



Is there an “Obama Doctrine”?

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Years from now, historians may well write that the decline or upswing in the American empire of liberty occurred during the Obama presidency. They will either write that the Obama administration's self-fulfilling prophecy and rhetoric of decline was overcome by the overwhelming greatness of the United States or that the ultimate downfall was caused by the conditions created by this White House.

Today, the country's expert and pundit classes are obsessed, first and foremost, with the absurd autopilot of sequestration designed to protect us from adult decision-making. As a distant second, media make some mention of the pressing national security issue of the day: The use of drones in fighting what was formerly known as the “war on terrorism.” Both issues describe this presidency writ large, highlighting the desire to avoid clear and direct decisions, mixed with an overreliance on a peculiar and unmanned technology. It is a White House on programmed reflex.

A question that I have been asked on more occasions than I care to remember is whether President Obama, in fact, has a national security doctrine. Three schools of thought exist on this matter.

The first view is, at first glance, quite glib: There is a doctrine, and it can be labeled ABB — Anything But Bush. However, before we completely dismiss this attitude, one should keep in mind that the Obama camp rejected unilateralism, pre-emption, democracy promotion, prevention and, generally, the global war on terrorism. These were the pillars of American grand strategy under President Bush and the administration has struggled mightily (often to the detriment to the country) to wrest itself from the Bush legacy. The second school of thought denies the existence of an Obama Doctrine altogether. His supporters have argued that he did not need one, so he could remain light and lethal, unconstrained by the prisons of declarations and pronouncements. The president's detractors, meanwhile, state that mass confusion and anxiety over national security issues is evidence of absence.

The third school, and the one that seems to make the most sense, posits that an Obama Doctrine does exist, albeit in a form that is too messy and murky to detail fully. Rather, the Obama Doctrine represents a cobbled-together robot that issues platitudes and seeks penance. Like Presidents Carter and Clinton before him, Mr. Obama has exhibited a disdain or disinterest in this singularly important aspect of the presidency. The two campaigns that elected him president were ones where the media allowed national security and foreign policy to be pushed to the back burner, rearing their heads only sporadically.

There was a moment when this could have changed. Mr. Obama, comfortable with his electoral victory, could have proved the critics wrong and set the stage for real leadership in national security. This moment, of course, was the State of the Union address.

Instead, what did the American people receive? A laundry list, tacked on pro forma, made up of vague posturing: We heard that we “need” to end the war in Afghanistan by telegraphing our withdrawal worldwide. Mr. Obama blisteringly called on the totalitarians of Pyongyang to meet their international obligations. There was the continued declaration that Iran will face a serious coalition of negotiation. And finally, the strong desire to disarm our nuclear arsenal. The Anything But Bush School received a shot in the arm by the president's inability to mention the global war on terrorism, the 60,000 Syrian dead or the aggressive moves made by China in the Pacific. If there was a grand strategy, it was the embrace of a sort of neo-isolationism. Yet this was countered by resurrecting the Bush team's desire for more free-trade agreements, and Mr. Obama's support of a trans-Pacific partnership.

What are we left with at the start of the president's second term? We are where we started, with a disjointed doctrine, vague strategy and ambiguity held at high altar. Mr. Obama effectively has patched together four prior presidential doctrines to form his own. He channels Nixon to achieve his burden-sharing, colloquially known these days as “leading from behind.” He invokes Mr. Carter's multilateralism for the sake of same, and as a counter to charges of American exceptionalism. Mr. Clinton's vision is summoned for its risk-averse nature, its faith in globalization and its worship of technocracy over ideals.

Ironically, though, the only success that the president has had in national security and foreign policy is where he had been unable to shake the spirit of George W. Bush. The Bush years have granted the U.S. government now the breathing room to engage in greater counterterrorism operations and a chance to establish a permanent presence in the Arab world and Central Asia. But this “Bush Lite” strategy has been embraced only out of a sense of inertia and the harsh encroachment of reality.

The areas where one lets Obama be Obama demonstrate the most dangerous results for strategy. The goals seem to be tactical: more treaties, adherence to more international organizations, an emphasis on soft power and greater diplomatic “restraint.” We have seen a souring of relations with nations such as the United Kingdom, Japan, Poland and Israel, a blind eye to Russian, Chinese and Iranian aggression, obsequiousness before the United Nations, and a glossing over of the grossest human rights violations in places such as North Korea, Sudan, China and Syria. Simultaneously, Mr. Obama's reversal of grand strategy regarding the use of nuclear forces has been nothing short of breathtaking, signaling a reluctance to use the very weapons that have kept enemies at bay.

The key to the Obama Doctrine is the need to “rebalance American commitments,” code for managing our decline. His doctrine is more about process than strategy. When he does speak on national security, the president likes to say that he would intervene if America's vital or national interests were at stake. However, in more four years, he has never once fully articulated what he believes those to be.

If the United States is to continue to claim its exceptional place in the annals of humankind, it has no choice but to be the only sword and shield for these. A president who fails his duty here has failed not only Americans, but all mankind. The president could still turn this ship around and embrace both the pragmatic and idealist destiny of his country. It will be his choice how history reads his presidency and this crossroads in our American epic.