

A NECESSARY „RETREAT FROM GLOBALISM”? THE FOREIGN POLICY OF THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION

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Summary. The Obama administration came to office at a time when the United States needed to reduce foreign affairs spending, because of the fiscal crisis, reduce its overseas commitments, because of public unease after wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and improve America's global reputation following the Bush administration. This study identifies and evaluates its efforts to do so and calls upon it to do more.

Key words: US foreign policy, globalism, fiscal crisis, Barack Obama, defense spending, overseas commitments

INTRODUCTION

American foreign policy in the next decade and beyond will be different from policy in the decades after World War II. Those years saw America's „rise to globalism”, during which it expanded the geographical scope of its foreign policy interests, its foreign policy goals, and the nature and amount of resources devoted to the realization of those goals¹. The initial rationale for the rise to globalism was the Soviet and communist threat, yet the demise of that threat in 1989 was followed by a further expansion of America's geographical interests and goals. Thus since 1989, the United States has fought two major wars in the Persian Gulf and one in South Asia; fought smaller wars in the Balkans and Libya; engaged in nation-building exercises in Bosnia, Iraq, and Afghanistan; overseen the expansion of NATO membership to include twelve new members; and established new military bases in South Asia and the Persian Gulf. The United States has been able to engage in such extensive global activities due to three factors: the great resources it could devote to foreign policy; the American public's willingness to continue to provide those resources; and the receptivity of much of the international community to the exertion of American power.

¹ S. Ambrose, D. Brinkley, *Rise to Globalism: American Foreign Policy Since 1938*. Penguin, New York, 2010.

The Obama administration came to power at a time when each of those factors was being called into question. In effect, the administration was forced to contemplate a „retreat from globalism”. This study examines these issues and the administration’s response. The first section documents the changing circumstances at the outset of the Obama presidency. The second examines the short-term adjustments made by the administration to each of these new realities, i.e., its efforts to reduce overall spending on foreign affairs, to reduce America’s overseas commitments, and to enhance its global standing. The third section takes a longer-term perspective and argues that the Obama administration and its successors should make more dramatic adjustments.

CAUSES OF A CHANGING AMERICAN WORLD ROLE

Available resources

The United States has long been able to apply significant military, economic, diplomatic and human resources to its foreign policy. Available resources will be reduced in the future, however, because of America’s fiscal crisis; the U.S. is now „incurring debt at a historically unprecedented and ultimately unsustainable rate”, with debt levels higher than at any time in American history, save for the period during and immediately following World War II². The situation has become so dire that Admiral Mike Mullen, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has described it as the „single biggest threat to our national security”³.

The fiscal crisis is a recent phenomenon, resulting largely from policy decisions in the first decade of the 21st century. At the outset of that decade the federal budget was balanced and the national debt stood at about 35% of GDP, near the historical average. During the decade, the Bush administration cut taxes dramatically, entered wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and initiated a prescription drug program for seniors, policies contributing to the „largest fiscal erosion in American history”. These were followed by the economic crisis in 2008 after which the U.S. bailed out a number of failed banks and enacted a large stimulus program. Given all of these factors, revenues – which had averaged 20% of GDP in the 1990s – fell to only 15% in the first decade of this century while spending increased to 25% of GDP by 2009⁴.

This is not a short-term problem. The fiscal outlook for the next decade is „poor”, with federal deficits averaging nearly \$1 trillion annually, while the out-

² R. Altman, R. Haass, *American Profligacy and American Power: The Consequences of Fiscal Irresponsibility*, „Foreign Affairs”, November/December 2010.

³ Mullen quoted in: G. Adams, M. Letherman, *A Meaner and Leaner Defense*, „Foreign Affairs”, January/February 2011.

⁴ R. Altman, R. Haass, *American Profligacy... op. cit.*

look after 2020 is „downright apocalyptic”, due to the increased age of the American public and increased interest payments on the debt⁵. This is unsustainable. Because the cause of this fiscal crisis, unlike those of other great powers, is „entitlement overstretch” as much as „imperial overstretch”,⁶ spending cuts will be needed in all areas of government spending. Defense spending cannot be exempted, both for reasons of equity and because it accounts for nearly 20% of total federal spending and 50% of discretionary spending. The public recognizes this already. A plurality of respondents to a February 2011 Gallup poll, nearly 40%, believed that the U.S. was spending too much on defense, up from 31% as recently as 2009⁷.

Complicating the need to cut overall spending is the fact that the U.S. has serious domestic problems and needs to focus on what Thomas Friedman has called „nation-building in America”⁸. These needs can be identified through comparisons with other OECD countries: in terms of health, the U.S. ranks 27th in life expectancy, 18th in the incidence of diabetes, and first in obesity. In terms of education, America’s 15-year olds rank 17th in science and 25th in math, while its college graduation rate ranks 12th. America’s infrastructure ranks 23rd among developed countries⁹. That is, while there is a need to reduce overall spending due to the fiscal crisis, there is also a need to increase spending on a number of domestic needs. Responses to both of these problems will have the effect of reducing resources available for foreign and military affairs spending.

Extent of overseas commitments

The United States retains significant power assets despite the fiscal crisis and reductions in American resources, but a second factor altering America’s world role is reduced public willingness to devote these to foreign policy matters. This can be illustrated in several ways: the public’s current and likely continuing focus on domestic issues, doubts about the likely success of American initiatives, and a hesitance to put U.S. troops into harm’s way.

It is not surprising in the current economic situation that the American public is focused on domestic matters. This is reflected in a number of recent opinion polls. In a 2010 poll, an amazing 91% of the respondents believed it was more important for the United States to „fix problems at home” than to „address challenges to the United States from abroad”. Asked to identify what those problems were, only 9% of respondents in a May 2011 Fox News poll identified foreign or defense policy issues (Afghanistan, Iraq, or terrorism). The over-

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ M. Mandelbaum, *The Frugal Superpower: America’s Global Leadership in a Cash-Strapped Age*, Public Affairs, New York, 2010, p. 48.

⁷ Gallup Poll, *U.S. Military Spending*, www.pollingreport.com, February 2–5, 2011.

⁸ T. Friedman, *Got to Get This Right*, „New York Times”, November, 27, 2011.

⁹ F. Zakaria, *Are America’s Best Days Behind Us?*, „Time”, March 3, 2011.

whelming focus was on domestic matters: 50% on the economy and jobs, 22% on the budget deficit and national debt, and 8% on health care¹⁰.

None of this is to say that the public believes the U.S. should not involve itself in the world. A 2010 poll revealed that 67% of the public believes the U.S. should play an active role in world affairs, but increasing numbers are skeptical about the nature of role the United States can play. Only 24% of respondents to the Chicago Council on Global Affairs survey of 2010 believed the U.S. was playing a more active and important role as a world leader than it had a decade earlier (the lowest percentage since the question was first asked in 1974). Perhaps as a result, 53% of respondents believed the ability of the United States to achieve its foreign policy goals had decreased over the previous decade¹¹. There was also widespread recognition that the United States is not liked in many countries of the world: fully 60% of Americans polled in 2010 believed the U.S. is generally disliked around the world¹².

Another factor likely to contribute to reduced public support for an active American world role is an „Iraq syndrome” resulting from the American experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. John Mueller, an expert on public opinion during conflicts, has argued that the American public „developed a strong aversion to embarking on such ventures again” after the wars in Korea and Vietnam, and suggests that the war in Iraq „will have important consequences for U.S. foreign policy for years after the last American battalion leaves Iraqi soil”. He predicted „growing skepticism” about a number of the beliefs that had preceded America’s entry into that conflict, including „that the United States should take unilateral military action to correct situations or overthrow regimes it considers reprehensible but that present no immediate threat to it”, that the U.S. „can and should forcibly bring democracy to other nations” that it „has the duty to rid the world of evil”, and that „international cooperation is of only very limited value”¹³. There is already evidence of such views emerging. The Chicago Council’s 2010 survey found that 79% thought the U.S. was being more of a world policeman than it should be. Similarly, a 2010 poll conducted by the Council on Foreign Relations and Pew Research Center revealed that 49% of respondents believed the U.S. should „mind its own business internationally”. The 49% agreement, first recorded in 2009, was the highest level of agreement with this sentiment in the 45 years that this question had been asked¹⁴.

¹⁰ Chicago Council on Global Affairs, *Constrained Internationalism: Adapting to New Realities, Results of a 2010 National Survey of American Public Opinion*, November 2010; Fox News, *National Priorities*, www.pollingreport.com, May 15–17, 2011.

¹¹ Chicago Council, *Constrained Internationalism*, *op. cit.*

¹² Pew Global Attitudes Project, *Obama More Popular Abroad Than at Home, Global Image of U.S. continues to Benefit*, June 17, 2010.

¹³ J. Mueller, *The Iraq Syndrome*, „Foreign Affairs”, November/December 2005.

¹⁴ M. Mandelbaum, *The Frugal Superpower*, *op. cit.*, p. 33; Chicago Council on Global Affairs, *Constrained Internationalism*, *op. cit.*

International receptivity

One of the things that facilitated America's „rise to globalism“ was the receptivity of many countries and peoples to an American leadership role and presence in their countries. Although Geir Lundestad applies the term only to Europe, his notion of an „empire by invitation“ could also describe the willingness of governments and publics in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Israel, and elsewhere to the American role in their countries¹⁵. By 2008, such international receptivity had eroded dramatically as the U.S. was viewed unfavorably in many regions. Not surprisingly given some Bush-era policies, support for the United States deteriorated significantly in the Islamic world during his presidency (from 25 to 19% in Jordan, 75 to 27% in Indonesia, 52 to 12% in Turkey, and from an already low 23 to 19% in Pakistan). Yet even in long-term American friends, the U.S. favorability rating deteriorated (in Britain 83–53%, Germany 78–31%, and Japan 77–50%). Residents in Latin America have long had ambivalent attitudes toward the United States but there, too, there was a further erosion of support for the United States, from 50 to 22% in Argentina and from 68 to 47% in Mexico in the same period. In several of the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) countries, too, majorities had an unfavorable attitude toward the United States: only 41% of Chinese and 46% of Russians had a favorable view of the U.S. in 2008, although fully 66% of Indians did. Africa was the only world region in which the U.S. received consistently favorable evaluations, with 87% of Kenyans and 70% of Nigerians having favorable views in 2007¹⁶.

While there are likely many reasons for America's loss of global support through 2008, the policies of the Bush administration likely made a major contribution. One common complaint is American unilateralism. Respondents in only three of twenty countries surveyed in 2007 believed the United States took account of their country's interests before acting in foreign affairs, with fewer than 20% in such diverse countries as France, Spain, Russia, Turkey, and South Korea believing so. America's efforts against terrorism also received relatively little support: majorities in only four (Poland, Russia, Nigeria, and Kenya) of twenty countries surveyed in that year supported American efforts to combat terrorism, while fewer than 20% in five countries (Argentina, Turkey, Jordan, Pakistan, and South Korea) did so. Not surprisingly, given the widespread disapproval of President Bush's policies, publics in many countries had little confidence that he would do the right thing in world affairs. Asked that question in 2008, a majority in only three (India, Nigeria, and Kenya) of twenty countries surveyed had faith in the American President. At the other extreme, only 2% of respondents in Turkey, 7% of respondents in Pakistan, Argentina, and

¹⁵ G. Lundestad, *The United States and Western Europe Since 1945: From 'Empire by Invitation' to Transatlantic Drift*, Oxford, 2003.

¹⁶ Pew Global Attitudes Project, *Obama More Popular Abroad*, *op. cit.*

Jordan, and 8% of respondents in Spain had confidence in Bush to do the right thing¹⁷.

THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION'S RESPONSE TO THESE REALITIES

To date, the evidence is mixed as to the willingness and ability of the Obama administration to respond to these problems by reducing expenditures on foreign affairs, reducing America's overseas commitments, and seeking to improve global receptivity to America and its policies.

Available resources

The administration has sought to moderate, if not reduce, defense spending while also increasing the amount spent on non-military foreign affairs programs. Defense spending increased 2.8% between 2009 and 2010 and, while still an increase, it was much less than the 7.4% average annual increase between 2001 and 2009¹⁸. This trend will likely continue. The Pentagon's proposed budget for fiscal year 2012 sought merely a one percent increase from fiscal 2010 and sought to cut spending by \$78 billion by 2016¹⁹. The FY 2012 budget was submitted in February 2011; just two months later, Obama proposed even more defense department cuts, calling for reductions of \$400 billion through 2023 and holding defense spending increases below the inflation level²⁰.

In addition to trying to slow defense spending, the Obama administration is also trying to increase spending on other foreign policy instruments. Defense Secretary Robert Gates has been outspoken on this issue, lamenting in a 2007 speech that spending on non-military foreign affairs programs „remains disproportionately small relative to what we spend on the military” and calling for a „dramatic increase in spending on the civilian instruments of national security”. Doing so would not only reduce the range of tasks on uniformed military in conflict zones, but also make it less likely that military force would have to be used in the first place, as local problems might be dealt with before they become crises²¹. Gates went so far as refer to the „leading role” diplomacy and development needed to play in American policy in a 2009 speech²².

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *Background Paper on SIPRI Military Expenditure, 2010*, www.sipri.org, April 11, 2011.

¹⁹ C. Whitlock, *Pentagon to Cut Spending by \$78 Billion, Reduce Troop Strength*, „Washington Post”, January 7, 2011.

²⁰ White House, *Fact Sheet: The President's Framework for Shared Prosperity and Shared Fiscal Responsibility*, www.whitehouse.gov, April 13, 2011.

²¹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Landon Lecture by Robert Gates*, www.defense.gov, November 26, 2007.

²² Gates quoted in: H. Clinton, *Leading Through Civilian Power: Redefining American Diplomacy and Development*, „Foreign Affairs”, November/December 2010.

Not surprisingly, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton agrees with such views. She has emphasized „soft power”, i.e., America’s ability to attract and entice others through diplomacy, development, and other policy instruments; „smart power”, i.e., combining soft power instruments with hard power instruments; and „civilian power”, which she describes as the „combined force of all of the civilians across the United States Government who practice diplomacy, carry out development projects, and act to prevent and respond to crisis and conflict”²³. Clinton hopes that the newly-created Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review process will not only identify these resources but also consolidate them in more efficient and less costly ways²⁴.

The administration has not been able to shift spending as much as it would like. Not only has it not asked for significant increases in spending for non-military aspects of foreign policy, but it has had to deal with a Congress that wants to cut such programs. The fiscal 2012 budget proposal for the State Department’s programs called for spending just \$47 billion, much less than requested for the Pentagon. While the administration talked about giving greater emphasis to diplomacy and development, the budget proposal slowed the proposed growth in the size of the Foreign Service and reduced or eliminated funding for a number of smaller foreign assistance programs. A State Department spokesman noted the impact of contemporary fiscal realities: „Countries like Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Cyprus, Poland, are all countries that we think we just can’t afford to give the kind of assistance we have in the past....We can’t fund everything, everywhere, any longer”²⁵.

It is a safe bet that Congress will reduce foreign affairs spending below what the President requested for fiscal year 2012, because \$8 billion of the \$38 billion in spending reductions for fiscal year 2011 agreed to in April came from the State Department budget. Among the programs cut at that time were the Economic Support Fund, the Millennium Challenge Corporation, and contributions to the United Nations and other international organizations²⁶.

Extent of overseas commitments

As with spending on foreign affairs matters, the evidence is mixed as to whether the Obama administration will reduce America’s overseas commitments,

²³ H. Clinton, *Remarks at Town Hall Meeting on the Release of the First Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review*, „Leading Through Civilian Power”, December 15, 2010.

²⁴ U.S. Department of State, *The Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review Fact Sheet*, www.defense.gov, November 26, 2010.

²⁵ White House, *Fiscal Year 2012 Budget of the U.S. Government and Other Programs*, www.whitehouse.gov, February 14; State Department official quoted in: J. Rogin, *State Department Budget Request May Be Dead on Arrival at Capitol Hill*, www.foreignpolicy.com, February 14, 2011.

²⁶ J. Rogin, *Appropriators Cut \$8 Billion from State Department Programs*, www.foreignpolicy.com, April 12, 2011.

especially its willingness to send troops to foreign lands. Defense Secretary Gates, responsible for overseeing America's forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, told an audience at West Point that „In my opinion, any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big American land army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa „should have his head examined”, as General MacArthur so delicately put it²⁷. This thinking is reflected in Iraq, where the number of U.S. troops has been reduced from 142,000 at the outset of Obama's term to 46,000 by June 2011. In part for that reason, the U.S. was also spending far less in Iraq, with total appropriations declining from more than \$140 billion in both FY 2007 and 2008 to \$95 billion in FY 2009 and \$65 billion in FY 2010²⁸.

In Afghanistan, however, the Obama administration initially increased the American commitment. There, the number of American troops increased from approximately 35,000 at the beginning of Obama's presidency to 99,000 by June 2011 and total spending has increased by more than 50% to nearly \$94 billion in FY 2010. Of course it is not surprising that overall spending went up with the dispatch of 60,000 more troops, but spending on State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development programs also increased, a reflection of the new approach the administration was taking toward Afghanistan. The new nation-building approach implies both broader tasks and a longer stay for the American military, new commitments of a different sort. America and its NATO allies have agreed to stay in the country until 2014²⁹. In yet another manifestation of its concern about and commitment to Afghanistan, the Obama administration has launched far more drone attacks into Pakistan territory in an effort to kill leading Taliban officials. During the Bush years, the U.S. had launched 45 such attacks; in 2009, alone, the U.S. launched 53. It fired another 117 in 2010 and 43 in the first seven months of 2011³⁰. More recently, Obama shifted course on Afghanistan, promising reductions in the number of U.S. troops and a reduced combat role for them.

The most unexpected move, however, was to dispatch American military forces to yet another country, Libya, in March 2011. However, the administration's approach there may actually illustrate aspects of an Iraq syndrome more than it does the assumption of new commitments, as the U.S. was initially hesitant to support the effort, only did so after it received broad regional and global

²⁷ Gates quoted in: T. Shanker, *Warning against wars like Iraq and Afghanistan*, „New York Times”, February 25, 2011.

²⁸ M. O'Hanlon and I. Livingston, *Iraq Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction and Security in Post-Saddam Iraq*, Washington, Brookings Institution, www.brookings.edu, June 30, 2011; A. Belasco, *The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11*, Congressional Research Service, March 29, 2011.

²⁹ I. Livingston, H. Messera and M. O'Hanlon, *Afghanistan Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction and Security in Post-9/11 Afghanistan*, www.brookings.edu, July 31, 2011; A. Belasco, *The Cost of Iraq*, op. cit.

³⁰ I. Livingston, M. O'Hanlon, *Pakistan Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction and Security*, www.brookings.edu, July 26, 2011.

support, insisted that NATO assume operational control, and pledged that no American ground troops would be dispatched³¹.

In other regions, too, there has been expansion of some American commitments and reduction of others. NATO has added two new members, Croatia and Albania, although the process that resulted in their membership began well before Obama became President. Georgia and Ukraine, two prospective members several years ago, are each less likely to join NATO now, given changing domestic circumstances in those countries. The Obama administration altered a commitment to Poland and the Czech Republic, deciding to remove components of a missile defense system that were to have been placed in those countries. It did so, however, not out of any reduced commitment to those countries – although some in the region took it as such – but rather because it had developed a sea-based system that was „stronger, swifter, and smarter” than the prior approach³².

International receptivity

America’s image in the world improved as soon as Obama entered the White House, if only because he was not George Bush. In a poll taken in February 2009, i.e., within one month of Obama’s coming to office, America’s image went up in 16 of the 19 countries surveyed by the Pew Global Attitudes Project, in some cases quite dramatically. Thus, its favorability rating in Germany increased from 31 to 64% between 2008–2009, in France from 42 to 75%, and in Mexico from 47 to 69%. Stated another way, majorities in 13 of the 16 countries had favorable images of the United States, in contrast to 2008 when majorities in only seven of 18 countries had a favorable image³³. Yet it would be America’s policies more than the occupant in the White House that would be important to maintaining a favorable image. Here, too, the administration has talked about changing American policies, but it has not, or not yet, brought many changes to those policies most disapproved of in certain parts of the world.

To begin to rectify negative perceptions in the Islamic world, for instance, Obama gave a major speech in Cairo in June 2009. He acknowledged problems of the recent past, but called for „a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world: one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect”. Toward that end, he proposed „a sustained effort to listen to each other; to learn from each other; to respect one another; and to seek common ground”³⁴. Obama’s second major speech on the Middle East, quickly dubbed „Cairo II”, was delivered in May 2011 during a period of major political upheaval in the Arab world, and in that speech, too, he acknowledged the failure of previous

³¹ J. Mueller, *Postscript: The Iraq Syndrome Revisited*, www.foreignaffairs.com, March 28, 2011.

³² U.S. Department of State, *Fact Sheet: United States European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA) and NATO Missile Defense*, www.state.gov, May 3, 2011.

³³ Pew Global Attitudes Project, *Obama More Popular Abroad*, *op. cit.*

³⁴ *Obama’s Speech in Cairo*, „New York Times”, June 4, 2009.

American approaches and advocated new ones. While the U.S. had often pursued a strategy based on its narrow interests, it had come to believe that that it „ha[d] a stake not just in the stability of nations, but in the self-determination of individuals....”. Accordingly, American support for political and economic reform was not a „secondary interest”, but a „top priority that must be translated into concrete actions”. Addressing an issue of central concern in the Arab world, Obama called for the creation of two states based on the 1967 boundaries³⁵.

While the speeches were well-received in the Islamic world, actions more than words will be needed to improve America’s image there. To that end, Obama made a major effort at the outset of his term to deal with the Israeli-Palestinian issue, but he later backed off in the face of Israeli intransigence and Palestinian division. American troops remain in Iraq and American economic support for countries undergoing political transitions has been modest. As a result of such decisions, America’s favorability rating in the Arab world was lower in 2011 than it had been in George Bush’s last year in office³⁶.

A similar pattern of promising but not delivering changes in policies exists with respect to some of Obama’s most popular promises from the 2008 campaign. These include the pledge to close Guantanamo and to involve America more energetically in climate change talks. He has now backed away from both pledges, something that likely contributes to the erosion of his support globally. By 2010, although America retained majority support in 15 of 20 countries surveyed, its favorability had declined in almost half of them³⁷.

Obama’s efforts to improve America’s image cannot be characterized solely as heightened expectations followed by a failure to deliver, however. The administration has sought to cooperate more with other actors in the international system and to negotiate with foes rather than threaten them. This is illustrated in its effort to reach out to Iran and its insistence on UN endorsement before participating in military action against Libya. It has sought to be less provocative, e.g., by altering the design of the missile defense system in a way that avoided provoking Russia. Also, building on America’s good image in Africa, the administration has initiated two new foreign aid programs, the Global Health Initiative and the Feed the Future Initiative. Both seek to coordinate existing programs to provide more integrated and sustainable responses to those global problems³⁸.

³⁵ Obama’s *Mideast Speech*, „New York Times”, May 19, 2011.

³⁶ Pew Global Attitudes Project, *Obama’s Challenge in the Muslim World: Arab Spring Fails to Improve U.S. Image*, May 17, 2011.

³⁷ Pew Global Attitudes Project, *Obama More Popular Abroad*, *op. cit.*

³⁸ H. Clinton, *Leading Through Civilian Power: Redefining American Diplomacy and Development*, „Foreign Affairs”, November/December 2010.

PROPOSALS FOR THE FUTURE

While the Obama administration deserves credit for developing some innovative ideas and responses to the challenges it inherited, its efforts to implement those responses has been much more modest. Not only does the administration need to do more to realize the goals it has set for itself, but it should go beyond those preliminary goals and seek to reduce defense spending further, assign still greater priority to non-military foreign affairs spending, reduce America's overseas commitments further, and work more actively to increase international receptivity for the United States and its policies. Doing so would advance American interests more than the actions Obama has taken so far.

Available resources

While Robert Gates argued at time of submission of his proposed defense cuts for FY 2012 that reductions above what he proposed would be „risky at best and potentially calamitous”³⁹, others believe the United States can cut defense spending more dramatically. Obama has already called for defense spending cuts greater than those advocated by his Secretary of Defense, yet his April 2011 proposals actually called for \$600 billion less in defense savings than did the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform (Simpson Bowles Commission) in its December 2010 report. That Commission called for, among other things, reducing the number of U.S. forces in Europe and Asia by one-third, freezing non-combat military pay for three years, reducing procurement by 15%, and cancelling a number of proposed weapons systems⁴⁰. Perhaps reductions of that magnitude are still too modest: the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute recently reported that the U.S. spent nearly 43% of the global total of defense expenditures and that its defense spending had increased nearly 81% in real terms since 2001⁴¹.

Even defense cuts of \$250 billion per year would leave the American defense budget four times larger than China's⁴². Moreover, the U.S. would still have the world's strongest military, one that „would still be superior to any other in technology and capability” and the only military „capable of patrolling the world's oceans, deploying hundreds of thousands of ground forces anywhere on the planet, dominating airspace, and managing intelligence and logistics worldwide”. Another way to demonstrate that American defense spending can be reduced much more than proposed to date is to note that it is bureaucratic

³⁹ C. Whitlock, *Pentagon to Cut Spending by \$78 Billion, Reduce Troop Strength*, „Washington Post”, January 7, 2011.

⁴⁰ E. Klein, *Obama's Deficit Plan is More Conservative, Less Ambitious Than Simpson-Bowles*, „Washington Post”, April 22, 2011; National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform, *Co-Chairs' Proposal*, www.fiscalcommission.gov, November 10, 2010.

⁴¹ SIPRI, *Background Paper on SIPRI Military Expenditure*, 2010, *op. cit.*

⁴² Ch. Kenny, *Three Cheers for Decline*, www.foreignpolicy.com, August 9, 2011.

interests and domestic politics more than threats to the United States that drive high spending. Even though the likelihood of war, especially among the great powers, has gone down, the Pentagon's bureaucratic interests push it to press for higher defense spending by „conjuring up...an array of monsters and potential monsters and possibly potential monsters and crypto-monsters and monster look-alikes and monsters wannabes”⁴³. Nonetheless, Congress, „with one eye always focused on defense contracts”, will „mostly continue to swallow, wallow in, or actively instigate the argument”⁴⁴. While there still are legitimate threats to the United States, including terrorism, weapons proliferation, and climate change, among others, the resolution of these depends less on military remedies than on diplomacy and other activities. As one columnist quips, „...you can't bomb global warming”⁴⁵.

Significant cuts to defense spending will advance American security in a number of ways. Money saved can be used for domestic purposes that will better advance American security. Evidence was presented above about poor American rankings on domestic matters such as health care and education. Countries scoring significantly higher on those measures typically spend much less on defense, either as a percentage of GNP or on a per capita basis. Although high defense spending, alone, cannot explain poor American scores and money saved from cuts in defense spending would not automatically go to domestic spending, money freed up by defense cuts „cannot help but divert money that could be used for other valuable social purposes....Spending that money wisely at home would leave many Americans better off and facilitate long-term economic growth”⁴⁶. Military officers recognize this reality. Those writing as „Mr. Y” in 2011 called for the „prioritization of our investments” in education, health, and other domestic needs, because „only by developing internal strength...can we muster the credible influence needed to remain a world leader”⁴⁷.

Reductions in defense spending should not be devoted solely to deficit reduction or domestic spending, however. The administration is correct that contemporary international problems require a mix of hard and soft power solutions and that America's soft and civilian power assets are greatly under-resourced. For instance, the United States has more musicians in its military bands than it has diplomats, the Foreign Service is smaller than the staff of a single carrier group, and the U.S. spends almost 500 times as much on its military as on

⁴³ A. Bacevich, *Washington Rules: America's Path to Permanent War*. Metropolitan, New York 2010, p. 224.

⁴⁴ J. Mueller, *Postscript: The Iraq Syndrome Revisited*, *op. cit.*

⁴⁵ N. Kristof, *Make Diplomacy Not War*, „New York Times”, August 10, 2008.

⁴⁶ S. Walt, *Defense Spending and National Well-Being*, www.foreignpolicy.com, February 22, 2011.

⁴⁷ Mr Y., *A National Strategic Narrative*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, www.wilsoncenter.org, 2011.

broadcasting and international exchanges combined⁴⁸. Because such soft and civilian power assets are precisely what will be needed to deal with many of the problems of the twenty-first century, some of the savings from defense spending cuts should be applied to non-military foreign affairs spending.

Extent of overseas commitments

With respect to its foreign commitments, too, especially foreign military interventions, the United States can afford to reduce these while also advancing American interests. The U.S. should avoid the use of military force except in cases where its security is directly threatened. Why? An obvious reason is the human and material costs actions such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan impose on the United States. As of July 2011, nearly 1700 Americans had died in Afghanistan and more than 4400 in Iraq. The U.S. spent more than \$747 billion in Iraq between 2003–2010, while it was spending more than \$100 billion a year in Afghanistan by 2011⁴⁹.

Yet the costs of these wars go far beyond what is spent in Iraq and Afghanistan. Joseph Stiglitz and Linda Bilmes have estimated that the total economic cost of the war in Iraq, alone, will exceed \$3 trillion. While the United States is a rich and strong country, „even rich and strong countries squander trillions of dollars at their peril“⁵⁰. Money that was spent in Iraq could not be spent on other foreign and domestic needs. Moreover, it is „clear“ that „our economy would be stronger“ without the intervention, because the war was responsible for approximately a quarter of the increased federal debt between 2003–2010 and for a \$10 per barrel increase in the price of oil⁵¹.

Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have also had an adverse impact on the American military. Consequences include greater difficulty in recruiting and retaining personnel, especially in the army, and an adverse impact upon readiness and equipment. All told, „while the impact of the wars on troop quality, force structure, modernization plans, and materiel readiness may not each be sufficient to cause alarm when considered separately, when added together they pose a serious challenge for the Army“⁵².

These costs might be worth bearing if interventions such as these advanced American security interests, but one can legitimately question whether the

⁴⁸ N. Kristof, *Make Diplomacy Not War*, *op. cit.*; J. Nye, *The War on Soft Power*, www.foreignpolicy.com, April 12, 2011.

⁴⁹ I. Livingston, H. Messera, M. O'Hanlon, *Afghanistan Index*, *op. cit.*; O'Hanlon, I. Livingston, *Iraq Index*, *op. cit.*

⁵⁰ L. Bilmes, J. Stiglitz, *The Iraq War Will Cost Us \$3 Trillion, and Much More*, „Washington Post“, March 9, 2008

⁵¹ J. Stiglitz, L. Bilmes, *The true cost of the Iraq war: \$3 trillion and beyond*, „Washington Post“, September 5, 2010.

⁵² T. Harrison, *Impact of the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan on the US Military's Plans, Programs and Budgets*, Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, August 12, 2009.

United States is more secure after its interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Andrew Bacevich argues that „Little evidence exists” that American actions are likely to have „a positive effect” and „No evidence exists (...) to suggest that U.S. efforts will advance the cause of global peace”⁵³. Not only is American security not advanced by such actions, but its position in the world is positively harmed by them. Interventions such as those in Afghanistan and Iraq increase the attention given to countries that are not intrinsically important to the United States, reducing resources and attention given to more important countries and issues. Currently, for instance, 20% of America’s diplomats and nearly 10% of its development specialists are in three countries: Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan. By 2010, the United States had spent more in Afghanistan than it has on President Obama’s health care plan⁵⁴.

Because foreign military interventions typically heighten anti-Americanism, refraining from doing so has the added benefit of improving America’s image in the world. As Stephen Walt has argued, „(...) a foreign policy that was less geared to overseas intervention would (...) diminish anti-Americanism in many places. Over time, fewer people would be joining anti-American terrorist groups and calling for further infringements on civil liberties here at home”⁵⁵. Even those deemed most benefitted by American interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, i.e., Afghans and Iraqis, provide only modest support for the American effort. In Afghanistan, the percentage of the public believing the U.S. is doing an „excellent” or „good” job in the country has deteriorated fairly consistently since 2005, with only 32% of the public holding such views in November 2010⁵⁶. In Iraq, 70% of respondents to a March 2008 poll wanted U.S. and other forces to leave and 78% of those wanted them to leave within six months⁵⁷. Nor is support for America’s policies much stronger in the regions adjacent to Iraq and Afghanistan.

While foreign military interventions are the most obvious overseas commitment that Americans should re-think, there are others. Consider America’s foreign military bases. The military identified 716 overseas bases in its FY 2009 *Base Structure Report*⁵⁸. That report did not include bases in Iraq, Afghanistan, or Pakistan, so some estimates of the number of overseas bases are as high as 1000. William Pfaff, a journalist for more than 25 years has argued that it was a „terrible error for the United States to build an all-but-irreversible worldwide system” of bases. Why? Because bases have „generated apprehension and hostility and fear of the United States”. That is, a policy aimed at enhancing the

⁵³ A. Bacevich, *Washington Rules*, op. cit., p. 238.

⁵⁴ H. Clinton, *Leading Through Civilian Power*, op. cit.; G. Treverton, *American National Security Since 9/11*, in: *Great Decisions 2011*, Foreign Policy Association, New York, 2011.

⁵⁵ S. Walt, *Defense Spending and National Well-Being*, www.foreignpolicy.com, February 22, 2011.

⁵⁶ I. Livingston, H. Messara, M. O’Hanlon, *Afghanistan Index*, op. cit.

⁵⁷ S. Kull, *Iraqi Public Opinion on the Presence of US Troops*, Testimony Before House Committee on Foreign Affairs, www.worldpublicopinion.org, July 23, 2008.

⁵⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, *Base Structure Report: Fiscal Year 2009 Baseline*, 2009.

national security of the United States has „actually done the opposite, provoking conflict and creating the very insecurity it was intended to prevent (...)”⁵⁹. Closing at least some overseas bases would actually enhance America’s strategic position, to say nothing of the money saved.

International receptivity

While the United States should do less regarding defense spending and overseas commitments, it should do more to enhance international support for its policies. Why? One reason is it has now learned that many of its major policy goals cannot be realized through military power, alone: „Democracy, human rights, and civil society are not best promoted with the barrel of a gun”.⁶⁰ In addition, because many contemporary international problems can only be solved by cooperation between states, the attainment of America’s goals is „impossible without strong and willing allies and partners”⁶¹. While some argue that anti-Americanism does not automatically impede the attainment of U.S. goals, pro-Americanism undoubtedly facilitates them. A final reason why the United States should do more to enhance its international legitimacy is that it has so many resources with which to do so. One German observer claims that America’s soft power ‘looms even larger than its military and economic assets. U.S. culture (...) radiates outward with an intensity last seen in the days of the Roman Empire (...) America’s soft power (...) rules over an empire on which the sun never sets’⁶².

What actions can the United States take to enhance its international legitimacy? Some of the proposals made here, e.g., fewer military interventions, reduced defense spending, would have the effect of improving America’s standing in the world. There are, however, additional things the United States can and should do. Several initiatives identified in a recent report on the application of American power – increasing development aid and the number of international exchanges – can be used to illustrate the benefits of greater efforts to enhance America’s global standing. Why spend more on foreign aid? Because doing so „re-inforces basic American values, contributes to peace, justice, and prosperity, and improves the way we are viewed around the world”⁶³. To illustrate, while the United States was unpopular in much of the world during the Bush presidency, Africa was a notable exception. There, America’s favorability rating was very high, 87% in Kenya and 70% in Nigeria in 2007⁶⁴. An often-cited reason for this is the foreign aid policies of the Bush administration, which included not

⁵⁹ W. Pfaff, *Manufacturing Insecurity*, „Foreign Affairs”, November/December 2010.

⁶⁰ J. Nye, *The War on Soft Power*, www.foreignpolicy.com, April 12, 2011.

⁶¹ Center for Strategic and International Studies, *CSIS Commission on Smart Power: A Smarter, More Secure America*, Washington, CSIS, <http://media.csis.org>, 2007.

⁶² J. Joffe quoted in Joseph S. Nye, *The Limits of American Power*, „Political Science Quarterly”, 117, Winter 2002/2003.

⁶³ Center for Strategic and International Studies, *CSIS Commission on Smart Power*, *op. cit.*

⁶⁴ Pew Global Attitudes Project, *Obama More Popular Abroad*, *op. cit.*

only an overall increase in aid but also, in the President's Emergency Program for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), emphasis on an issue of particular importance to Africans.

International exchanges are important because they typically involve linkages between people outside of government. They have been shown to be very effective: „State Department evaluations repeatedly show that foreign exchange participants complete their programs with a better impression of the United States and its people” and „U.S. ambassadors consistently rank exchange programs among the most useful catalysts for long-term political change and mutual understanding”.⁶⁵ Those benefits come at little cost. The State Department's exchange programs cost less than one-tenth of one percent of total federal spending, so expansion of these programs can bring great benefits at relatively little cost⁶⁶.

America's reputation abroad is also a result of what it does at home. If it fails to live up to its own principals, America's reputation and those principals will be discredited. Efforts need to be made to ease inequalities in America, increase educational levels, improve health outcomes, eliminate intolerance, and insure the civil rights of all. Doing so not only strengthens America's ability to succeed in the contemporary world, as argued above, but also enhances the country's reputation.

CONCLUSION

One conclusion of this study is that the situation inherited by the Obama administration in 2009 was actually one of opportunity and not crisis, as it is sometimes portrayed⁶⁷. The need to cut spending and public unease about extensive overseas involvements could contribute to a different American approach to the world, one that could bring benefits at less cost. A second conclusion, however, is that the Obama administration has been unable or unwilling to make the most of this opportunity. Although it has reduced the American presence in Iraq and slowed the growth in defense spending, it also increased the presence in Afghanistan and allowed defense spending to increase. While Obama said a number of things aimed at increased international receptivity for American policies, he has not always acted on his promises. Obama has also failed to take advantage of the near global goodwill for the United States that existed at the outset of his presidency.

⁶⁵ Alliance for International Educational and Cultural Exchange, FY 2012 Department of State Exchange Program Funding, www.allianceexchange.org, May 22, 2011.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁷ M. Mandelbaum, *The Frugal Superpower*, *op. cit.*, pp. 65–99.

Looking to the future, it seems unlikely that Obama will go much further than he has. America's military presence in Afghanistan is due to last until at least 2014. While he may want to reduce defense spending and increase spending on non-military foreign affairs activities, Obama must deal with a Congress opposed to both of those goals, and he appears unwilling to press that fight. The goodwill that existed at the outset of Obama's presidency has been eroded and the administration seems unwilling to implement the kinds of policies dedicated to reviving it. Consequently, the opportunity the administration had in 2009 to fundamentally reshape U.S. foreign policy and retreat from globalism has been lost.