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How Obama Went From Being a Peace Candidate to a War President

Critics call him timid, but the president's foreign policy has often been too aggressive—even at the risk of our long-term national interests.

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When it comes to his administration's foreign policy, Barack Obama must feel a little like Michael Corleone in The Godfather Part III: "Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in."

Upon entering office, the president promised to end the wars of occupation in Iraq and Afghanistan, reset American relations with Russia, and give priority to rebuilding the American middle class. Now, after being “pulled back in” by liberal interventionists and neoconservative hawks both inside and outside his administration, he finds himself pursuing a new open-ended war against the so-called Islamic State (ISIS), prosecuting an expanded counterterrorism campaign from Central Asia to North Africa, overseeing a new Cold War with Russia, and pivoting toward what could become one with China in East Asia.

It’s worth noting that many of the people pulling Obama into these strategic choices are the same ones who cheered us into the war in Iraq. Such credentials should have thoroughly discredited them. But over the last several years, they have had a disproportionate influence in shaping a narrative of US foreign policy that is almost as misguided as the one they spun in the lead-up to the Iraq War.

According to this narrative, Obama has led an American retreat from the world that has emboldened our adversaries and put at risk the international system built by the United States. The fundamental goal of US foreign policy, therefore, must be to restore American global leadership and reassure our allies with more decisive and muscular action, particularly in defeating ISIS in Iraq and Syria and in countering Russia in Ukraine and China in East Asia.

All of the Republican presidential candidates, with the exception of Rand Paul, have taken up this “interventionist” narrative and are making Obama’s foreign policy—and, by extension, that of Democratic candidates in general—one of their central campaign themes. This virtually guarantees that foreign policy will be one of the defining issues of the 2016 election. But the narrative that the Republican candidates are echoing is wrong in almost every respect, and so are the lessons that they’re drawing from it. The failure of Obama’s foreign policy is not that it has been too cautious or has diminished American power, but that it has embraced many of the very positions that Obama’s interventionist opponents have advocated. In so doing, it has failed to protect America’s most important national interests.

To begin with, the neocon and liberal-hawk critique of the administration is way off base in saying that Obama has led a retreat from the world. Far from retrenching American power, the administration has expanded—in some ways dramatically—US foreign-policy goals and the reach of American power. While the administration has withdrawn American ground forces from Iraq and is in the process of doing so in Afghanistan, it has nonetheless maintained America’s commitments to both countries and, in the case of Iraq, has now reinserted US special forces as part of the larger coordinated air and ground war against ISIS. Meanwhile, it has greatly increased the geographic scope of the “war on terror” to include Yemen, Syria, and large parts of Northern and Eastern Africa.

In the Middle East and North Africa, the administration extended US foreign-policy goals to include military intervention and regime change in Libya and the removal of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. In Eastern Europe, it has sought to bring Ukraine exclusively into the Western orbit, and has positioned US military power closer to Russia by deploying American forces in Poland and the Baltic states and by sending military advisers to Ukraine. And in East Asia, it has sought to organize a new trade group, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the purpose of which is, in part, to exclude China, while proceeding with plans to expand America’s military presence in the region.

In all these respects, the Obama agenda constitutes an expansion of US foreign-policy ambitions. The Bush administration may have contemplated regime change in Syria, but it backed away from that goal after things went sour in Iraq. With regard to Libya, the Bush administration actually worked with the Qaddafi government to reach an agreement eliminating Libya's WMD program and gaining Tripoli's cooperation in the "war on terror."

On Russia and the former Soviet Union, the Bush White House clearly supported various statements by NATO endorsing possible membership for Georgia and Ukraine, but it responded more cautiously to the war in Georgia than the Obama administration has done in the case of Ukraine. When then-Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili ordered his forces to attack South Ossetia in 2008, prompting a Russian defense of the breakaway republic, the Bush administration limited its response to sending humanitarian aid and imposing relatively minor sanctions. These actions stopped well short of the current US military buildup in Eastern Europe and the economic war that the Obama administration has sought to organize against Moscow.

In Asia, while neocons and liberal hawks called for a League of Democracies that would isolate China, the Bush administration actually seemed to recognize the inevitable multipolar world that was beginning to emerge with the rise of China. It did initiate the talks on the Trans-Pacific Partnership, but it did not make the TPP a strategic priority in the same way that the Obama administration has with its pivot to Asia. If anything, the Bush administration was too passive in accepting China's mercantilist trade practices (carrying on the unfortunate trade policy that the Clinton administration had bequeathed it) and was too eager to encourage US corporate investment in China at the expense of American economic interests.

The prevailing narrative also holds that the Obama administration has let down America's allies and friends. This, too, is unfounded, and it misses the real problem—not that the administration has neglected the concerns of US allies, but that it has, on too many occasions, put their interests above our own and above the broader interests of peace and security. With the exception of its persistence in pursuing negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program, the administration's Middle East policies have been more in line with the desires of Israel and Saudi Arabia than with American strategic interests. In the process, it has unwisely embraced some of their questionable foreign-policy goals, including regime change in Syria and Libya and, more recently, Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen.

It was not in US interests to break the Syrian state or replace the Assad government, given the risk that the regime's collapse would open the door for Islamic extremists, and given that Assad had kept the peace with Israel. But the administration nonetheless actively supported the campaign of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar to bring down Assad's government. Similarly, in Eastern Europe, it was not in America's interest to change Ukraine's nonaligned status, given that doing so would likely lead to a crisis in a country that is still deeply divided politically and economically—and knowing that active US involvement in an unconstitutional change of government would lead to a strong response from Russia. But the administration nonetheless worked with Poland, the Baltic states, and other anti-Russian European Union members to do so. Nor was it in America's interest to help escalate the civil war by unconditionally supporting Kiev's various military offensives this past year, when such offensives would only further bankrupt Ukraine and cause even more unnecessary bloodshed. But again the Obama administration did so.

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The prevailing interventionist narrative also paints the Obama administration as indecisive and too inclined toward diplomacy. But, if anything, the administration has been too quick on the draw—declaring that Assad must go and that Putin must be punished—before it has thought through the implications of its declarations or, in some cases, even before it has had the facts to back up its position. Indeed, with the notable exceptions of the opening to Cuba and its more recent negotiating posture toward Iran, the administration's idea of diplomacy has been very much in the triumphalist Clinton and Bush tradition that favors declaration over compromise; hence the practice of making unattainable, maximalist demands or setting unrealistic preconditions to negotiations and then employing coercive statecraft to achieve them.

To his credit—and the nation's benefit—the president has dragged his feet on certain hawkish demands. Thanks to Obama's last-minute reflections, the administration backed away from bombing Syria in September 2013, allowing us to accept Russia's help in obtaining an agreement to eliminate Syria's chemical weapons in the process. By now it should be clear just how disastrous an American bombing of Damascus would have been. Indeed, there is a strong possibility that had Obama gone forward with the bombing campaign, ISIS and the various Al Qaeda groups in Syria would be in control of Damascus and Aleppo now, threatening to deploy Syria's chemical-weapons stockpile against Israel, Christians, and Shiites.

Also to his credit, Obama has continued negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program, moving us closer to an agreement that will confirm Iran's commitment not to pursue nuclear weapons. Unfortunately, the administration has done so in a manner that has made major concessions to the interventionist narrative along the way, thus limiting the possibility of a true transformation in US-Iranian relations.

For many months, the administration refused to recognize Iran's right to enrich uranium, instead launching a far-reaching covert effort to sabotage its enrichment program, which eventually failed to halt its progress. Moreover, it has pursued a nuclear agreement without an accompanying strategy of rapprochement, which threatens to limit the benefits of any deal. As a consequence, the administration continues to refuse to cooperate openly with Iran on the war against ISIS, although such overt cooperation would clearly further American interests and may be necessary in order to defeat ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Worse, it has chosen to try to reassure Saudi Arabia of Washington's support in ways that are detrimental to American interests in the region. It has gone so far as to openly back Riyadh's grotesque bombing campaign in Yemen, which has killed thousands of civilians and strengthened Al Qaeda in Yemen. And it has acquiesced in the Saudi-engineered escalation of the war in Syria, which has entailed expanded Saudi, Turkish, and Qatari support of the Army of Conquest led by Jabhat al-Nusra.

For his instances of caution and restraint, Obama has received only the scorn of neocons and liberal hawks, who have derided him as too soft and indecisive. But the administration has been far from soft with its dramatic escalation of drone strikes leveled against Al Qaeda and Taliban targets; indeed, it has gone far beyond what the Bush administration had imagined. So, too, with the administration's resort to economic warfare, which has been taken to new heights against Russia and Iran—and beyond what would be in this country's long-term interests, if the goal were to preserve America's global economic leadership and the dollar's position as the world's principal reserve currency.

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With few exceptions, then, the Obama administration has largely followed the policies that the interventionist narrative would have the United States undertake. And the results have been nothing short of the disaster that candidate Obama might have predicted. It is reasonable to argue we could have avoided much of the Ukrainian crisis had key figures in the Obama administration not actively conspired to bring down the Yanukovich government, and especially if the administration had not, in effect, supported the illegal February 22 street coup in Kiev. Similarly, it is likely that there would have been no Benghazi, no civil war among competing Islamic militias, no spread of weapons or chaos in Libya, if Washington had refrained from militarily intervening against Qaddafi.

It is also possible that ISIS would not be on the march to the degree that it is today had Washington not worked with its Sunni allies—Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar—to funnel weapons to Sunni rebels in Syria, and had it done more to restrain our allies from supporting foreign jihadi fighters in both Syria and Iraq. But by helping to open the floodgates for both weapons and fighters, the administration is now looking at an endless new war that will only bleed us morally as well as financially. If Obama had actually acted with the restraint that his critics accuse him of, can anyone seriously say we would be worse off?

The damage to American interests, however, cannot be measured only by the instability that Washington's policy has caused; we must also take into account the extent to which these crises have crowded out other important foreign-policy goals. The true cost of the interventionist narrative is that it threatens another lost decade for American foreign policy, simultaneously weakening our long-term position in the world while undermining our most important national priorities.

Consider the utter senselessness of our actions over the past year. While Washington has readied NATO to deter what it sees as Russian aggression against Eastern Europe, all the while congratulating itself on isolating Russia, Moscow has been reshaping the Eurasian economy—especially the energy economy—by forging deeper ties with China, India, South Korea, and Japan. And while the US military has been busy chasing Sunni extremists around the greater Middle East and trying to make Iran and its Shia allies submit to American dominance, China has been engaging most of the world's economies with international economic initiatives, such as its new Silk Road Fund and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Both of these will expand China's influence deep into Eurasia and the Middle East.

Still, the biggest failure of Obama's foreign policy is that it has not advanced the country's most important national goals. The president was right when he suggested that our overriding national priority must be to rebuild the American middle class and reduce inequality at home. But he has been wrong to believe that he can carry out a foreign policy fundamentally at odds with that priority. With 18 months left in his term, it is not too late for the president to realign US foreign policy to support his domestic agenda while strengthening America's position internationally.

If Obama is serious about rebuilding the American middle class, he needs a foreign policy that gives priority to addressing the worrying economic conditions that continue to threaten the breakdown of economic growth and political stability in much of the world. More specifically, this would mean curtailing military commitments that are not essential to our national security or maintaining international peace, while promoting programs to expand investment and jobs in strategically important regions.

Such an approach would do more to constrain the destabilizing policies of Turkey and Saudi Arabia, while making common cause with Iran and Russia to contain ISIS until a more responsible Sunni alternative emerges. It would mean reengaging Russia in an effort to bring the civil war in Ukraine to an end and to rebuild the Ukrainian economy. It would mean shifting our pivot to Asia away from the TPP and toward the opportunities opened up by China's proposed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and by its transition to a more consumer-oriented economy, troubled as it may be.

Our strategy ought to be to leverage and take advantage of China's demand-enhancing investment region-wide, not to integrate more deeply with the mercantilist-oriented Pacific economies. The US and world economies need more investment that creates jobs and produces rising incomes for working men and women, not more delusional efforts to make Japan's economy more like our own or to create more low-wage export platforms in countries like Vietnam. We, in turn, should come up with our own international investment initiatives to enhance demand and create jobs, rather than pursue trade deals that will only embroil us in endless disputes while doing little or nothing to correct the basic imbalance of too much supply and too little demand in the world economy.

In short, we should be working with our international counterparts to strengthen the world economy and create jobs. In this way, we might be able to break our downward drift toward endless war in the Middle East and new Cold Wars in Europe and Asia.