

# Obama Foreign Policy Doctrine: Preparing America to Succeed in Multipolar World

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## Abstract

The article aims to explain the foreign policy doctrine of the Barack Obama administration, describe the core principles and assumptions it is based on and in this context, analyze the concrete steps it undertook in international relations.

It is well-known that Barack Obama's foreign policy is based on an important recognition. Namely, the world has become much more multipolar today than it was even ten years ago. This means that America can no longer be the only state that dictates its order to the world. Therefore, America should no longer be the only state responsible for providing the global "public goods" as well. However, world still needs the US's leadership. Today, America is the only state that possesses the necessary power and influence to lead in dealing with the issues, such as the maintenance of the open and stable economic system, climate change and global warming, nuclear proliferation, the fight against international crime etc., and succeed in involving all relevant global players in the process as they are common for all. The US leadership, as well as the peaceful evolution of the international order depends on how America succeeds to engage the world's leading states into the cooperation for resolution of these issues. The most important challenge for the United States in the 21st century, however, will be the reforming of the current world order that is a kind of a hierarchical liberal institutionalism, based on the American hegemony, experiencing a legitimacy crisis in today's world. In this way America will, for the third time in its existence, continue to lead in the formation of an international order that will be an open, rule-based, evolutionary form of the liberal institutionalism, where the newly emerging powers will manage to pursue their vital interests and this fact, together with American leadership will be the guarantor for the stability of the new international order.

**Keywords:** Obama foreign policy doctrine, liberal institutionalism, evolution of liberal institutionalism, multipolar world, America in multipolar world, American hegemony

## Introduction

Much controversy surrounds the current US foreign policy. In comparison to Bush's unilateral foreign policies, Obama's foreign policy record proves inspiring and hopeful. Domestically, administration supporters evaluate his approach as calculating and pragmatic. His political opponents, however, claim that the United States under Barack Obama is "less assertive, less dominant, less power-minded, less focused on the American people's particular interests, and less concerned about preserving U.S. freedom of action." (Feith, 2011) The domestic political opponents usually blame the president for his conciliatory policy in international relations, which some perceive as a retreat and weakness, as well as for his willingness to join a number of international treaties that in their opinion would undermine the freedom of action of the US, and therefore, its sovereignty. The recent events in Libya highlight these accusations of weakness, as Obama's critics described the president's decision to intervene in Libya only with the approval of the Arab League and the UN Security Council as "leading from the back" or "keeping the United States within the bounds set by the United Nations Security

Council." (Feith, 2011)

The article aims to explain the foreign policy doctrine of the Barack Obama administration, describe the core principles and assumptions it is based on and in this context, analyze the concrete steps it undertook in international relations.

## Theoretical Backgrounds

It is well-known that Barack Obama's foreign policy is based on an important recognition. Namely, the world has become much more multipolar today than it was even ten years ago. This means that America can no longer be the only state that dictates its order to the world. Therefore, America should no longer be the only state responsible for providing the global "public goods" as well. At his West Point speech, in May 2010, Obama declared that "The United States cannot act alone in the world," adding that "the burdens of this century cannot fall on our soldiers alone. It also cannot fall on American shoulders alone ... the United States must strengthen existing alliances and build new partnerships." (Text of Obama's Speech to West Point 2010 Cadets, 2010)

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The current foreign policy of the US is based on the analysis of this century's changing international system and the ongoing processes in international relations that by their nature are completely different from what the world has already experienced. These changes are not simply explained with the decline of American power or the so called "rise of the rest". Rather, they are the result of the more fundamental changes in the international system caused by the unique events and processes that are indicative of the 21<sup>st</sup> century realities.

The power of the US is declining but it is still the only country that controls the global commons and is able to project its force worldwide. The main question focuses on what can be constituted as power in this century that enables states to influence the processes and achieve desirable outcomes. It is paradoxical but in our information era when we have access to all kind of data for evaluating the power of almost every state we cannot even determine how many poles there are in current international system. As the American scholar, Joseph S. Nye Jr. admits, "World politics today is like a three-dimensional chess game. At the top level, military power among states is unipolar; but at the middle level, of interstate economic relations, the world is multipolar and has been so for more than a decade. At the bottom level, of transnational relations (involving such issues as climate change, illegal drugs, pandemics, and terrorism), power is chaotically distributed and diffuses to non-state actors." (Nye, 2009)

When we talk about power in our century, all the advantages that the US possess in terms of military power, should be discussed in terms of its capability to be translated in bargaining power over the wide range of issues of global politics. American military power by itself does not contain a threat for those countries that are supposed to be considered as poles in coming multipolar world. First of all, here are implied the so-called BRICs: Brazil, Russia, India and China, which possess vast territories and populations, and with the exception of Brazil, all possess nuclear weapons as well. Given these circumstances, there is virtually no possibility the US will be involved in armed conflict with any of the mentioned states. Therefore, with respect to these countries, the ability of the US military power to be transformed into the bargaining power reduces, but does not disappear. As Nye puts it, "in today's information age, success is the result not merely of whose army wins but also of whose story wins". (Nye, 2009) In such reality, the US should strengthen the attractiveness of its soft power and in combination with its hard power, turn it into what is called as a smart power.<sup>1</sup> This will be possible only if the US is able to convince the rest of the world that cooperation is a symbiotic and mutually advantageous arrangement.

The Obama administration recognizes both the strength and limitations of American power and pragmati-

cally highlights its real capabilities. Accordingly, the current US administration is aware of the reality, that despite the fact it still remains the only superpower (and, in terms of military power, its superiority is not going to be endangered even in the next decades) it can no longer act as a unilateral hegemon. However, the US can influence international events if it manages to convince other countries that cooperation is in the best interest of maintaining liberal institutions that represent the bedrock of 21<sup>st</sup> century international relations. Reinforcing and strengthening these institutions will simultaneously allow the United States to maintain its leadership position.

Another change the Obama foreign policy is based on is that the current order that is a kind of hierarchical liberal institutionalism, based on the American hegemony, is no longer adequate for today's world. It is more and more often recognized that the current form of the liberal institutionalism that was established after the World War II, is experiencing a legitimacy crisis and is no longer able to deal with the challenges of our century.

If in the Cold War era being under the US shield was welcomed by the capitalist world, circumstances have changed after it has ended. Until the threats coming from the Soviet empire were real for the members of the capitalist world, the US was allowed to act as a hegemon at the expense of providing security guarantees for them. This means that the US was actually "buying" the right to have a unilateral foreign policy from the rest of the world for the cost of security assistance guarantees. After the end of the Cold War, on the one hand, the threats coming from the Soviet Union disappeared, as a result of which the "redemption" of the right for unilateral actions became difficult for the US. On the other hand, after the engagement in the open, liberal, rule-based, more or less peaceful international relations, a number of states started to gain power. The rising states started to struggle for pursuing their interests that quite often, were in contradiction with America's interests. Amid these developments, problems of legitimacy were raised about the institutions of the liberal world order that were created after the World War II and were based on the realities of that period. Today the major problem of these institutions lies in the absence of representativeness that would reflect the current distribution of power in the world.

American scholar, John Ikenberry,<sup>2</sup> in his article "Liberal Internationalism 3.0: America and the Dilemmas of Liberal World Order" describes the events, that have further intensified the legitimacy crisis of the current world order. According to Ikenberry, gradual shifts in the global system are two-fold. On the one hand, he points out the unfolding of human rights and "responsibility to protect" revolution and on the other hand, the opportunities for non-state actors or transnational gangs of individuals, to acquire weapons of mass destruction, as a result of which it

is now the weakness of states and their inability to enforce laws and order within their own societies that provide the most worrisome dangers to the international system. Due to these shifts, the international community is seen as having a legitimate interest in what goes on within countries. The result is gradual erosion in norms of state sovereignty which means that the international system has created a new 'license' for powerful states to intervene in the domestic affairs of weak and troubled states. (Ikenberry, 2009) Meanwhile, independent actions of some powerful states when it comes to interfering in the internal affairs of any other state, do not have a degree of legitimacy and therefore, are reasons for disagreements and dissatisfactions among the international society. As an example we can bring the case of the US intervention in Iraq.

Based on these developments, Ikenberry suggests that as the liberal international order will increasingly find itself concerned with the internal governance of states, the international community is going to need capacities and legitimate authority to intervene in weak and troubled states. (Ikenberry, 2009) And the high degree of legitimacy can only enjoy those institutions where all the major states of contemporary world are represented.

While, as a result of the ongoing processes in the world, the basis of liberal institutionalism as a current form of world order is being shaken, incentives and pressures are emerging for its reorganization. Barack Obama's administration could, on the one hand, recognize (but not articulate, due to domestic political situation) the simple reality that any world order that is based on the domination of one nation over the others, is doomed to fail. On the other hand, the administration sees the natural flows in international relations, following which leads to the reconstruction of existing international institutions. In such circumstances, if the US will try to stay as a hegemon and dominant, it will endanger the liberal institutionalism, as a form of the world order as a whole. While, if it acts not as a dominant but as *primus inter pares*, it will be able to ensure the maintenance of liberal institutionalism by its transformation in such a way that the interests of rising states will be taken into account.

Thus, if the United States wants to maintain its leadership in the frames that the current world order allows, it has to subordinate to the new requirements of the order that it once created. If the US leads the natural flows for the evolution of the world order, it will have to give up certain privileges and with them, certain obligations as well. However, it can remain a leader in forming the agenda of international relations and that is the role that the US will have to play for quite a long time. Through the observations of the latest developments in the world (e.g. the Arab Spring), it became obvious that the so called rising powers are not ready to take responsibility for the events that take place outside their borders unless their vital interests are

endangered. This reality is not supposed to change in the coming decade as well. Therefore, the world needs flexible leadership from the United States that should be expressed in the formation of agenda and subsequently, in convincing the major players to cooperate in its implementation.

It is noteworthy, that the current world order promotes the deeper cooperation among the states. In his paper "Interpolar World: a New Scenario," Giovanni Grevi<sup>3</sup>, a scholar at the EU Institute for Security Studies, formulates the theory of the modern international system that he considers as "interpolar". As the author explains, the term "interpolar" involves not only the existence of an international system where there are more than two poles, but also implies a strong interdependency between the poles. According to Grevi, the interpolar system creates basis for the convergence of interests of main international actors and focuses on the frameworks and procedures that could help bring cooperative solutions to shared challenges. This has a very simple reason: there are expanding ranges of serious challenges that affect many countries while none of them, no matter how powerful, can unilaterally provide for its prosperity, stability and security. Therefore, the interpolar system puts the emphasis on cooperative solutions and collective security and focuses on the process and institutions by which the convergence of the main powers around common priorities can be fostered. (Grevi, 2009)

Current US administration realizes the necessity of cooperation with the global actors, including the rising powers, in order to deal with the major challenges of the contemporary world. As Hillary Clinton once said, "America cannot solve the most pressing problems on our own, and the world cannot solve them without America". (Nye, 2009) Now it is easy to understand the US administration that stresses "multipartnership" – the USA realizes that it cannot maintain world domination on its own. The US goal is to choose privileged partners in international relations in order to obtain support for its leadership. As an associate editor of the Financial Times and its chief political commentator, Philip Stephens notes, "if the US president realizes the margins of American power, he will be able to sustain it ... today we are facing a choice: either we should live in the world where powerful and influential states are limited with the frames of multilateral cooperation, or where the narrow national interests and aspirations result in confrontation". (Stephens, 2009)

#### **Reimagining America's Role in the World<sup>4</sup>**

Taking into consideration the above-described changes that are taking place in the international system, the Obama administration aims to reimagine the role and place of America in the new world order. The world still needs the US's leadership. Issues, such as the maintenance of the open and stable economic system, climate change

and global warming, nuclear proliferation, the fight against international crime – all require American leadership. Today, America is the only state that possesses the necessary power and influence to lead in dealing with the above mentioned issues and succeed in involving all relevant global players in the process as they are common for all. The US leadership, as well as the peaceful evolution of the international order depends on how America succeeds to engage the world's leading states into the cooperation for resolution of these issues.

When President Obama talks about American leadership, he recognizes that it is essential, but explains that “real leadership” means creating the conditions for others to step up. Leadership, as Obama puts it “does not mean acting alone — it means shaping the conditions for the international community to act together.” As to his mind, “leadership” usually refers to the act of taking initiative to drive an effort toward a valuable goal (U.S. Africa Command). Evaluating his presidency, in one of his recent interviews Obama describes his foreign policy doctrine: “It’s an American leadership that recognizes the rise of countries like China, India and Brazil. It’s a U.S. leadership that recognizes our limits in terms of resources and capacity. And yet what I think we’ve been able to establish is a clear belief among other nations that the United States continues to be the one indispensable nation in tackling major international problems.” (Zakaria, 2012)

Much of the conciliatory tone of the Obama administration is a result of the heritage with which it had to deal – complicated foreign politics and damaged reputation due to the unilateralistic actions of his predecessor that caused discontent even within the traditional allies of the US. Obama’s first task was to restore prestige of the United States, regain goodwill of its allies and seek partnerships for urgent tasks.

As the Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton puts it, the United States under Obama is a smart power, a participant in a “new era of engagement based on common interests, shared values, and mutual respect.” (U.S. Department of State, 2009) Clinton as well as the Obama administration as a whole is an advocate of the so called “smart power” that as she defines it, is “the full range of tools at our disposal – diplomatic, economic, military, political, legal, and cultural – picking the right tool, or combination of tools, for each situation.” (U.S. Department of State)

Interestingly enough, the Obama administration detaches power in its traditional sense from influence and believes that the more the United States is respected in the world, the more diplomatic power it acquires. Foreign Policy magazine, that has awarded Barack Obama the second place among the 100 global thinkers for the “reimagining America’s role in the world”, gives interesting evaluation of his presidency: “with his “smart power” mantra, the man who commands the world’s most powerful military has di-

versified the United States’ arsenal of foreign-policy tools by listening. He spoke to the Muslim world from Cairo, smoothed over a rift with Europe, and reached out to recalcitrant rogue states.” (Foreign Policy’s first annual list of the top 100 global thinkers)

The Obama administration believes that for America’s image in the world (and therefore, its soft power), it is essential that its actions on the world stage have legitimacy that can only be granted through the authorization of international institutions. Keeping in mind the Iraq experience, Obama’s actions in case of Libya absolutely opposed of those of his predecessor’s. First, Obama made sure that opposition in Libya that demanded the removal of Kaddafi was a considerable force, which guaranteed that America would not be blamed in acting without considering the opinion of local population. In this case, the foreign intervention was required and approved by locals. Second, he took care of the legitimacy of America’s intervention in a sovereign country. For this reason, America entered the country only after the authorization of the UN Security Council. Third, the Obama administration, conscious of America’s image in Muslim world, had to ensure that its intervention in Libya would not be labeled as Western intervention in the Muslim land. Therefore, the US gained regional legitimacy through the approval of Arab League, some members of which had even joined the coalition. Finally, the United States made its European allies acknowledge that intervention in Libya was more in their interests than in American; therefore, they would have to constitute a large part of the coalition and fund a large share of its expenses. As a result, if we do not consider one part of domestic opposition who were criticizing Obama for “leading from behind”, there was no one else who would blame the US for its action: on the international stage, the intervention had the widest possible legitimacy and there was no one to blame America for imperialistic intentions, while on the domestic stage the lack of dissatisfaction was due to law costs<sup>5</sup> of the intervention and no American casualties.

When Obama was accused in subordinating the US freedom of action to international institutions, he declared that he “will never hesitate to use our military swiftly, decisively, and unilaterally when necessary”. (Feith, 2011) Indeed, when Obama saw America’s vital interests endangered, he has never stepped back from the use of hard power and has been even tougher than his predecessor. On the one hand, through special operations, he shot most Al-Qaeda leaders living in Pakistan, including Bin Laden. On the other hand, as he saw that Iran was not going to negotiate, that has excluded the possibility to neutralize the threats of its nuclear program without serious pressure, Obama has managed to gain international support for imposing tighter sanctions on Iran. In this way, Obama managed to reconcile Israel that was much more skeptical about him before. As Fareed Zakaria notes in his article “The Strategist”, the

fact that Chinese and Russians signed on to new sanctions against Iran at the U.N., as well as the fact that Washington's European and East Asian allies have gone further in cutting off economic ties with Iran, would not have happened without significant multilateral diplomacy. (Zakaria, 2012)

While talking about the Arab Spring, Fareed Zakaria highlights Obama's excellent ability to prescience events that enabled him to conclude that the democracy protests had become unstoppable and the regimes were doomed. This gave him an opportunity to place the US in the right side of a historical wave. Therefore, Egyptians would know that whether they succeed or fail on their path, it is because of themselves, and not Washington. Besides, as Zakaria notes, the Obama administration could successfully distinguished Iran's Green movement from the Arab Spring. The White House quickly concluded that the movement would not be able to succeed and limited itself with rhetorical support only that enabled Washington not to escalate already tense relationships with the current Iranian administration which was supposed to stay in power after the wave was over. (Zakaria, 2012)

The Obama administration is closely following the power redistribution process in the world, according to which a gradual, but stable rise of the Far East is observed. Naturally, this process is accompanied by outlining of such rising states as China and India. The first actively strives for the leadership on the mainland, while the latter tries to fit the role of a leader of the developing world that was well observed during the Doha summits. According to the assessment of Zbigniew Brzezinski, China can significantly diminish American role on the mainland of Far East. However, he explains that it is not likely to lead to anything remotely similar to a politically motivated war. It's more an ongoing bargaining and adjustment as China fits itself into the new system. (Brzezinski Z. a., 2008)

Despite the existence of conflict of interests between the US and the rising powers in a number of areas, it is important to acknowledge that none of these states will try to overthrow the open, rule-based liberal world order. This is natural, as the existing system has created favorable conditions for their development. They will only fight for the expansion of their rights within this system through increasing of their participation in international institutions (and therefore, increasing their participation in the decision-making process). If we, for example, look at China, which as many believe is the main competitor of the United States in the 21st century, we will see that its development totally depends on the existence of the open, liberal system. China, more than any other states needs an open world, where it will buy raw materials and export its production later. Therefore, the existence of stable, rule-based and open world order is vitally important for China's development.

Obama administration analyzes this reality. Besides, it is well aware of China's aspirations for leadership on the mainland. The difficulty of the Washington's task lies in the fact that on the one hand, it must try to maintain maximum influence in the region while on the other hand, its presence there should not be perceived too acutely by China as a kind of containment policy against it. As Obama describes the US politics towards China, America has "sent a clear signal that we are a Pacific power that we will continue to be a Pacific power. But we've done this all in the context of a belief that a peacefully rising China is good for everybody. The only thing we've insisted on, as a principle in that region, is everybody's got to play by the same set of rules. That's not unique to China. That's true for all of us."

The US's moderate presence in the Far East is acceptable for the whole region as it seeks to ensure balance between China and Japan. As Brent Scowcroft<sup>6</sup> describes, the United States "not only reassures China against Japan, and Japan that we are still there when they need us, it also gives breathing room to the rest of the Asia. Without that US presence and the balance it provides, they might feel as though they have to choose between Japan and China. That's a choice none of them wants to make." (Brzezinski Z. a., 2008)

Finally, the Obama administration could manage to establish a constructive working relationship with Russia, which was strained during the Bush administration. Despite the often voiced doubts about Russia's non-reliability, the "reset" of relationships did have tangible positive results (The White House). First of all, as the general working atmosphere was improved, two countries could peacefully shape the issues where they can cooperate and where they must "agree to disagree".<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

Barack Obama's foreign policy doctrine, as has already been mentioned, is based on the understanding of the changes taking place in global politics that originate in the reconstruction of the current world order according the current power redistribution in the international system. Outlines of the new multipolar world are being shaped, where, in order to succeed, the United States will have to redefine the meaning of American preeminence and to reimagine its role in the new world.

The Obama administration managed to redefine the concept of power, unifying in it any kinds of tools that could increase America's bargaining power. It also successfully accomplishes the redefinition of the notion of leadership from a hegemon, to a kind of an elder brother, which under its initiative, brings together the states facing the common challenges. Obama's profound analytical ability is revealed in his attempts to reengage even adversaries. As in the coming multipolar world, there will be

no alliances in their traditional, 19th century sense. Rather, there will be the ad hoc alliances where different states will cooperate for the resolution of different particular issues. Therefore, for a rational, pragmatic politician, there is no notion of a sworn enemy, as the majority of the challenges characteristic for our century, can be containing threat for every country and in this respect, need for cooperation on some concrete issues can be raised with any state. The United States certain comparative advantage over the other global actors lies in the possibility of raising such issues and obtaining the necessary support for their implementation. This will be a role, that the US should fit in during the 21st century and if it succeeds, then it has all necessary resources to carry out leadership in terms of formation and execution of the international agenda through the coming decades.

The current US administration realizes that as the rising powers will start challenging each other's unilateral actions, states will begin to move towards multilateral institutions which are supposed to be the only source for granting legitimacy to their actions. However, international institutions will themselves be lacking legitimacy before they become objectively representative according to the existing power distribution in the contemporary world. This first of all, implies the widening of such major international institutions, as the UN Security Council.

In the given circumstances, the most important challenge for the United States in the 21st century will be the reforming of the liberal institutionalism, as a form of the world order, on the bases of the natural flows towards its evolution. In this way America will, for the third time in its existence, continue to lead in the formation of an international order that will be an open, rule-based, evolutionary form of the liberal institutionalism, where the newly emerging powers will manage to pursue their vital interests and this fact, together with American leadership will be the guarantor for the stability of the new international order.

*dent Richard Nixon. He is President of The Scowcroft Group, an international business and financial advisory firm.*

*7. For example, in April 2010 Obama and Medvedev signed a new START agreement; President Obama and President Medvedev worked closely with other members of the UN Security Council to reach an agreement on UN Security Council Resolution 1929 that implied the most comprehensive set of sanctions against Iran to date; Russia joined the United States in supporting UN Security Council resolution 1874 in response to North Korea's nuclear test. The resolution tightened sanctions against North Korea; the U.S. and Russia have made significant progress in developing the common nonproliferation agenda; the Obama Administration has expanded the volume of supplies being shipped to our troops in Afghanistan through the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), thanks in part to Russia's agreement to allow ground and air transit for troops and supplies for Afghanistan through its territory etc. (The White House)*

1. *Smart power is a term in international relations defined by Joseph Nye as "the ability to combine hard and soft power into a winning strategy". (Nye J. S., In Mideast, the goal is 'smart power', 2006)*

2. *G. John Ikenberry is the Professor of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University in the Department of Politics and the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. He is the author of many different books and publications majority of which deal with the future of liberal institutionalism and the US role in international relations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.*

3. *Giovanni Grevi is Senior Research Fellow at the EU Institute for Security Studies, he deals with the development of the EU foreign and security policy, institutional questions and civilian crisis management.*

4. *Foreign Policy has awarded Barack Obama the second place among the 100 global thinkers for the "reimagining America's role in the world".*

5. *According to Fareed Zakaria, the direct costs of the Libya operation so far have been less than \$1 billion, about 0.1% of what has been spent on Iraq. (Zakaria, 2012)*

6. *Brent Scowcroft Served as National Security Advisor to Presidents George H. W. Bush and Gerald Ford, and as Military Assistant to Presi-*

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