hand, tends to relegate difference and promote conceptions of moral equivalency; there are no good and bad states, just different ones.

Barack Obama is in some sense trapped within this liberal dichotomy. If he can be said to be advancing a theory of international relations, it is one which prizes the character of American power - limited government, freedom of speech and of trade. But Obama is also the product of 1960s 'Great Society' liberalism which sought to ground US foreign policy in a cultural relativism; if American society is no better than that of its opponents, war on its behalf is both unjust and unnecessary - why fight? The United Nations, as the great forum for the equality of
nations, is morally better equipped to take the lead in conflict resolution. America should take a backseat. In Libya, Obama acted according to a liberal theory of international relations - determining that Gaddafi led a malign regime that deserved overthrow. In Syria, Obama deferred to international egalitarianism and refused to override UN resistance to western military intervention. The sustainability of this schizophrenia at the heart of his foreign policy remains an open question.

Notes

1 Obama, 20 November 2006.
4 Obama, 21 May 2009.

Suggested further reading


References


Obama, Barack (2009a) Remarks at NATO Summit, Strasbourg, France, 4 April.


Obama, Barack (2009c) Nobel Prize speech, Oslo, Norway, 10 December.

Obama, Barack (2011) Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Libya, Washington DC, 28 March.


