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Obama's Rhetoric of Foreign Policy: A Doctrine of Strategic Balance

U.S. presidential rhetoric in 2014 is particularly steeped in international politics. Over the past few years, President Barack Obama has taken to the bully pulpit to justify U.S. responses to a myriad of foreign policy exigencies: militaristic re-engagement in Iraq, economic sanctions against Russia, military withdrawal from Afghanistan, peace negotiations between Israel and Hamas, drone strikes in Northern Africa, diplomatic relations with Iran, human rights violations in Syria, democratic obstacles in Egypt, and spying embarrassments in Germany. The diversity of President Obama's foreign policy responses – a from overt air attacks and covert drone strikes to economic sanctions and diplomatic engagements – has led his critics to question the coherence of his foreign policy vision. As *New York Times* reporter Peter Baker observed in July of 2014, the president's critics call his foreign policy decisions “ad hoc”, “parlay[zing]” the president and damaging “American leadership in the world” (2014a). The following month, James B. Steinberg, former deputy secretary of state under President Obama, wrote of “scratching... [his] head” over the president's foreign policy decisions in Iraq (Baker 2014b).

Within this essay, we seek to synthesize President Obama's doctrine on U.S. foreign policy by turning to his public messages. We contend that his rhetoric outlines a much more coherent and defensible doctrine than many political observers allow – a doctrine predicated on a sense of *strategic balance* between his political ideals and the national security threats.¹ That balance requires constant recalibration as the dangers on the ground shift in each regional conflict. Attempting to justify and balance firm political ideals (justice, peace, human rights, diplomacy,

1. We draw our conception of strategy from the scholarship of Lawrence Freedman. Freedman associates strategic thinking with war, politics, business, and other areas where a need arises to “think about actions in advance, in the light of our goals and our capacities.” For Freedman, strategic thinking is required when “there is actual or potential conflict, when interests collide and forms of resolution are required.” Importantly, Freedman also pinpoints the key role that persuasion plays in strategy building: “The purpose of such a strategic story is not solely to predict events but to convince others to act in such a way that the story will follow its proposed course.” See: Freedman 2013: 621.

national sovereignty, international cooperation) with evolving political realities (threats to national security and acts of genocide) represents a complicated rhetorical task for the president. In spite of the changing conditions in these world hot spots, Obama's rhetorical articulation of his foreign policy vision has remained relatively stable from his political campaigns through his terms in office. Yet, a policy predicated more on balance and complexity than dogma and certainty attracts critics from the political left and right.

The commitment of President George W. Bush to pre-emptive action, unilateral independence, and a brash enunciation of American exceptionalism served as a backdrop to Senator Obama's 2008 views on foreign affairs. (Parry-Giles 2008: 122-138) The Bush doctrine of pre-emption was outlined in "The National Security Strategy of the United States of America" from 2002, where the presidential administration determined that "as a matter of common sense and self-defense, America will act against such emerging threats before they are fully formed." (The National Security Strategy of the United States of America). The president's common refrains also made clear that the U.S. would take "unilateral" action with or without international support: "you are either with us or against us in the war on terrorism" (Bush 2001) and "America will never seek a permission slip to defend the security of our country"(Bush 2004). Such unilateralism angered the international community because of its expression of "cowboy diplomacy"; to act without U.N. support was especially condemned for its audaciousness (Cooper 2014: 234). And President Bush's expression of American exceptionalism further alienated many around the world: "This liberty we prize is not America's gift to the world; it is God's gift to humanity." (Bush 2003)

It was in the shadow of the Bush doctrine that Barack Obama first articulated his vision of U.S. foreign policy. As a candidate in the 2008 presidential race, Senator Obama sought to usher in a new era that put more emphasis on building "new bridges" internationally and promoting a "common humanity" globally. During his Berlin, Germany speech in July of 2008, the senator acknowledged the troubling perceptions of U.S. foreign policy worldwide: "the view that America is part of what has gone wrong in our world, rather than a force to help make it right, has become all too common." (Obama 2008a) He defined his foreign policy mission more fully in his August 2008 acceptance speech before the Democratic national convention in Denver, Colorado. President Obama made clear his devotion to strengthening U.S. national security through defense over preemption: "As commander-in-chief, I will never hesitate to defend this nation." Yet, he balanced military preparedness with a commitment to "direct diplomacy," even with such long-standing foes as Iran. In contrast to President Bush's unilateralism, he promised

to establish “partnerships to defeat the threats of the 21st century.”(Obama 2008b)²

By the time that President Obama returned to Berlin five years later as a second-term president, he would elaborate on this strategic balance between universal political ideals (peace and justice) and the need for global and national security. In his speech at the Brandenburg Gate on June 19, 2013, President Obama urged: “Peace with justice means pursuing the security of the world without nuclear weapons.” For the president, political balance meant remaining “vigilant about the threat of terrorism” while moving “beyond a mindset of perpetual war.” He made his commitment to strategic balance clear when he spoke of “balancing the pursuit of security with the protection of privacy.” (Obama 2013)

When President Obama made the decision to re-engage militarily in Iraq during August of 2014, he laid out a four-part political vision that reinforced a strategic balance between promoting national security and putting his political ideals into practice. First, he made clear that the U.S. will use force when American (and allied) security was at risk. In his August 9, 2014 statement on Iraq, the president argued: “If these terrorists threaten our facilities or our personnel, we will take action to protect our people.” (Obama 2014) Second, he asserted that the U.S. would provide humanitarian support to stave off human rights abuses. During an August 8, 2014, interview with Thomas L. Friedman of the *New York Times*, the president talked about the humanitarian aid the country was offering to the Kurdish refugees and others Iraqis displaced by ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and Levant): “When you have a unique circumstance in which genocide is threatened, and a country is willing to have us in there, you have a strong international consensus that these people need to be protected and we have a capacity to do so, then we have an obligation to do so.” (Friedman 2014) Third, he pledged a commitment to build coalitions and partnerships with international organizations and other countries. During the August 8 speech, President Obama reported: “The U.N. Security Council has called on the international community to do everything it can to provide food, water and shelter. And in my calls with allies and partners around the world, I’ll continue to urge them to join us in this humanitarian effort.” (Obama 2014) And fourth, he reaffirmed his commitment to “partnerships,” where the United States would aid those burgeoning democracies like Iraq whose leaders pledged sovereignty

2. We are making broad-stroke distinctions in the rhetoric of President George W. Bush and President Barack Obama. We have no doubt that President Bush was also committed to many of the political ideals that President Obama championed. Yet, our point is that President Bush articulated foreign policy aims that were weighted more toward U.S. nationalism over internationalism and national security over diplomacy and partnerships. Colin Dueck argues: “The initial shift in emphasis from Clinton to Bush was certainly toward American nationalism as well as hard-nosed realism in foreign affairs, but not toward increased interventionism abroad.” President Bush became much more interventionist after 9/11 where he fulfilled his campaign goals: “increased defense spending, military modernization, and national missile defense.” (See: Dueck 2010: 268, 270).

over their own governance and future. The president made the following claim on August 9:

We will be your partners, but we are not going to do it for you. We're not sending a bunch of U.S. troops back on the ground to keep a lid on things. You're going to have to show us that you are willing and ready to try and maintain a unified Iraqi government that is based on compromise.

President Obama's last answer clarified his delay in re-intervening in Iraq because of the hope that the Iraqis would take responsibility for their own defense. Libya served as President Obama's cautionary tale. Before intervening in any country, he wanted to ensure that the nation's leaders could assume control for its own governance once U.S. forces withdrew. For him, the decision to intervene militarily depended on the answer to the following question: "Do we have an answer [for] the day after?" (Friedman 2014)

President Obama's attempt to balance political ideals with national security exigencies met with harsh criticism from both the political left and right. From the left, he has been critiqued for being too slow to act on humanitarian issues in Syria, for refusing to close Guantanamo Bay, for his drone program, and for intelligence programs that violated civil liberties (see for example Moore 2014, Friedersdorf 2013, Byrd 2014, Becker and Shane 2012, Sarlin 2014). On the right, he has been attacked for not acting boldly enough in Syria, for being slow to act in Iraq, and for being tepid in his response to Russia; others have vilified him for dragging the country into political quagmires with no clear exit strategies (Moore 2014, Lee 2014, LaFranchi 2014, Bannon 2013). From both sides of the political spectrum, President Obama's foreign policy doctrine has been maligned as too "weak." (Abrams 2014) Representative John Boehner (R-OH), Speaker of the House, has also condemned the president for an "absence of a strategy" in his foreign policy actions. (LaFranchi 2014)

Our contention is that since Barack Obama entered the presidential campaign of 2008, he has featured a balanced vision of foreign policy. Obama's doctrine has been expressed with a more nuanced rhetoric than reflected in most of President Bush's foreign policy statements (e.g., "you are either with us or against us"). Elvin T. Lim discusses an "anti-intellectual" strand in American political rhetoric that features "applause-rendering platitudes, partisan punch lines, and emotional and human interest appeals." (Lim 2008: 6) Certainly, President Obama has uttered his own "anti-intellectual" tropes, and he has shown signs of indecision on the domestic and world stages. We contend that in contrast to his predecessor, President Obama's rhetoric of strategic balance offers a greater level of political nuance. His attempt to balance competing needs ultimately pleases few across the political spectrum. Our larger point is that a more balanced approach to foreign

policy strategy – just as seeking political compromise in times of deep partisan division – should be given greater recognition in this period of international tumult that touches the lives of so many.

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