

Interests and Values in Obama's foreign Policy: Leading from Behind?

*Interesses e valores na política externa de Obama:
Leading from Behind?*

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Introduction

It is fair to say that, in the foreign-policy literature, interests are largely considered to predominate over values in decision-making. In previous studies (2010, 2013) we sought to evaluate this assertion by analyzing American foreign policy in the post-Cold War period, more specifically, examining the importance of democracy *vis-à-vis* security in this policy.

We selected so-called crucial cases¹, that is, cases of American military interventions in which strategic and material interests were expected to prevail over values. If, however, we find that values are present in a significant proportion to justify the use of force, the assertion above has to be qualified.

The research question then was: what role values as compared to interests play in American military interventions in the post-Cold War period?

Castro Santos and Teixeira (2011, 2013) showed that the American presidents of the post-Cold War period, especially Bush, have assigned an important role to the construction of democracy stability in the target countries to assure American security, merging, in this way, American security interests and liberal-democratic values as motivations to military interventions.

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1 In his classical work "Case Study and the Theory in Political Science", Eckstein (1975) defines crucial case as the case study that seems the "least-likely" case to test positively a theory, but it does. King, Keohane and Verba (1994: 209) explain: in this case, "the theory will have passed a difficult test, and we will have reason to support it with greater confidence."

This study refers to the same research question, now focusing on Obama's administration and its military actions related to Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Al-Qaeda and ISIL.²

Obama established what has been characterized as a "leading from behind" strategy, asserting repeatedly that imposition of democracy is out of the question and regime change should be a task for the nationals of the target countries. This approach also applies to Obama's plan to transfer responsibility to Iraqi and Afghan governments for their local security. Preliminary analysis suggested that, differently from his predecessors, Obama's foreign policy strategy does not link democracy to security when it comes to justify military interventions, dissociating therefore values and interests and giving priority to the former. This work will exam this assertion.

Empirical data are provided by the quantitative and qualitative content analysis of President Obama's³, his Secretaries of States⁴ and the Secretaries of Defense's⁵ speeches between January 2009 and January 2015. We have found and analyzed references to motivations for actions and interventions in the cases at stake in 350 speeches.

The first section of this article will discuss the issue of interests and values in American policy-making. The second one will examine the motivations of Obama's actions toward the selected cases, seeking to evaluate the role interests and values play in the related foreign-policy decisions.

Interests and values in American foreign policy

U.S. political discourse has traditionally shown strong support for the promotion of the American Liberal Tradition (Hartz 1955) worldwide. In a nutshell, the Liberal Tradition is the particular kind of liberalism developed in America. It can be traced back to the Founding Fathers and it rests on a clear set of moral and political principles. It places the individual at the center of political life and sees each person as possessing some inalienable rights. Liberals emphasize individual liberty and are mistrustful of unchecked power. They also believe that

2 There are, of course, many other important foreign-policy moves in Obama administration related to strategic American interests, such as those related to the Arab Spring, the Israeli-Palestinian or the Ukraine-Russian strains, in which liberal values are taken into consideration as well. The selection of cases that include the use of force is due to the methodological advantages of crucial cases.

3 The analyzed Obama's speeches are all those which fit the following categories, as classified by the American Presidency Project: Inaugural Speeches, State of the Union, Addresses to Congress, Major Addresses to the Nation, Addresses to the UN General Assembly and all his News Conferences, since the beginning of his first term up to January, 2015. Available at www.presidency.uscb.edu.

4 The speeches of the Secretaries of State examined were those delivered to the UN, OTAN, the Congress, the Military Colleges and those registered by the media (Press Briefings, CBS, NBC, ABC, CNN, The Washington Post, Fox News and the New York Times). Available at the State Department website (www.state.gov/speeches).

5 All the speeches of the Secretary of Defense listed at the State of Defense (www.defense.gov/speeches) were analyzed.

democracy is the best form of government and favor the rule of law, freedom of expression, and market economies. They ultimately defend that most human beings would be better off if these practices were universal.

The influence of this liberal tradition has been identified in the American political thought by historians such as Louis Hartz (1955), Richard Hofstadter (1948) and Daniel Boorstin (1953). They were perceived in the foreign policy doctrines by Robert Packenham (1973) during the Cold War and again recognized in similar manifestations by Castro Santos (2010) and Teixeira (2010) after the Cold War period. The Liberal Tradition crosses party lines and unites Democratic liberal internationalists and Republican neoconservatives. It was the foundation of Bill Clinton's strategy of democratic enlargement, George W. Bush's liberty doctrine, and an important determinant of Barack Obama's "leading from behind" strategy.

The historical record shows, however, that U.S. foreign policy decisions have often favored security interests over democratization and human rights concerns. From the academic point of view, different theories of International Relations consider various aspects of the international or domestic scenarios as more or less pertinent in explaining foreign policy. In the case of the prominent debate between realists and idealists, the former believe that this policy should be guided by American interests while the latter think that values are crucial.

For sure, security and material concerns are essential determinants of Obama's responses to the challenges posed by Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria Al-Qaeda and ISIL. We argue, however, that they do not tell the whole story. Liberal-democratic values have been relatively neglected explanations for the foreign-policy actions related to these critical case studies.

Slaughter (2001) calls the attention to the fact that in public debate the terms 'interests' and 'values' usually come freighted with assumptions and associations that typically skew and bias the outcome of the discussion. According to the author, the typical debate framing carries the following baggage: interests (strategic, vital, realist, cool, hard-headed, calculation, narrow); values (moral, optional, idealist, passionate, warm-hearted, emotion, broad). Putting it in this way, values distort decisions that should be objectives and based on interests.

The democratization literature does not see this contradiction between values and interests in American foreign policy. Diamond (1992), a prominent author of this literature, says very assertively:

[There] is a fallacy in thinking that "real" interests can be distinguished from the US interests in fostering democracy. A more democratic world would be a safer, saner, and more prosperous world for the United States. (...) Promoting democracy must therefore be at the heart of America's global vision. Democracy should be the central focus – the defining feature – of US foreign policy. (p. 30, 31).

Owen (2006), for his part, believes the expansion of American interests is only possible through the expansion of democracy: “American hegemony – the unipolar era – is extended in time by the extension in space of democracy. Democracy is not just a consequence of American primacy, it is also a cause of it”. In this same vein, Fukuyama and McFaul (2007) remember us that “Not all autocracies are or have been enemies of the United States, but every American enemy has been an autocracy”⁶.

Even if (liberal, democratic) values have been relatively less investigated than (economic, security, power) interests in the American foreign policy, there is a well-established literature on this topic. Besides the works cited above, we still want to emphasize two important books.

The first well-known work in this line is *Ideas & Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions and Political Change*, edited by Goldstein and Keohane in 1993. The book offers the argument that “policy outcomes can be explained only when interests and power are combined with a rich understanding of human beliefs” (p. 13). They identify three causal pathways through which ideas can influence policies: (i) ideas serve as road maps, in the sense that this pathway limits choice by excluding other interpretations of reality; (ii) ideas serve as focal points that define cooperative solutions or act as coalitional glue to facilitate the cohesion of particular groups; (iii) ideas embedded in institutions specify policy in the absence of innovation. The general conclusion is that policy varies because of the choice of some ideas rather than others.

Nevertheless, according to Cox, Lynch and Bouchet (2013) for “the overwhelming majority of students of American grand strategy, democracy was never, ever, a major American foreign policy aim” (p.1). Its goals were rather to expand power, promote US economic interests and assure the balance of power (stability and security). This was especially true during the Cold War, when authors as ideologically diverse as Hans Morgenthau, Noam Chomsky, Kenneth Waltz or William Williams could write about American foreign policy without ever considering that the promotion of democracy mattered at all. They call the attention, notwithstanding, to Tony Smith’s book (1994), *America’s Mission*, where the author argues that it is not possible to understand American foreign policy along the twentieth century without referring to democracy and the way Americans think about themselves and their role in the world. Taking as a reference the two opposed assessments, eleven qualified scholars, most of them already widely published on this theme, exam and qualify the place democracy promotion has occupied in the foreign policies of the various American administrations, since Theodore Roosevelt.

6 For further discussion on the absence of contradictions between promoting American interests or principles see Drezner (2005), Wollack (2008) and Record (2001).

With this theoretical background, we will show, in the next section, that the American Liberal Tradition assumes, in Goldstein and Keohane's (1993) parlance, the role of a road map in Obama's foreign policy. Through the analysis of the critical cases of military interventions started or inherited by the Obama administration, we will assess the role American values *vis-à-vis* security interests have played in his foreign-policy directives.

Democracy and security in Obama's foreign policy actions

We analyzed the total of 1203 speeches delivered from 2009 and 2014 by President Obama, his Secretaries of State and Defense which fell into the selected categories of speeches indicated above. This section is based on the quantitative and qualitative content analysis of 350 speeches of those decision-makers⁷ in which it was possible to identify at least one motive or justification for military interventions in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Libya, Non-Syria, Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Our ultimate sample represented 29% of the initial 1203 selected speeches and our final empirical material corresponded to the 848 identified remarks on purposes and reasons for the use of force in the indicated cases.

The 848 remarks on justifications for the use of force in target countries were grouped in the following meaningful analytical categories: humanitarian aid; support and promotion of liberal-democratic institutions and democratic governance; and security. The latter was further divided into three additional categories: local/national security; regional and international security; and American security.

The relative importance of Obama's reasons and motivations for the use of force

The first important result of the analysis was the confirmation of the prevalence of security among Obama administration's motivations to foreign-policy actions concerning the selected countries. In fact, Table 1 and Figure 1 show that 55% of the total references identified were related to security, as compared to 28% associated to the promotion of democratic governance and liberal-democratic institutions, and 17% to humanitarian aid.

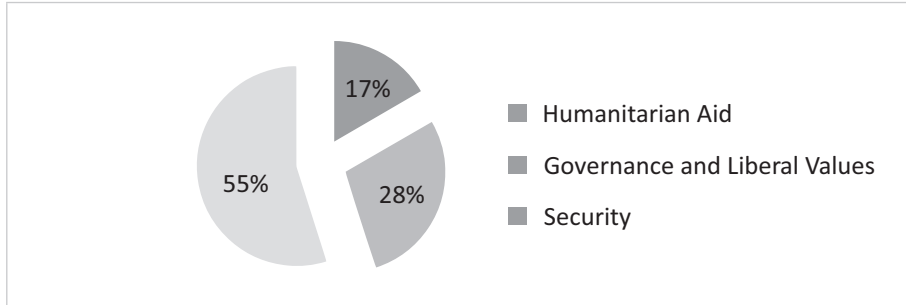
7 Among the total 350 selected speeches, 43 were delivered by Obama, 208 by his Secretaries of State and 99 by the Secretaries of Defense.

Table 1. Motivations for Intervention, Obama and Secretaries of State and Defense, per year, 2009-2014

Year	Humanitarian Aid					Governance and Liberal Values			Security
	P	S	D	P	S	D	P	S	D
2009	1	5	2	7	26	4	8	40	14
2010	0	9	1	10	22	8	16	25	20
2011	6	19	9	12	18	16	10	33	55
2012	7	21	7	7	31	24	10	20	36
2013	3	22	6	4	15	9	12	33	29
2014	1	16	6	4	22	2	13	63	28
Total	18	92	31	44	134	63	69	214	182
Sum	141						241		

*P: President Barack Obama; S: Secretaries of State; D: Secretaries of Defense.

Figure 1. Motivations for Intervention, Obama and Secretaries of State and Defense, 2009-2014



Both the President and his Secretaries of State and Defense equally put stronger emphasis on security as compared to the other justifications for American foreign-policy procedures. Not surprisingly, this emphasis is relatively stronger in the remarks of the Secretaries of Defense (66%), followed by those of Obama (53%) and those of the Secretaries of State (49%). Not surprisingly either is the fact that the selected references by the Secretaries of State to the American support and promotion of democratic governance and liberal-democratic institutions in the target countries as well as humanitarian aid summed up in higher proportion (51%) than those of Obama (47%) and his Secretaries of Defense (34%). (cf. Table 1 and Figures 2, 3 and 4)

Figure 2. Motivations for Intervention, Obama, 2009-2014

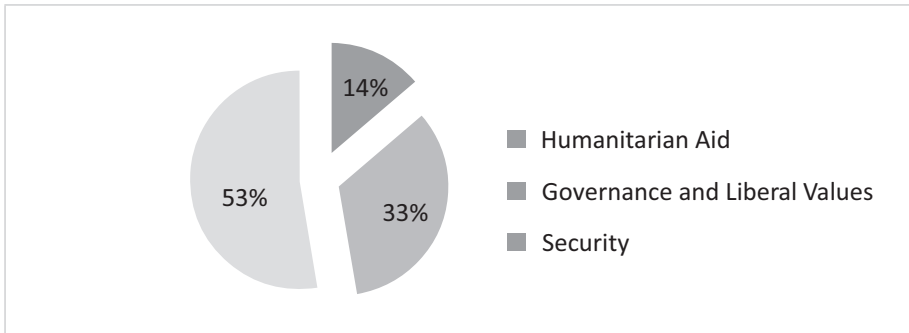


Figure 3. Motivations for Intervention, Secretaries of Defense, 2009-2014

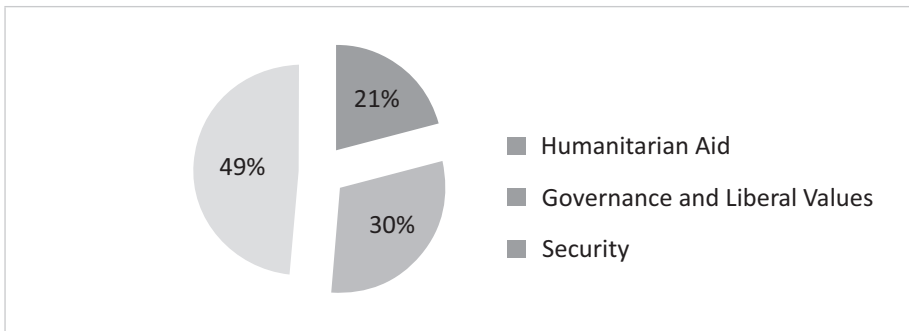
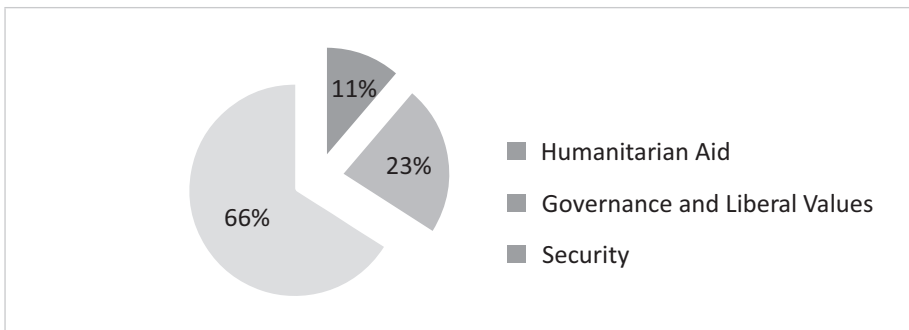


Figure 4. Motivations for Intervention, Secretaries of State, 2009-2014



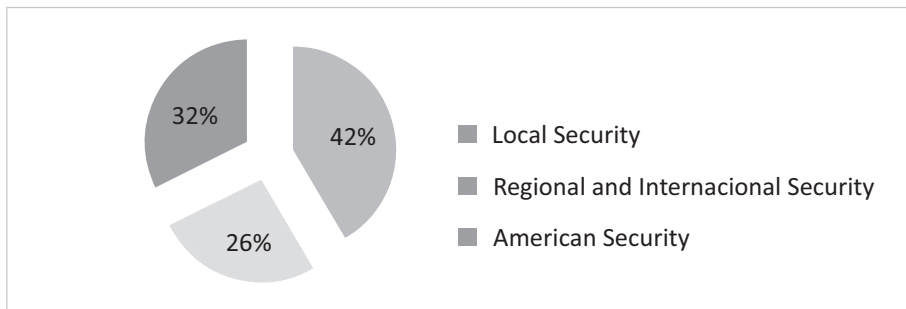
It is interesting to note, as well, that among the security types of motivations the references to the security of the target countries (42%) took prevalence over American security (32%), and regional and international security (26%). (cf. Table 2 and Figure 5)

Table 2. Security Motivations, Obama and Secretaries of State and Defense, per year, 2009-2014

Local Security					Regional and International Security				American Security
P	S	D	P	S	D	P	S	D	
4	14	6	0	15	4	7	19	4	
14	21	19	3	2	5	7	5	3	
2	18	33	3	8	13	7	12	23	
8	12	27	5	6	5	4	7	10	
1	2	8	9	25	8	7	17	16	
3	39	17	7	26	12	5	24	16	
32	106	110	27	82	47	37	84	72	
248					156				193

*P: President Barack Obama; S: Secretaries of State; D: Secretaries of Defense.

Figure 5. Motivations for Intervention, Obama and Secretaries of State and Defense, 2009-2014



The emphasis on local security could be interpreted as an indicator of Obama’s “leading from behind” strategy. This is due to, especially in the case of Iraq and Afghanistan, his administration pressing the established governments to assume responsibility for their own safety and to keep their territory clear of Al-Qaeda terrorists. We can indeed think of local security and American security as closely linked also in the other cases, given that Obama and his Secretaries very much insisted in this connection, *i.e.*, that America would only be safe when terrorists are not given a safe haven in the target countries:

And with our friends and allies, we will forge a new and comprehensive strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan to defeat Al Qaida and combat extremism, because I will not allow terrorists to plot against the American people from safe havens

halfway around the world. We will not allow it. (Barack Obama, Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress, February 24, 2009)

[We] must keep the pressure on them (the terrorists) wherever they go. We must ensure that they never again find a safe haven from which to attack America, not in Afghanistan, not in Iraq, not in Yemen, not in Somalia, not in North Africa. Nowhere should they find a place to hide from which they can attack this country. (Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, DIA 50th Anniversary Gala, October 1, 2011)

Now, President Obama has stated repeatedly that he will do what is necessary and what is in our national interest to confront ISIL and the threat that it poses to the security of the region and to our security in the long run. None of us should have to be reminded that a threat left unattended far beyond our shores can have grave, tragic consequences. (Secretary of State John Kerry, Press Availability on Syria and Iraq, June 23, 2014)⁸

The references to regional and international security usually go as reinforcement to American security:

As our military presence decreases over time, we should still expect to be involved in Iraq on some level for many years to come – assuming a sovereign Iraq continues to seek our partnership. The stability of Iraq remains crucial to the future of the Middle East, a region that multiple presidents of both political parties have considered vital to the national security of the United States. (Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, Opening Statement on DoD Challenges to the Senate Armed Services Committee, January 27, 2009)

(...) America has an important strategic interest in preventing Qadhafi from overrunning those who oppose him. A massacre would have driven thousands of additional refugees across Libya's borders, putting enormous strains on the peaceful yet fragile transitions in Egypt and Tunisia. (...) So while I will never minimize the costs involved in military action, I am convinced that a failure to act in Libya would have carried a far greater price for America. (Barack Obama, News Conference, November 13, 2011)

It matters to our security and the security of our allies. It matters to Israel. It matters to our close friends Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon – all of whom live just a stiff breeze away from Damascus. It matters to all of them where the

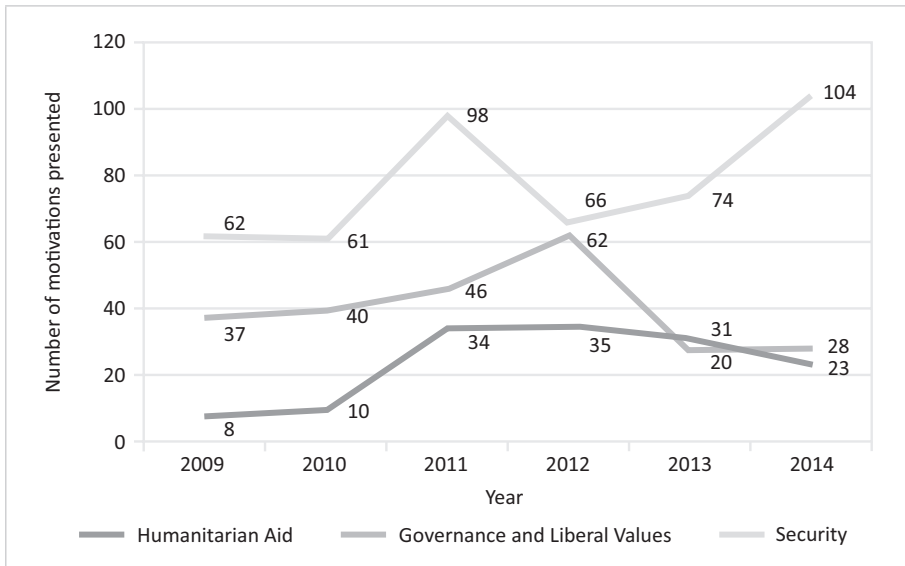
8 To better qualify this link between local and American security, see Obama's News Conferences in London, April 2, 2009; Inaugural Address, January 20, 2009; Remarks at the United States Military Academy at West Point, December 1, 2009; Address to the Nation on the Drawdown of the United States Military Personnel in Afghanistan, June 22, 2010; Hillary Clinton, Secretary of State, New Beginnings: Foreign Policy Priorities in the Obama Administration; Interview with George Stephanopoulos of ABC's This Week, November 15, 2010; Interview with Savannah Gunthrie of NBC's Today Show, October, 12, 2011; Remarks from Press Availability in Islamabad, October, 21, 2011; Remarks on the Deaths of American Personnel in Benghazi, Libya, September 12, 2012; State Department and USAID Budget Request, February, 28, 2012; Remarks to the World Affairs Council, NATO Conference, April 3, 2012; John Kerry, Secretary of State, Proposed Authorization to Use Military Force in Syria, September, 10, 2013; Press Availability on Syria and Iraq, June, 23, 2013; Robert Gates, Secretary of Defense, Opening Statement on DoD Challenges on the Senate Armed Forces Committee, January 2009; Statement on Libya-House Armed Services Committee, March 31, 2011; Leon Panetta, Secretary of Defense, Message to the Department of Defense, July 01, 2011; Trip Message: Djibouti, Afghanistan, Iraq, Turkey, Libya, December 19, 2011.

Syrian chemical weapons are. And if unchecked, they can cause even greater death and destruction to those friends. And it matters deeply to the credibility and the future interests of the United States of America and our allies. (Secretary of State John Kerry, Statement on Syria, August 30, 2013)

I believe we can make history and help forge a more peaceful future for the people of Afghanistan, for the region, and – in turn – for the world. (Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, Message to ISAF Personnel, March 8, 2013)⁹

Figure 6 indicates an interesting summary of how Obama’s reasons for military interventions evolved along the time. Roughly speaking, we perceive here as well that security motivations prevail along the whole period of analysis over humanitarian aid and promotion of liberal-democratic values and governance. Humanitarian aid motivations, however, more than tripled between 2011 and 2012, the first year of the Arab Spring, and have kept pretty constant in this higher level along the period, probably due to the great and publicized amount of humanitarian relief the United States provided to the Arab countries that engaged in this movement.

Figure 6. Military Interventions Motivations in the Obama Administration, per year, 2009-2014



9 About the use of regional and international security as a reinforcement to American security, see also: Barack Obama, News Conference, May 27, 2010; Press Conference in Chicago, May 21, 2012; Address to the Nation on the Situation in Syria, September 10, 2013; Hillary Clinton, ABC Interview: US, Japan Work Together for Global Recovery, February 17, 2009; Remarks at The International Conference on Afghanistan, March 31, 2009; Robert Gates, Statement to NATO Defense Ministers, March 11, 2011; Leon Panetta, McConnell Center Lecture: "Fighting for the American Dream", University of Louisville, March 01, 2012.

On the other hand, the good progress the security transition policy in Afghanistan and Iraq was making, and Obama's policy to support the moderate opposition in Libya and Syria are possibly responsible in a great measure for the stronger emphasis that was put on the promotion of liberal-democratic values up to 2012. From that year on, however, security takes the lead again with the ISIL threat and the use of chemical weapons in Syria. In fact, security's considerations are overwhelmingly stronger than promotion of democratic governance and values, which shrank very significantly along this last period (cf. Figure 6).

Obama's Foreign Policy Strategy

If Bush focused his presidency after September 11 on ending tyranny and promoting democracy in the world to win the war on terror, Obama took office in 2009 with the intention to retract from this freedom agenda. The objective was no longer to transform domestic societies and establish democratic governments in rogue states but to prevent Al-Qaeda or other extremist elements from regrouping in these countries and carrying out violent attacks against the United States or its allies. He moved from Bush's broad war on terror to a narrower focus on Al-Qaeda operatives and other terrorists who were, in his view, threatening US security. Preemption was no longer an element of the national security policy.

Thus, when announcing the strategy toward Middle East wars in 2009, the President made clear the decision to concentrate military troops and resources in Afghanistan and Pakistan, indicating that America had "a clear and focused goal: to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda in [those countries], and to prevent their return to either country in the future" (Barack Obama, Remarks on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, March 27, 2009; see also his Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan, December 1, 2009). As for Iraq, American intelligence seemed convinced that no terrorist group could find shelter in its territory. Obama's first plans were then to pull American presence out of this country as soon as possible.

For sure the American Liberal Tradition principles and values are Obama's road map (cf. Goldstein and Keohane, 1993), as it was the case with his predecessors. In fact, in several occasions, especially when he delivers major speeches, liberal values are praised and emphasized:

Democracy and human rights are essential to achieving each of the goals that I've discussed today, because governments of the people and by the people are more likely to act in the broader interests of their own people, rather than narrow interests of those in power (...) (Barack Obama, Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly in New York, September 23, 2009)

In the speech of the State of Union, 2010, Obama reinforces the belief in the American values connected to foreign policy actions:

As we have for over 60 years, America takes these actions because our destiny is connected to those beyond our shores. But we also do it because it is right. (...) For America must always stand on the side of freedom and human dignity—always. (...) Abroad, America's greatest source of strength has always been our ideals. (Barack Obama, Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union, January 27, 2010).

Both National Security Strategies (2010 and 2015) of the President administration have especial sections on values. In the 2015 document we read:

Defending democracy and human rights is related to every enduring national interest. It aligns us with the aspirations of ordinary people throughout the world. We know from our own history people must lead their own struggles for freedom if those struggles are to succeed. But America is also uniquely situated—and routinely expected—to support peaceful democratic change. (...) We will continue to insist that governments uphold their human rights obligations, speak out against repression wherever it occurs, and work to prevent, and, if necessary, respond to mass atrocities. (...) Any support we might provide will be balanced with an awareness of the costs of repressive policies for our own security interests and the democratic values by which we live. (p. 19)

Obama's Secretaries stand for American values is equally pervasive in their speeches:

As President Obama said last month: “for generations, we have done the hard work of protecting our own people, as well as millions around the globe. We have done so because we know that our own future is safer, our own future is brighter, if more of mankind can live with the bright light of freedom and dignity. (Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, National Library for the Study of George Washington Groundbreaking Ceremony, April 14, 2011)

That is our strategic goal. And we have to analyze everything against that goal. And then, of course, we want to be good partners in helping the Syrian people build the kind of democratic, pluralistic society and government that will respect human rights and restore a better future. So, this is how we are proceeding. (Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Remarks on Syria: Questions and Answers Session, August 11, 2012)¹⁰

10 On the defense of American Values, see as well Obama's Inaugural Speech, January 2009; Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union, January 27, 2010; Address to the Nation on the End of Combat Operations in Iraq, August 31, 2010; Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union, January 25, 2011; Inaugural Speech, January 21, 2013; Address to the United Nations General Assembly, September 9, 2013. Hillary Clinton, Interview with Greta Van Susteren of Fox News, June 4, 2009; Interview with Chris Wallace of Fox News, January 30, 2011, Robert Gates, Carnegie Europe (NATO), October 5, 2011; Leon Panetta, Statement on Syria before the Senate Armed Service Committee, March 7, 2012.

At the launching of his first administration, however, the President wanted to retreat from an active role in the promotion of democracy, especially by the use of force. Thus, during this initial period, Obama often started his talks with apologies for the American democracy promotion strategies from the previous administration. In Cairo he said: "I know there has been controversy about the promotion of democracy in recent years, and much of this controversy is connected to the war in Iraq" (Remarks by the President on a New Beginning, June 4, 2009; see also Remarks by the President at the New Economic School Graduation, July, 17, 2009).

The general tone was that democracy was a cherished value, but there was no special role for America to spread it by force: "Each nation gives life to democracy in its own way, and in line with its own traditions ... America will not seek to impose any system of government on any other nation." (Remarks by the President to the Ghanaian Parliament, July 11, 2009). The building of democracy was defined as a task for the locals themselves, although he assured that the United States would back up, support and work with the target countries to build liberal-democratic institutions and governance:

Democracy cannot be imposed on any nation from the outside. Each society must search for its own path, and no path is perfect. Each country will pursue a path rooted in the culture of its people and in its past traditions. And I admit that America has too often been selective in its promotion of democracy. (Barack Obama, Remarks at the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, December 1, 2009)

And finally, we must all take responsibility for advancing democracy's cause. America believes that all citizens should have a say in how they are governed (...) We don't believe that democracy can be imposed on others by force. As Senator Robert Kennedy argued with prophetic power in 1966, "Nations, like men, often march to the beat of different drummers, and the precise solutions of the United States can neither be dictated nor transplanted to others". (Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Remarks at the Israeli Presidential Conference, October 21, 2009)

We are unlikely to repeat a mission on the scale of Iraq or Afghanistan anytime soon – that is, forced regime change followed by nation-building under fire. (...) (Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, Nixon Center – Security Assistance, February 24, 2010)¹¹

11 Relative to the decision of not imposing democracy, see: Barack Obama, Address to the Nation on the End of Combat Operations in Iraq, August 31, 2010; News Conference, February 15, 2011; Address to the Nation on the Situation in Libya, March 28, 2011; Address to the United Nations General Assembly, September 21, 2011; Hillary Clinton, Christopher Hill Nominated to be US Ambassador to Iraq, March 25, 2009; Interview with Christiane Amanpour of ABC's This Week, February, 18, 2011; Press Availability in Istanbul, July 15, 2011; John Kerry, Fiscal Year 2014 – House Foreign Affairs Committee, April, 17, 2013.

In May 2011, with the death of Bin Laden, the significantly weakening of Al-Qaeda was a fact. What the American government called the “transition phase”, part of its mentioned “leading from behind strategy”, already in progress in Iraq, was put to work at full in Afghanistan as well. The “transition” referred to the American military training and preparation of Afghans and Iraqis so they become capable to respond for the security of their own countries and to prevent terrorists from keeping safe havens in their territories:

Our mission will change from combat to support. (Barack Obama, Address to the Nation on the Drawdown of the United States Military Personnel in Afghanistan, June 2, 2011)

The supplemental request also includes \$1 billion to strengthen Iraqi security forces. These additional resources will be used this year to strengthen Iraqi capabilities in areas General Odierno believes are important to ensure that the Iraqis are fully prepared to assume internal security responsibilities. (Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, Senate Appropriations Committee – Defense Budget Request, March 25, 2010)

While drawing down in Iraq, we have refocused on defeating Al Qaida and denying its affiliates a safe haven. In Afghanistan, the United States and our allies are pursuing a strategy to break the Taliban’s momentum and build the capacity of Afghanistan’s Government and security forces so that a transition to Afghan responsibility can begin next July. (Barack Obama, Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly in New York City, September 23, 2010)

This year’s request will support the ongoing transition, helping Afghans take responsibility for their own future and ensure their country is never again a safe haven for terrorists who can target us. (Hillary Clinton, State Department and USAID Budget Request, February 28, 2012)¹²

The President and the Secretaries of State and Defense would repeatedly guarantee the local governments that this movement did not mean neither the occupation of their territory nor abandonment.

And I think that President Karzai understands that we are interested in a strategic partnership with the Afghan people and the Afghan government. We are not interested in staying there any longer than is necessary to assure that Al Qaida is not operating there and that there is sufficient stability that it doesn’t end up being a free-for-all after ISAF has left. (Barack Obama, The President’s News Conference, March 6, 2012)¹³

¹² About the transition of security to local forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, see as well: Hillary Clinton, Interview With George Stephanopoulos of ABC’s This Week, November 15, 2009; Press Conference at U.S. Embassy Kabul, November 19, 2009; Robert Gates, Statement to NATO Defense Ministers, March 11, 2011; Chuck Hagel, Munich Security Conference, February 1, 2014; Barack Obama, News Conference in Newport, Wales, May 9, 2014).

¹³ On the non-abandonment issue cf. also Obama’s News Conference in Toronto, June 27, 2010 and News Conference, March 6, 2012.

The United States would support and work with the Afghan and Iraqi governments to build governance capability, market economy and liberal-democratic institutions:

And in Afghanistan, we're increasing our troops and training Afghan security forces so they can begin to take the lead in July of 2011 and our troops can begin to come home. We will reward good governance, work to reduce corruption, and support the rights of all Afghans, men and women alike.

(...)

As we take the fight to Al Qaida, we are responsibly leaving Iraq to its people. As a candidate, I promised that I would end this war, and that is what I am doing as President. We will have all of our combat troops out of Iraq by the end of this August. We will support the Iraqi Government as they hold elections, and we will continue to partner with the Iraqi people to promote regional peace and prosperity. But make no mistake: This war is ending, and all of our troops are coming home. (Barack Obama, Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union, January 27, 2010)¹⁴

The United States and the two countries would be partners. An agreement was signed with Iraq still in 2008. Obama refers to it:

A transitional force of US troops will remain in Iraq with a different mission: advising and assisting Iraq's security forces, supporting Iraqi troops in targeted counterterrorism missions, and protecting our civilians. Consistent with our agreement with Iraqi Government, all US troops will leave by the end of next year. (Barack Obama, News conference in Toronto, June 27, 2010).¹⁵

In 2012, another agreement was signed with Afghanistan.¹⁶

(...) we're building an enduring partnership. The agreement we signed today sends a clear message to the Afghan people: As you stand up, you will not stand alone. It establishes the basis for our cooperation over the next decade, including shared commitments to combat terrorism and strengthen democratic

14 About the promotion of liberal-democratic institutions in Iraq and Afghanistan, see also: Barack Obama, News Conference in Toronto, June 27, 2010; Address to the Nation on the End of Combat Operations in Iraq, August 31, 2010; News Conference in Seoul, November 12, 2010; Hillary Clinton, Foreign Policy and Diplomacy, January 27, 2009; Respect for International Humanitarian Law, January 29, 2009; President's Proposed Budget Request for FY2011 for the Department of State and Foreign Operations, February 24, 2010; Foreign Policy Priorities in the FY2011 International Affairs Budget, February 24, 2010; Robert Gates, Statement on Afghanistan to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, December 3, 2009.

15 Cf. the Agreement between the United States of America and the Republic of Iraq On the Withdrawal of United States Forces from Iraq and the Organization of Their Activities during Their Temporary Presence in Iraq, November 17, 2008.

16 See the Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement between the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, May 2, 2012.

institutions. It supports Afghan efforts to advance development and dignity for their people. And it includes Afghan commitments to transparency and accountability and to protect the human rights of all Afghans: men and women, boys and girls. (Barack Obama, Address to the Nation on Military Operations in Afghanistan from Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan, May 2, 2012)

American troops left Iraq in December 2011 and three years later, in December 2014, they retreated from Afghanistan. Obama's electoral campaign promise – to end the Middle East wars and bring American soldiers back home – was accomplished. The President had no intention to ever again put “troops on the ground”.

When the Arab Spring broke out, however, challenges were put in Obama's foreign-policy strategies. It became probably the biggest and most unexpected event the President had to deal with. It represented the promise of the greatest advance for human freedom since the end of communism in Eastern Europe and the end of the Cold War. Moreover, when thousands of Arabs and Muslims peacefully protested for universal rights, education and jobs, it seemed like a rejection of the “clash of civilizations” narrative (Huntington, 1996). Obama, however, kept faithful to his “leading from behind” approach, praising the liberal-democratic values, showing the US deep interest for the revolts outcomes, assisting in overthrowing long-time dictators of the region, but declaring that the fate of the Middle East peoples were to them to decide:

How this incredible transformation will end remains uncertain. But we have a huge stake in the outcome. And while it's ultimately up to the people of the region to decide their fate, we will advocate for those values that have served our own country so well (Barack Obama, State of the Union, 2012).

We stand not for empire, but for self-determination. That is why we have a stake in the democratic aspirations that are now washing across the Arab world. We will support those revolutions with fidelity to our ideals, with the power of our example, and with an unwavering belief that all human beings deserve to live with freedom and dignity. (Barack Obama, Remarks by the President on the Way Forward in Afghanistan, June 22, 2011)¹⁷

It is fair to say that Obama was faithful to this policy in countries like Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen, as those excerpts indicate:

The United States of America stands with the people of Tunisia and supports the democratic aspirations of all people. (...) We must never forget that the things

¹⁷ On Obama's and Clinton's responses to the Arab Spring, see also: Barack Obama, Address to the United Nations General Assembly in New York City, September 21, 2011; Hillary Clinton, Remarks at a United Nations Security Council Session on the Situation in Syria, January 31, 2012; Hillary Clinton, Press Availability at the United Nations on the Situation of Libya, March 12, 2012.

we've struggled for, and fought for, live in the hearts of people everywhere. (Barack Obama, Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union, January 25, 2011)

We want to assist them on the economic reform efforts that they're undertaking. Now ultimately, this is up to the Egyptians. They're going to have to make these decisions. But we've offered our advice and we're offering aid where appropriate. (Hillary Clinton, Interview with David Gregory of NBC's Meet the Press, March 27, 2011)

As Yemen continues its multi year transition, reforms its constitution, convenes a national dialogue, and continues to grapple with its security and humanitarian challenges, we must remain engaged and supportive. (Hillary Clinton, Remarks at the United Nations Security Council, March 12, 2012)

The president and his staff for sure were also very much concerned with the region stability. In several occasions they declared that America has a vital interest in the Middle East, but even so he maintained his promise of not putting troops on the ground. In fact, this was the case in the American military intervention in Libya. While the use of force was very much justified on humanitarian grounds, the President entered the conflict pressed to help European allies, stressing that American participation would be limited, with no troops on ground and, more important, under the UN Security Council Resolution 1973/2011. This Resolution backed up the establishment of a no-fly zone with NATO's support. Even when the American Ambassador in Benghazi was killed, Americans did not resort to ground forces. The reaction to this tragic event was mainly of a diplomatic nature.¹⁸

However, the United States pressed hard for Khadafi ouster from power, an initiative not supported by the UN resolution.

(...) we'd imposed sanctions and we had mobilized the international community through the United Nations so that across the board we are slowly tightening the noose on Kaddafi. He is more and more isolated internationally, both through sanctions as well as an arms embargo. In addition to that, we've provided a host of humanitarian aid measures to make sure that people are not adversely affected as they cross the borders into Tunisia or Egypt. (Barack Obama, News Conference, March 11, 2011)¹⁹

In Syria, US again did not get directly involved in regime change. They put strong diplomatic pressure toward the deposition of Assad, claiming repeatedly that the dictator had lost his legitimacy and therefore should step out of power.

18 See Obama's News Conference, June 2011 29, 2011; Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly in New York City, September 25, 2012; Hillary Clinton, Interview With Jake Tapper of ABC's This Week, March 27, 2011; Remarks at Press Availability, April 15, 2011.

19 To further clarify Obama's stand toward Libya, see also his News Conferences, June 29, 2011 and March 6, 2012.

On Syria, obviously, this is a very tough issue. I have indicated repeatedly that President al-Assad has lost legitimacy, that he needs to step down. So far, he hasn't gotten the message, and instead has double downed in violence on his own people. The international community has sent a clear message that rather than drag his country into civil war he should move in the direction of a political transition. But at this point, the likelihood of a soft landing seems pretty distant. (...) I have, at this point, not ordered military engagement in the situation. (The President's News Conference, August 20, 2012)

It seems that the support to Assad from Russia and China – which repeatedly blocked a UN Resolution to take action against the dictator –, weighed heavily in Obama's calculus:

We are forging an international consensus that the Assad regime's brutality must end and that a democratic transition in Syria must begin. Although China and Russia have repeatedly blocked the UN Security Council from taking action, the UN Assembly has given full support to the Arab League's transition plan (...) (Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, Statement on Syria before the Senate Armed Services Committee, March 7, 2012)

(...) there's no doubt that Russia, which historically has had a relationship with Syria, as well as China, which is generally wary of commenting on what it considers to be the internal affairs of other countries, are and have been more resistant to applying the kind of pressure that's necessary to achieve that political transition. (Barack Obama, The President's News Conference in Los Cabos, Mexico, June 19, 2012)

Even when Assad "crossed the red line" traced by Obama, by using chemical weapons "on his own people" (cf. The President's News Conference, August 20, 2012), pressure and diplomacy were the only used tools. In fact, after a deadly chemical weapons attack in Damascus in August 2013, quick negotiations between the U.S. and Russia, resulted in an agreement on the destruction of Syria's entire chemical weapons arsenal, which should be over by June 2014. The Secretary of State praised this success:

We know that when the United States and Russia do succeed in working together, the world can become a safer place, as was evidenced in our historical agreement to remove all of the chemical weapons that were declared under the conventional weapons system from Syria. (Secretary of State John Kerry, Remarks at Solo Press Availability, October, 14, 2014)

The agreement, reached with Syria's acquiescence, also required the country to join the Chemical Weapons Convention, an international treaty forbidding the manufacture, stockpiling and use of chemical weapons. All the parts of the accord were successfully accomplished.

In both cases of Libya and Syria, American diplomatic pressures were paramount, always engaging the support of the international community and Arab allies. The objective was to have the “moderate opposition” win the game, that is, win the power struggle in those countries. This happened faster in the case of Libya. The “moderate opposition” should be an organized group identified with liberal-democratic values and the construction of democracy. To those groups Americans would provide support, arms and military training. Concerning Syria:

I'm encouraged to see that the Syrian opposition created an umbrella group that may have more cohesion than they have had in the past. We're going to be talking to them. My envoys are going to be traveling to various meetings that are going to be taking place with the international community and the opposition. We consider them a legitimate representative of the aspirations of the Syrian people. We're not yet prepared to recognize them as some sort of government-in-exile, but we do think that it is a broad-based representative group. One of the questions that we're going to continue to press is making sure that that opposition is committed to a democratic Syria, an inclusive Syria, a moderate Syria.

(...)

We have been extensively engaged with the international community as well as regional powers to help the opposition. (...) We are constantly consulting with the opposition on how they can get organized so that they're not splintered and divided in the face of the onslaught from the Assad regime. (Barack Obama, News Conference, November 14, 2012)

[We] hope to hear from the Syrian opposition about their vision for a post-Assad Syria that is governed by the rule of law and respects and protects the universal rights of every citizen regardless of religion, ethnicity, sect, or gender (...) (Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Press Availability on the London Conference, February 23, 2012; see also Press Availability on Libya, September 1, 2011)

As you know, the United States, in fulfillment of our obligations with respect to supporting the opposition, committed to doubling our nonlethal aid and to giving much of that to local leaders who are trying to lay the groundwork for a stable and a democratic future. (Secretary of State, John Kerry, Press Availability, Istanbul, April 21, 2013)

The moderate opposition remains Syria's best hope, and they're the only option from Syria's future we are prepared to accept. (Secretary of State John Kerry, Remarks at Syria Ministerial, September, 24, 2014)

It is here, in the cases of Libya and Syria, that Obama's strategy of “leading from behind” showed its strong grip. To begin with, as seen above, the United States declares that it is not prepared to accept an option for Syria other than the moderate opposition with the liberal-democratic values as its road map. Another

indicator of the tough face of this strategy is the clear and strong pressure to take Kaddafi and Assad out of power, without UN support.

And what we want to see is a change in regime in Libya and a move toward a democratic government. And I think we're prepared to keep the pressure on till that happens. (Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Interview With Katie Couric of CBS News, May 19, 2011)

This is a crisis that should be resolved peacefully. In order to do that, the United States believes that President Assad should step away and permit others to begin the process of negotiating a political transition that will lead to elections and the fulfillment of the aspirations and universal human rights of the Syrian people. (Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Remarks Following UNSC Meeting on Syria, January 31, 2012)

In Syria (...) the pressure against it is increasing dramatically each day.(...) Assad's conduct has deservedly brought scorn, pressure and punishing sanctions not just by the United States and Europe, but now by the Arab League and Turkey as well. (Secretary of Defense, Leon Panetta, Opening Session of the Saban Forum, December 2, 2011) .²⁰

The frequent traveling of the Secretaries of State and Defense to the target countries, their neighbors and American allies to pressure for their political democratic transition, and the reassurance of their support to the moderate opposition is another important marker of the tough leading from behind. It follows some references to the engagement of the “international community” in the cases of Libya and Syria:

In Libya we led an international coalition that helped give Libya back to the Libyan people. I had the chance recently to go to Tripoli and was deeply moved by the determination of the Libyan people to try to forge that better future for themselves. More broadly, through my travels as secretary of Defense over the last eight months, a consistent theme has been the desire by countries across the globe, including our allies, old allies, new partners, to increase their partnership with our military forces. (Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, McConnell Center Lecture, “Fighting for the American Dream”, University of Louisville, March 1, 2012).

(...) So what we've done (in Syria) is to work with key Arab States, key international partners—Hillary Clinton was in Tunisia—to come together and to mobilize and plan how do we support the opposition, how do we provide humanitarian assistance, how do we continue the political isolation,

20 On the strong pressure to oust Syrian and Libyan dictators cf as well the speeches by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Remarks at Press Availability, April 15, 2011; Interview With Diane Sawyer of ABC News, March 22, 2011; Press Availability on the Meeting of the Friends of the Syrian People, Feb. 24, 2012; Interview With Wyatt Andrews of CBS, Feb. 26, 2012.

how do we continue the economic isolation. And we are going to continue to work on this project with other countries. And it is my belief that ultimately this dictator will fall, as dictators in the past have fallen. (Barack Obama, The President's News Conference, March 6, 2012)

We look forward to concrete progress on three fronts: providing humanitarian relief, increasing pressure on the (Assad) regime, and preparing for a democratic transition.(...) We also expect additional nations to impose effective sanctions against the regime, and we look to all countries to aggressively implement the measures they have already adopted. (Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Press Availability on the London Conference, February 23, 2012)

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) strongly challenged Obama's strategies of security transition in Iraq and of supporting moderate opposition in this country, as well as in Syria. On the one hand, Iraq clearly was not prepared to halt terrorists and radical muslims, suggesting American troops had left too soon. Part of the country's territory is now dominated by ISIL, whose members are in its major part resentful Sunnis. On the other hand, territories left without a recognized authority in Syria opened up space to ISIL fixing in this vacuum, suggesting that maybe the US should have acted more directly in this case, like it did in Libya. ISIL expanded its grip over Syrian territory, mainly through Sunni majority areas, and proclaimed itself to be a caliphate, the "Islamic State". It is by now considered by the US government a major threat to American interests and European stability, besides menacing the Arab political order and even non-Arab countries in the Middle East:

In Iraq and Syria, however, even if ISIL still controls a large part of those countries' territories, the American led coalition seems to have been successful in containing the group's advances. Leading a coalition of over 60 countries, with the support of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Obama has assured that the campaign cannot be described as another ground war in the Middle East:

American leadership—including our military power—is stopping ISIL's advance. Instead of getting dragged into another ground war in the Middle East, we are leading a broad coalition, including Arab nations, to degrade and ultimately destroy this terrorist group. (...) Now, this effort will take time. It will require focus. But we will succeed. (Barack Obama, Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union, January 20, 2015)

The United States and GCC member states further affirmed their commitment to assisting the Iraqi government and the international coalition in their fight against ISIL/DAESH. (...) The leaders committed to continue working towards a sustainable political resolution in Syria that ends the war and establishes an inclusive government that protects all ethnic and religious minorities, and preserves state institutions. (Barack Obama, Joint Statement by the United States and the Gulf Cooperation Council, May 14, 2015)

The military response to ISIL threat has been tough indeed. As of July 2015, more than 5,000 airstrikes had hit ISIL targets. Americans are also supporting and training local forces on the ground, including the moderate Syrian opposition. As part of this effort, Obama has authorized the redeployment of 3,550 U.S. Armed Forces to Iraq. The American military are in coordination with the Iraqi government to train and support local security forces. The Congress Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) against ISIL included the possibility for the American troops eventually take action against ISIL targets on Obama's command, as they have already done in Syrian territory:

(...) as part of a comprehensive strategy to degrade and ultimately defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), last year I authorized the deployment of U.S. Armed Forces to Iraq. These U.S. forces are conducting coordination with Iraqi forces and providing training, communications support, intelligence support, and other support to select elements of the Iraqi security forces, including Kurdish Peshmerga forces. Additionally, U.S. forces are conducting a systematic campaign of airstrikes and other necessary actions against ISIL forces in Iraq and Syria and airstrikes in Syria against operatives of al-Qaida (...) The Force Management Level for U.S. Armed Forces in Iraq currently is 3,550 personnel. Additionally, on May 15, 2015, U.S. forces conducted a raid in Syria to capture a senior leader of ISIL (...) These actions are being undertaken in coordination with and at the request of the Government of Iraq and in conjunction with coalition partners. (Barack Obama, Letter to Congressional Leaders on the Global Deployment of United States Combat-Equipped Armed Forces, June 11, 2015)

This is a cause, a coalition, that's united countries across the globe, some 60 nations, including Arab partners. Our comprehensive strategy against ISIL is harnessing all elements of American power, across our Government: military, intelligence, diplomatic, economic, development, and perhaps most importantly, the power of our values... (...) Our coalition has now hit ISIL with more than 5,000 airstrikes. We've taken out thousands of fighting positions, tanks, vehicles, bomb factories, and training camps (...) over the past year, we've seen that when we have an effective partner [Iraq] on the ground, ISIL can be pushed back. (Barack Obama, Remarks on United States Efforts To Combat the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) Terrorist Organization and an Exchange With Reporters, July 6, 2015).

So far, American military response to ISIL's threat has hit it very hard. So far as well, and except for some occasional raids into terrorists targets, Obama has not used American ground forces. Does it mean that the President's "leading from behind strategy" is working well?

Conclusion

We have argued that although in the foreign-policy literature interests are largely considered to predominate over values in decision-making, they do not tell the whole story. Very often values are neglected and underestimated as explanations for foreign-policy decisions.

The exam of the military-interventions motivations in Obama's administration showed that in fact security concerns prevailed among them. Nevertheless, neither the prevalence of security was overriding (55%) nor justifications based on American liberal-democratic values were neglectful (28%). As a matter of fact, when we consider the reasons based on humanitarian aid and on American values together, they added up to 45%, almost the same proportion for justifications based on security interests.

A first important conclusion, therefore, is that if it is true that security worries were the main motivation for Obama's foreign-policy actions in the selected cases, it is not less true that American liberal-democratic values occupy a significant place among the justifications for those actions, and hence they should not be neglected by foreign-policy researchers.

We also have put a second argument to be demonstrated. In fact, we have indicated that preliminary analysis – based on the explicit and very much repeated contention that imposition of democracy by the use of force would be out of the question –, suggested that security and values were treated separately by top decision-makers in the Obama administration. That is to say, contrary to the post-Cold War Presidents before him, especially Bush, Obama did not consider the building of democracy as a necessary condition to reach local, regional or American security. To face this argument, we had to exam the President's "leading from behind" strategy.

In fact, during the first years of his administration, the President concentrated his efforts on fulfilling the promise of his electoral campaign, *i.e.*, on ending the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Security was the main concern. He narrowed the focus of Bush's war on terror and targeted Al-Qaeda's safe havens in Afghanistan and Pakistan. He implemented the transition of the responsibility for Iraq's local security from American troops to the Iraqis police and Armed Forces. After the dismantle of Al-Qaeda, he did the same in Afghanistan. The two countries should be able to prevent Al-Qaeda operatives to regroup in their territories. At this point, his "leading from behind approach" seemed to be working well. In fact, after transferring security responsibility, Obama's administration repeatedly indicated that the United States commitment will be limited to support, cooperate and work with local governments to build governance, liberal-democratic institutions, individual rights and market economy. Americans assured Iraqis and Afghans that these policies did not mean abandonment. On the contrary, they will be partners.

However, when the Arab Spring broke out, Obama's strategy began to become tougher. It is fair to say that he could be reasonably faithful to his policy in countries like Egypt and Tunisia. Notwithstanding, when it comes to Libya and Syria, despite numerous references to humanitarian aid, the President and his Secretaries of State and Defense frequently enough indicated rather assertively that the United States "wanted to see", "wished" or "was not prepared to accept" a political solution other than the building of liberal-democratic institutions. Those were requirements applied to the moderate-opposition groups indicated by American intelligence. The United States would then work with these groups, providing support, arms and military training, and helping in their organization and unification. The pressure to oust Khadafi and Assad from power were paramount, in both cases with no support of the United Nations. The military intervention in the case of Libya came by the establishment of a no-fly zone, backed by the UN Resolution 1973/2011. No ground forces were used. In the case of Syria, severe sanctions were applied. In every instance the United States managed to have the support of the international community, the Arab League or the Council of Cooperation of the Gulf Arab States (CCG). The Secretaries of State and Defense frequently traveled to the target countries, their neighbors, key Arab countries, "American allies, old allies and new allies", exerting strong diplomatic pressure to increase their partnership with American military forces and to assure their support to the moderate opposition and democratic transition in those countries.

The second important conclusion of this article is that in Obama's foreign-policy interests and values are brought pretty close to each other, and for that reason, his "leading from behind" approach is not very distant from the foreign and defense strategies of his post-Cold War predecessors.

Moreover, when ISIL came into stage, it strongly challenged Obama's "leading from behind" strategy. In fact, it defied the strategies of local security transition and moderate-opposition support in Iraq. This country clearly was not prepared to halt terrorists and radical muslims, suggesting that American troops left too soon. The major part of ISIL operatives are resentful sunnis who were left out of the new Iraqi government, formed under American occupation and supervision. On the other hand, ISIL found a vacuum of authority in Syria's vast territories, indicating that the strategy of moderate-opposition support did not work in this country either.

So far, the United States has counted many victories over ISIL, with intense air strikes, occasional military incursions into the occupied territories and the approval of Congress. It remains to be seen whether the 3,550 American troops sent back to Iraq will grow in number and whether no boots will in fact not be put on the ground if the war gets worse. In this case, Obama's "leading from behind" strategy will probably not endure the new situation. After all, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant is for sure the most threatening challenge the United States and its Western allies are facing by now. It is a war of civilizations.

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Abstract

This study will exam the relative importance of values and interests in Obama's foreign policy, focusing on crucial cases: the military actions related to Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Non-Syria, Al-Qaeda and ISIL. We will argue that his "leading from behind" strategy is not very distant from the foreign and defense strategies of his post-Cold War predecessors, by which democracy is seen as an assurance to security. According to Obama's strategy, Americans will only provide support for the building of democracy in the target countries, while this task should be performed by the locals themselves. Americans will provide military training to the new governments as well so they can be responsible for their own security, including preventing regrouping of terrorists in their soil. If Obama opposes the imposing of democracy by the use of force, empirical data shows that his administration is "not prepared to accept" any option that threatens US security or American liberal-democratic values, bringing in this way values and interests very close to each other.

Keywords: American foreign policy, military interventions, Obama administration, values and interests.

Resumo

Este trabalho examina a importância relativa de valores e interesses na política externa de Obama, focando-se em casos críticos: as ações militares relacionadas a Afeganistão, Iraque, Líbia, não-Síria, Al-Qaeda e ISIL. Argumenta-se que sua estratégia de *"leading from behind"* não é muito diferente das estratégias de política externa e de defesa de seus predecessores no pós-Guerra Fria, nas quais a democracia é vista como garantia de segurança. De acordo com a estratégia de Obama, os americanos apenas apoiariam indiretamente a construção da democracia nos países-alvo, enquanto esta tarefa deveria ser realizada pelos próprios habitantes locais. Eles também proveriam treinamento militar para que os novos governos se tornassem responsáveis por sua própria segurança, o que incluía prevenir que grupos terroristas se reagrupassem em seus territórios. Se Obama se opõe à imposição da democracia pelo uso da força, os dados empíricos mostram que sua administração "não está disposta a aceitar" qualquer alternativa que ameace a segurança ou os valores liberais democráticos dos Estados Unidos, juntando desta maneira valores e interesses em sua política externa.

Palavras-chave: Política externa americana; intervenções militares; governo Obama; valores e interesses.

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