BARACK OBAMA’S FLEXIBLE RESPONSE:
THE SHADOW OF THE COLD WAR IN US FOREIGN POLICY SINCE 2009

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Abstract
This paper tests how far Obama’s foreign policy has broken with cold war precedent. It was widely assumed that his presidency would not only repudiate his predecessor, but also transcend the ‘old think’ of the cold war. ‘Resets’ would replace geostrategic tensions. Cosmopolitanism would replace containment. Opponents would be engaged into compromise. US foreign policy would come to resemble the EU’s. The paper argues that despite this rhetoric, Obama has delivered a foreign policy shadowed by the cold war. Claiming to embrace a more mobile appreciation of threats and opportunities, à la Kennedy’s flexible response, Obama has, like him, found cold war-style diplomacy strategy unavoidable. Case studies include Russia, China, and the Middle East.
Governor Romney . . . when you were asked what’s the biggest geopolitical threat facing America, you said Russia, not Al Qaida; you said Russia, in the 1980s, they’re now calling to ask for their foreign policy back because, you know, the Cold War’s been over for 20 years.

President Obama, third presidential debate, October 23, 2012

The contest of ideas [with Moscow] continues.
President Obama, speech in Brussels, March 26, 2014

Does he [Putin] continue to wreck his country’s economy and continue Russia’s isolation in pursuit of a wrong-headed desire to recreate the glories of the Soviet empire? Or does he recognise that Russia’s greatness does not depend on violating the territorial integrity and sovereignty of other countries?

Obama, press conference at G7, Germany, June 8, 2015

The wave of euphoria that greeted the election of Barack Obama in November 2008 masked some uncomfortable realities. First, despite a widely assumed national and global popularity, Obama had managed to win over only thirty-two percent of the American electorate; some sixty-percent voted against him or did not vote at all. Second, the ‘change’ mantra he adopted in his campaign was especially problematic when it came to foreign policy. What Obama had actually campaigned on was not a revolution or counterrevolution in US diplomacy but continuity. He wanted to adopt many of Bush’s strategies – and improve them. His qualified national popularity and tacit call for continuity was to bedevil his foreign policy. This paper assesses how Obama struggled to implement a foreign policy in the long shadow of the cold war.

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1 http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/27/world/europe/obama-europe.html?hp&_r=0
2 http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/08/g7-leaders-sanctions-russia-ukraine-conflict-obama
Despite a geographically varied upbringing – taking in Hawaii, Indonesia, and Kansas – and a proud assertion of his ‘world citizenship’ – traveling to Africa, India, Pakistan and Europe after graduating – Obama came to the presidency with surprisingly little direct experience of international affairs. As a student and community organizer in his twenties, he had specialized in civil rights law. As a state lawmaker in his thirties he rose by his navigation of local Illinois politics. His stands on foreign affairs were rather humdrum and left-leaning. In the 1980s he opposed apartheid in South Africa and wanted a nuclear weapons freeze but otherwise did not betray a peculiar zeal for causes beyond his own political ambitions. He visited Kenya for familial not geostrategic reasons – his father was a Kenyan. In the 1990s, he had little to contribute on post-cold war foreign policy debates. He was ambivalent, as far as we can glean, about the liberal military interventionism of Bill Clinton. Indeed, his grasp of the issues that were sown thereby came retrospectively. During his rise to national political power in the early 2000s, Obama consulted with key foreign policy makers and scholars of the Clinton era but seems not to have inherited their liberal passions. As a freshman US senator, 2005-07, his foreign policy positions were not easily labeled.\(^3\) In 2008, the liberal historian Sean Wilentz claimed that Obama ‘resembles Jimmy Carter more than he does any other Democratic president in living memory.’\(^4\)

His Carterish tendencies were arguably apparent even before he became president. By the time he announced his run in 2007, Obama had, on domestic matters, one of the most liberal voting records in the Senate. But, in contradistinction to Carter in 1976, his intended foreign policy was a study in ambiguity. He made much political hay

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\(^3\) See Ryan Lizza, ‘The Consequentialist,’ *New Yorker*, May 2, 2011.

indicating the failures of George W. Bush’s Iraq war while at the same time claiming the 
mantle of his father, who had attacked Baghdad in 1991. Like the elder Bush, Obama 
embraced a cool realism, eschewing the younger’s ‘dumb’ (Obama’s adjective) 2003 
war. Simultaneously, he sought the counsel of humanitarian hawks, enticing Samantha 
Power – the young author of an influential book on genocide – to advise him on foreign 
policy. He wanted a troop drawdown in Iraq and a surge in Afghanistan. He made initial 
overtures to Middle Eastern Muslims – promising to curtail American colonial meddling 
– before joining Britain, France, and Italy in a protracted attack on Libya, resulting in the 
extrajudicial killing of its leader. It seemed Obama was determined to avoid the charge of 
consistency in his foreign policy. Rather, flexibility and adaptation – not doctrine – 
became the hallmarks of his approach. Both liberals and realists wanted to claim him as 
one of their own – and, depending on the issue at hand, each school could. How far was 
this ‘flexible response’ a successful attempt to break the straitjacketing of the cold war? 
How much was new in Obama’s foreign policy? What did he change? We can begin to 
answer these questions by looking at his foreign policy team.

Obama’s team

Those within the early Obama foreign policy team claimed the first Bush administration 
(1989-93) was their model. Eschewing the free-for-all decision-making of Clinton and 
the closed shop of Dick Cheney, Obama attempted to reconstruct the close-knit team of 
George Bush Sr. Success in this regard was not immediately apparent. His first national 
security advisor turned out to be no Brent Scowcroft. James L. Jones endured an unhappy 
tenure at the NSC, failing to win the new president’s confidence – and vice versa. In
November 2010 Thomas Donilon replaced him. ‘Change’ became the hallmark of Obama’s foreign policy team. In April 2011, Robert Gates, the defense secretary retained from the Bush administration, was replaced with Leon Panetta. Panetta’s directorship of the CIA was then assumed by David Petraeus, the general that had saved George W. Bush’s war in Iraq. After an affair with his biographer came to light, Petraeus resigned the post in 2012.

The Bush-Scowcroft-Baker analogue was further complicated by the woman selected for Jim Baker’s role. Hillary Clinton, whom Obama so brilliantly out-strategized to win the Democratic nomination, was offered and accepted the State Department but could hardly be regarded as a friend and intimate. Scholars can only speculate as to Obama’s motives here. Certainly, tying her political fortunes to his own whilst simultaneously removing her from the locus of power by virtue of her foreign traveling made good strategic sense.

Reinforcing the cold-war anchor was Obama’s selection of elder statesmen. Henry Kissinger has become perhaps the most ubiquitous presidential advisor of the modern era, again belying claims that after the cold war US foreign policy changed decisively. Clinton, Bush Jr., and Obama all sort his counsel. Obama continued this raid on 1970s’ know-how by consulting with Zbigniew Brzezinski. In 2011, Carter’s national security advisor (1977-81) was described as ‘the reigning realist of the Democratic foreign-policy establishment.’

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Russia

Russia’s nostalgia for the cold war was to continually bedevil Obama’s efforts to transcend that conflict. US-Russia cooperation (over nuclear weapons for example) and contestation (as over Ukraine) were both framed by a cold war shadow. On April 8, 2010 another START agreement was signed. A Russo-American strategic engagement routed in the cold war continued. The original idea for a comprehensive arms control agreement had been Ronald Reagan’s in the early 1980s. George H. W. Bush signed it in 1991. Obama was the third president to adopt and extend its framework. Indeed, Obama’s START drew criticism for being overly-rooted in ‘a cold war mentality.’ Rather than pursue more aggressive anti-proliferation efforts – against Iran and North Korea, for example – Obama fell back on a traditional and rather outmoded measure of diplomatic success: arms control treaties with Russia.° A discomforting Chinese propensity to leak nuclear technology to Pakistan was left essentially unchecked by the Obama administration. With no cold-war precedent to draw on, the US has found formal arms agreements with the PRC hard to come by.

Despite the change he was meant to embody, Obama pursued a traditional foreign policy. This complicated more than it advanced US security and interests. START was an example of this. President Obama invested significant diplomatic as well domestic political capital in the deal with Russia. And yet it was not clear how a renewed rapprochement with Moscow would solve problems like North Korean nuclear gamesmanship, the Iranian penetration of Lebanon, Iraq and Syria and, compounded by

the latter, the capture of Palestinian West Bank by Hamas. Nor indeed, that agreements
with Putin could do much to restrain his territorial ambitions in his backyard. Rather than
confront these issues, Obama returned to the vision of a nuclear-free world. This may
have motivated his student activism in the early 1980s but was a second-tier priority in
2010. Pursuing START also meant confronting a Republican Party in Congress newly
energised by sweeping gains in the 2010 midterm elections. The deference of the
legislature to the White House in the cold war and post-9/11 crisis environments no
longer applied. Obama’s Russian foreign policy obliged to him fight a battle on Capitol
Hill he might otherwise have avoided.

A relationship supposedly ‘reset’ by the Obama administration had, by 2014,
assumed a familiar cold war pattern. In March of that year, Russian military forces
invaded Ukraine. Vladimir Putin, on a similar pretext to his invasion of Georgia six years
earlier, claimed to be acting in defense of Russian lives against a ‘fascist’ government. In
a popular uprising days before, the pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovych had been toppled.
The new regime looked westward with muted confidence to the protection of the
European Union. When this was not forthcoming, Putin annexed Crimea, in Ukraine’s
south. President Obama watched, as George W. Bush had done, as Moscow rolled tanks
into its ‘near abroad.’ ‘Russia,’ said Obama, ‘was on the wrong side of history.’

And yet it was a cold war history that was repeating itself – both in terms of
Russian action and US response. Presidents that Obama compared himself favorably to
had also been impotent in the face of Russian aggression in its neighborhood. Harry

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8 20 November 2010 NATO Agrees on a Missile Defense Shield;
Truman could do little to protect eastern Europe from Soviet domination in the late 1940s. Dwight Eisenhower had threatened a harder line against global communism but could do nothing as Russian troops crushed the uprising in Hungary in 1956. LBJ could only bluster when Brezhnev invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968. Jimmy Carter’s substantive response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was to boycott the Moscow Olympics. Even the great cold warrior Ronald Reagan went no further than a rhetorical commitment to the liberation of eastern Europeans; by his second term he was cutting deals with their oppressor.

So if they could not resist Russian military power on its western front, how might a president wedded far more to the concepts of soft power and diplomatic engagement, of withdrawal from war, do so when Ukrainian independence was threatened? Obama’s critics made much of his impotence but it mirrored that of his predecessors. American options for repelling Russian power in the lands of the former Soviet Union remain very limited. This was reflected in an aversion to deeper conflict with Russia. During the spring 2014 crisis in Ukraine, for example, a poll found that, by a margin of 56 percent to 29 percent, Americans favored steering clear of a more forceful response.

And yet there remained a nagging sense that Obama’s ambivalence about containing Russia was not simply a repeat of the cold war but a fundamental failure in the president’s approach. Early in his term, Obama had tried to reset relations with Moscow. Hillary Clinton presented her Russian counterpart with a big red reset button. By 2014, however, Russian foreign policy was resetting itself to a seemingly cold war pattern. Obama’s engagement had failed. ‘I am very depressed today,’ noted Michael McFaul,

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9 See Anne Applebaum 2013.
who was the hopeful and spirited architect of Obama’s Russia policy and later ambassador to Moscow. ‘My only hope is that this dark period will not last as long as the last Cold War.’\footnote{In Peter Baker, ‘If Not a Cold War, a Return to a Chilly Rivalry,’ \textit{New York Times}, 18 March 2014; http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/19/world/europe/if-not-a-new-cold-war-a-distinct-chill-in-the-air.html?hp&_r=0}

In Vladimir Putin, Obama faced a leader far more like his Soviet predecessors. US presidents like Nixon and Reagan, whilst they cut important deals with the Kremlin, kept the Russians guessing as to their true intentions. Would their anti-communism lead to nuclear belligerence? How rational were opponents of the USSR in the White House? Richard Nixon deliberately sought to convey the impression that he was unhinged when it came to communism.\footnote{See http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/03/25/madman_in_white_house_nixon_russia_obama} He called it his ‘Madman Theory’:

\begin{quote}
I want the North Vietnamese to believe I’ve reached the point where I might do anything to stop the war. We’ll just slip the word to them that, ‘for God’s sake, you know Nixon is obsessed about communism. We can’t restrain him when he’s angry – and he has his hand on the nuclear button,’ and Ho Chi Minh himself will be in Paris in two days begging for peace.\footnote{H.R. Haldeman, \textit{The Ends of Power} (New York: Times Books, 1977), p. 364.13230973 HALD}
\end{quote}

Barack Obama, in contrast, traded on an opposite persona. In the face of Russian cold war nostalgia in Ukraine he projected a cool modernity. Obama’s supporters welcomed his urbanity; his detractors observed that it merely made him predictable. The effect was to telegraph to Putin a deep-seated aversion to military confrontation and even hard talking. Ronald Reagan’s ‘new cold war’ in the early 1980s was accompanied by a significant defense build-up (from 4.9 percent of GDP to 6.2) and a rhetoric of moral absolutism. Reagan called the USSR ‘the focus of evil in the modern world’ in 1983 and joked that he was about to begin bombing Russia in 1984. Obama’s Russian policy was
conducted in an era of defense sequestration (from 4.6 per cent of GDP to 4.2) and, if not in the language of moral relativism, employed a vocabulary of soft power, preferring economic sanctions to military bluster.

Obama made concerted attempts to frame Russian adventurism as a cold war throwback but refused to countenance a hardline cold-war style response himself. He had ridiculed his 2012 presidential opponent when the Republican designated Russia a key threat to the United States. The 1980s, said Obama were ‘calling to ask for their foreign policy back.’ This dismissal of cold war thinking, ironically, was an implicit appeal to Obama’s hero of that conflict: President John Kennedy. The last senator to become president, until Obama in 2008, Kennedy had resolved the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, not by military threat but by empathy with Nikita Khrushchev and a willingness to compromise.

Even as Obama sought to transcend the cold war he found himself adapting its strategic lessons. Kennedy’s ‘flexible response’ gave him cover to both make war against Soviet interests – he began the military escalation in Vietnam, for example – and to bargain short of war – as the resolution in Cuba showed. Obama sort a similar room for maneuver. Kennedy, though, had framed his Russia policy as a balance between hard and soft power. His rhetoric and his decision-making reveal a calibration of the two. Violence was to be used if necessary but not if negotiation could achieve the same end. Critics of Obama charged him with a misplaced place in the efficacy of soft power – moving the United States from being the world’s ‘Arsenal of Democracy’ to its ‘linen closet’ – a charge not easily leveled at Kennedy.14

And yet both men in their different eras recognized the limits of US power in Russia’s sphere of influence. We will never know if Kennedy really would have gone to nuclear war over west Berlin. He treated the Soviet occupation of eastern Europe as an accomplished fact, seeking little revision to it. Rather, he and his immediate successors chose to fight Russia by proxy, in the developing world. Obama, likewise, showed no stomach for a military confrontation over Crimea (part of Russia until 1954 and then again after 2014). Like Kennedy, his substantial tools were rhetorical. ‘In the 21st century,’ he said, ‘the borders of Europe cannot be redrawn with force; that international law matters; and that people and nations can make their own decisions about their future.’ Unlike Kennedy, Obama did not commit to ‘pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship,’ in order to negate Russian meddling. His response was tangentially military – sending extra US fighter jets to Lithuania and Poland, for example – and largely economic and diplomatic.

Whether US presidents ever had a decisive impact on Soviet/Russia behavior and/or caused the demise of the USSR remains an enduring historiographical debate. Obama’s foreign policy should be seen within the terms of that debate. Criticism of his alleged passivity in the face of Russian expansion tends to ignore the straitjacketing that geography forces on every US president. Russia’s backyard affords the US commander-in-chief few realistic options. In 1944-47, Roosevelt and then Truman acknowledged that the parts of Europe under Soviet occupation were likely to stay that way – as they did for the next forty-five years.

Ronald Reagan increased his moral support of Solidarity in Poland when the Kremlin ordered a crackdown on it but did not make military threats. George W. Bush
was arguably more forceful in his denunciation of Putin’s invasion of Georgia in 2008 (leading to the annexation of Georgian territory) but, like his successor, recognized the limits of a military solution. Such evidence points to the relative autonomy Moscow has and will enjoy to its near west irrespective of who sits in the White House. Russia does what is does for largely endogenous reasons.

And yet this free-pass for Obama relies on a selective reading of US-USSR relations. Others scholars argue that US posture has been crucial in altering Russian calculations – and thus find reason to chide Obama’s passivity. Conservative commentators blamed the president squarely for a pusillanimous response to Russia – a re-run of Carter’s moral dithering. The historian John Lewis Gaddis noted that ‘hanging tough paid off’ for Ronald Reagan; his defense build-up forced the USSR to compete and lose. Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, dispute this interpretation. The USSR fell as a consequence of its own internal decrepitude.

Debate about Obama’s Russia policy is framed in similar fashion. It is possible to construct a narrative, drawn from the cold war, that US disinterestedness, exampled in Obama’s ‘pivoting’ toward Asia, emboldened Putin to seize Crimea. Obama’s ‘weakness,’ his ‘abandonment’ of a missile shield with Poland and the Czech Republic, and his embrace of soft power invited the Kremlin to revert back to cold-war type, to threaten its neighbors and restore a pride wounded by cold war defeat (a defeat Putin never accepted happened).

But such an interpretation necessarily elides the seriousness with which Obama took the Ukrainian crisis. Indeed, one could argue his reaction to Putin’s annexation of

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15 John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the end of the cold war* (1992), ch. 7
Crimea was more vociferous than that of George W. Bush over his invasion of Georgia. Bush had a need to keep Putin on side in his larger war against terror. Obama did not feel a similar constraint. Importantly, his framing of the Ukraine situation drew direct cold war parallels. Having dismissed Romney’s anachronistic approach to Russia in 2012, by March 2014, Obama was articulating it. ‘The contest of ideas [with Moscow] continues,’ he told an audience in Brussels. ‘For 20 years,’ one historian noted, ‘nobody has thought about how to “contain” Russia. Now they will.’

Obama increased US military cooperation with eastern Europe and reassured NATO allies of US support. The rotation of more US ground troops through the Baltic states was a clear signal that countries Putin regarded as within Russia’s sphere (and which had been colonised by the USSR) were now firmly in the American camp. Remarkably, to those who recalled his 2008 presidential campaign, Obama defended Bush’s Iraq war as indicative of America’s desire ‘to work within the international system. We did not claim or annex Iraq’s territory. We did not grab its resources for our own gain.’

Obama, after Ukraine, was to reside firmly in the cold war’s shadow. Like Bill Clinton, he attempted to sweep away the old-think of that bi-polar conflict and adapt to the sunny uplands of liberal democratic progress. But ideological conflict did not end with the collapse of the Soviet project. Gangster capitalism gave way to a new authoritarianism in Moscow, founded on long-standing notions of Russian

19 See this on Putin as a cold warrior: http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141390/cynthia-a-roberts/the-czar-of-brinkmanship?sp_mid=45828761&sp_rid=dGx5bmNoQHViuW1BGlzuZWR1LmF1SO. See also http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/16/world/europe/a-diplomatic-victory-and-affirmation-for-putin.html?smid=nytcore-ipad-share&xmpref=nytcore-ipad&_r=0
exceptionalism that drew a striking parallel to the style and tone of Soviet propaganda. Vladimir Putin exercised a censorious power over Russian society in a manner not even his Soviet counterparts had been able to match. They had presided over economic penury; Putin exploited Russia’s natural wealth.\(^{20}\)

The US government targeted that wealth in its response to Putin’s Ukrainian machinations. Instead of relying exclusively on the traditional tools of military containment, Obama went after the financial assets of the men and women in Putin’s inner circle. As Karen Dawisha observed in 2014, ‘after fourteen years of dealing with [Putin] as a legitimate head of state, the US government has finally admittedly publically what successive administrations have known privately – that he has built a system built on massive predation on a level not seen in Russia since the tsars.'\(^{21}\) Corruption was not only a way to realize personal gain but of restoring Russian greatness. Putin replicated the suppression of free speech of the old Soviet Union. Independent media disappeared. Internal dissenters, even pop singers, were jailed. As it had in the cold war, the United States found itself facing a regime riven with corruption, prepared to destabilize its neighbors, and wedded to pervasive (and state-enforced) nostalgia about a great Russian past. Obama’s innovation in response to all this belied just how traditional the character of Russian power remained.

Carter redux?

The analogy is not perfect but Obama’s ‘reset’ resembles that promised by Jimmy Carter in 1977. Carter and Zbigniew Brzezinski, his national security advisor, wanted to rid

\(^{20}\) [National Interest](http://nationalinterest.org/feature/europes-nightmare-could-still-come-true-nato-russia-war-over-11418)

American political culture of the ‘inordinate fear of communism.’ Obama maintained that the threat posed by Islam and Islamism was similarly overstated. Carter wanted to get beyond the cold war, Obama to abandon the war on terror. Both objectives, in their time, were widely applauded. Each president was given credit for attempting to transcend the discredited foreign policy of his predecessor. And yet both men enjoyed qualified failure in seeking to recast American political psychology – which remains skeptical of the claim that the terrorist threat emanating from the Middle East is only coincidentally Islamic – and of changing the nature of the threat itself. For Carter, downplaying the Soviet menace did little to ameliorate its behavior. In 1979, Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan. For Obama, removing Islam from his national security calculus did not stop terrorists claiming the imprimatur of the Prophet attacking US interests at home and abroad.

The reliance on ‘soft power’ was also common to the Carter and Obama administrations. Carter set great store in soft power and, by using a variation of it, enjoyed considerable success in peace talks between Israel and Egypt. Obama explicitly grounded his foreign policy in a nexus of soft and smart power. The results have been more mixed. It is not clear that the Russian governing elite was impressed by this soft-power emphasis, assuming they understood what was meant by the term. The START treaty with Moscow was hailed as a victory for Obama’s approach but also criticized by his opponents as an empty gesture – of little strategic importance. If the treaty was a validation of soft power it was a very thin one.
Middle East

On December 14, 2011, as US troops came home, President Obama assured them they were ‘leaving behind a sovereign, stable and self-reliant Iraq.’\textsuperscript{22} A year earlier Vice President Joe Biden announced that he was ‘very optimistic about Iraq. I think it’s going to be one of the great achievements of this administration.’\textsuperscript{23} The Obama administration’s withdrawal from Iraq realized a key objective of his presidency but at the price of strategic failure. Obama derided Iraq as a war of choice, the wrong choice. However, depending on one’s definition, every war the US has fought since 1941 has been a war of choice. A war of necessity is one which must be fought, lest the state vanish. Losing any of the wars America has fought in the last century and in this would not have threatened American survival. The same could be said for other large nations. Even Germany’s defeat in World War II did not destroy the nation. Small nations have a much tougher time. Milan Kundera once wrote, ‘a small country is a country that can disappear and knows it.’\textsuperscript{24} Israel’s wars are better characterized as wars of necessity. However, for the United States, wars remain as they were in the cold war: a matter of choice. Vietnam was chosen in the early 1960s in much the same manner as was Iraq after 9/11. Obama painted a false distinction. He has been obliged to navigate an international terrain that obeys the same rules and imperatives of the cold war years. It is one which obliges big powers, like the US, to choose peace and war, contingent on what advances their interests and security.

\textsuperscript{22} https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2011/12/14/president-obama-fort-bragg-welcome-home
\textsuperscript{23} February 11, 2010 CNN interview with Larry King.
\textsuperscript{24} In Charles Krauthammer, ‘Obama is average,’ Spiegel Online, October 26, 2009: at http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,656501,00.html
Obama’s Middle East strategy was the product of choices and decisions. In 2010 he chose to be outraged at Israel’s decision to continue settlement expansion in the West Bank. Unlike Bush, who stood far more solidly behind Israel, Obama connected US security in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan with Israel’s intransigence: the more settlements it builds, said Joe Biden, the more US troops are targeted in those theatres. This assertion elides the more uncomfortable reality that Islamists are unlikely to down tools if America abandons Israel. Al Qaeda’s genesis lay its it desire for regime change in Riyadh not Jerusalem. The Middle East has been capable of significant conflict irrespective of Israeli behavior. Its bloodletting has been within the house of Islam: the war between Iran and Iraq in the 1980s, the Iraqi civil war after 2003, and the bloody disintegration of Syria and Libya after 2011. Israeli is essentially tangential to the Sunni-Shia divide within the region. The disappearance of Israeli from the map would not quiet Saudi concerns over Iran. Settling the Israeli-Palestine dispute would not lead to a region-wide peace.

Obama’s instincts were to join the European-led castigation of Israeli ‘excesses.’ His transition to the presidency between November 2008 and January 2009 saw the controversial invasion of Gaza by the Israeli Defense Forces. His administration displayed a marked coolness toward the Israeli government in the years afterward. Whilst this represented a rupture with the strategy of the Bush administration, it does have precedence in the cold war. In 1948, George Marshall, Truman’s secretary of state, warned his boss that recognition of, let alone active support for, the new Israeli state would complicate and compromise US interests in the region. The Arab autocracies were far more consequential to US cold war strategy and oil security than the Jewish state they
surrounded. Realism then and now suggests America would be better off without its connection to Israel. Obama, despite his liberal instincts, has been especially prone to this realist analysis in the Middle East. The commonality of US-Israeli values has not conditioned his diplomacy toward the region’s only democracy – as a number of prominent realists said they should not. Likewise, Obama was far more muted than Bush when it came to condemning Arab governance – though he never explicitly rejected Bush’s democratic universalism, warning instead that ‘no system of government can or should be imposed upon one nation by any other.’

In Syria, Obama, like Reagan, found himself supporting jihadists as a means to check Russian power. Unlike Reagan, Obama was refused an obvious choice of ally and compounded this ambiguity by allowing Russia to play peacemaker when Assad used chemical weapons. There was in Obama’s righteous though ultimately impotent anger an acceptance that Syria was better conceived of as part of a Russian sphere, thus removing the necessity of more aggressive US action.

The clearest echo of the cold war, for some, could be heard in the 2011 Arab Spring. Just as the autocracies of Soviet Eastern Europe collapsed with remarkable and unpredicted speed in 1989 so too did regimes in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya in 2011. Some have found the analogy specious, grounded more in hope than expectation that the Arab transitions will be as smooth as those in Eastern Europe.

Obama’s hesitancy in the face of the unfolding drama certainly mimicked that of Bush Sr. Like Bush, he feared overt American interference would provoke the regimes that the revolutions were seeking to overthrow. He avoided the charge of meddling in

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23 Obama, Cairo speech, June 4, 2009.
Iranian affairs by refusing to take a strong line on the turmoil following a disputed national election in Iran in 2009. Two years later, his chosen option was ‘to lead from behind’ in the Libyan people’s war against Muamarr Gadhafi – a reticence that produced just enough of a material contribution to tip the odds in favor of the rebels, following over six months of NATO airstrikes.

Obama was cool on intervention to the point where he faced charges of dithering. ‘The idea that when Qaddafi said that they’d be going door to door hunting for people who are participating in protests – you know, that implied a, sort of, lack of restraint and ruthlessness that I think raises our antenna,’ he said.27 His convoluted condemnation of Gaddafí’s crackdown echoed George Orwell’s dictum that ‘Despotic governments can stand ‘moral force’ till the cows come home; what they fear is physical force.’28 When Obama finally embraced a hard power option, the scales decisively tipped in favour of the regime’s opponents.29

The rise of Islamic State, not unlike Russian revanchism in Ukraine, checked assertions that, led by President Obama himself, that contemporary international relations had somehow transcended history. Threats that obtained before the cold war assumed different names, locations and styles after it but their intentions were strikingly similar: to retard US power and influence and to render more difficult an American retreat into domestic renewal.

27 http://www.slate.com/id/2288044?wpiscrc=xs_wp_0001
29 ‘his workplace has moved from the center of college sports arenas where he was surrounded by hysterical youngsters to offices and hallways and conference tables where men of guile and cunning gather, the power of his ego has failed him.’ See Fisher critique of Obama in Libya in McCormick 2012 Domestic Sources, pp. 202-5
China

Daniel Drezner argues that after two decades of having the upper hand in world politics, the US found itself after 2009 again having to deal ‘with independent forces of national power.’ China has bridled against American unipolarity. The old cold war offers itself as a model for checking US power in a new one. The PRC, like the USSR, knows it cannot yet compete in military terms with the United States. Internally, it is wracked by problems from rural poverty, and urban unrest, to ecological degradation and demands for political liberalization. Externally, it remains surrounded by states keen to limit its regional ambitions, from Japan and South Korean to India and Vietnam. The Soviet Union was in several respects similarly beleaguered. It got round these apparent weaknesses by projecting an impression of strength and ambition. It was a triceratops – a fearsome exterior disguising a vegan pusillanimity – but even triceratops looked sufficiently scary to force caution on their adversaries. China is engaged in a similar cloaking strategy. In order to conceal its great-state-poor country status, it has increasingly challenged American interests in Southeast Asia. It has threatened to wield financial weapons in order to lessen American commitments to Taiwan – reaffirmed by President Obama in his decision to sell arms to the island in 2009. It recurrently warns that it will withdraw from climate change negotiations or abrogate treaties stemming there from – rendering them meaningless – if the US does not play ball.

These are the strategies of the weak. Their analogue can be found in the cold war. For nearly half a century, the Soviet Union maintained the illusion that it was balancing US power despite being unable to feed its own people. It spent heavily on its exterior

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30 ‘Uncle Sam vs the Dragon,’ Spectator, February 20, 2010, 22-3, 23.
armor and trusted that this would hide its internal putrefaction. It worked remarkably well for a very long time. Successive American presidents were convinced it was far more dangerous than it probably was. Washington engaged in bouts of appeasement and negotiation with the Russian Communists which, with hindsight, merely served to perpetuate their hold on power. We can speculate that China’s current leaders, then rising party activists and bureaucrats, watched this relationship unfold and drew from it a central lesson: that weakness does not preclude influence and that cold wars with the United States work. Just as it would be hard to imagine American leaders jettisoning the strategic lessons of the old cold war so we should expect China’s leaders to adapt them to a new one.

An Obama Revolution?

Obama won the 2012 presidential election able to tout some significant foreign policy accomplishments. He had ordered the killing of bin Laden and made regime change in Libya possible. He had negotiated a new START treaty with Russia. He had withdrawn from Iraq. By 2015, however, these achievements were clouded by the rise of ISIS, the disaster that post-Gadhafi Libya has become, Russian adventurism and a nuclear deal with Tehran that will struggle for Senate ratification.

His Nobel Peace Prize, awarded in December 2009, before the new president had much opportunity to make peace, was ostensibly to reward his promise rather than his performance. The START Treaty with Russia had made the Prize committee optimistic of further successes – perhaps the ratification of a binding anti-nuclear treaty. But
START was hardly a revolution in arms control merely ratifying a Russian warhead decrease that was already largely underway. As with continuity in the war on terror, Obama displayed a preference for the pursuit of cold war diplomacy – getting Russia to sign agreements to limit its nuclear stockpiles – which any number of US presidents have pursued. Bill Clinton, like Obama, wanted to move beyond cold war anachronisms but delivered a traditional arms control agenda.

If Obama’s war on terror enjoyed some successes, and his arms controls efforts were, at best, negligible, it was on the territory he himself claimed he would bring decisive change that he was, by 2015, most exposed. Peace in Israel/Palestine, a signature issue for Obama early in his term, was no closer as a consequence of his diplomacy. Obama had made not much more progress than George W. Bush and, by the estimates of some, even less.31 Similarly, and again belying his Peace Prize, his rhetoric of extending open hands to clenched fists in Pyongyang, Damascus and Tehran led to little improvement in the American relationships with these regimes. Obama was far better at removing dictators by hard, military power – as in Libya – than by killing with the kindness of soft power. Like Carter, Obama began his presidency believing in the power of the American moral example. After a brief exposure to the world, however, both men fell back on more reliable tools of statecraft: increased defense spending, in Carter’s case, in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; regime change, in Obama’s, in response to Gadhafi’s human rights depredations.

31 http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/obamas-foreign-initiatives-have-faltered/2012/01/05/gIQAcCqAKP_story.html?wpisrc=nl_opinions
Conclusion

Obama’s critics were keen to compare him to Jimmy Carter. In at least one respect, the comparison is instructive. Both men, as candidates for president, supported the 1973 War Powers Resolution. In office, however, both opposed it. The intention of the WPR was to render war possible only with the agreement of Congress. If a president deployed troops abroad he had sixty days to get legislators’ approval. If he failed in this the troops would have to be stood down within ninety-days. The WPR was seen as a mechanism to reign in presidential power. It failed. Every president has disputed its constitutionality. Most presidents, since its passage, have made war irrespective of whether Congress gave them approval to do so.

Barack Obama joined his cold war and post-cold war predecessors in making war in Libya without congress’ say-so. Jimmy Carter, reflecting on how the WPR compromised his foreign policy, supported its attempted repeal in 1995. Ronald Reagan invaded Grenada in 1983 without Congress knowing of the action until it was over. Bill Clinton kept troops in Somalia through 1993 – including the Black Hawk Down incident – without congressional approval. He made war in Kosovo, in 1999, this time in the face of an explicit refusal by Congress to authorize the campaign. Somewhat ironically, given his reputation as a cowboy, George W. Bush only fought wars approved on Capitol Hill – in Afghanistan and Iraq and the wider war on terror. Obama, in contrast, waged his war against Gaddafi beyond sixty days without even seeking congressional approval. Reagan was at least mindful of taking military action that set the WPR clock ticking but which

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ended before Congress became an issue. Presidents Clinton and Obama were much bolder in making prolonged war irrespective of what Congress thought.

There are also distinct echoes of Reagan in Obama’s Middle East strategy. In October 1983, 241 US marines were killed in their Beirut barracks by a terrorist bomb. Reagan quickly removed the remaining forces from Lebanon. Whilst rhetorically hawkish on counterterrorism, the Republican was willing to cede the country to a range of terrorist groups. The ensuing Lebanese civil war cost 10,000 lives. Obama, like Reagan, similarly calculated that withdrawing US troops from Afghanistan would hand terrorists a significant victory. The lives of thousands of Afghans, especially women, would be put in jeopardy. Yet he withdrew nonetheless. The words of Robert McFarlane, Reagan’s national security advisor, were eerily prescient thirty years later: ‘One could draw several conclusions from this episode. To me the most telling was the one reached by Middle Eastern terrorists, that the United States had neither the will nor the means to respond effectively to a terrorist attack.’ The Lebanese retreat, said Reagan’s NSA, was ‘one of the most tragic and costly policy defeats in the brief modern history of American counterterrorism operations.’

The often uncomfortable mismatch between rhetoric and realism did not die with the end of the cold war.

The failure of Obama’s open hand to make the Syrian regime less brutal suggests a cold war explanation. The Russian (and Chinese) veto of a UN resolution calling on Assad to resign in February 2012 is explicable at a number of levels. Certainly, Putin has no interest in seeing another autocracy overthrown by people power – the veto coincided with popular demonstrations in Moscow against Putin’s government. But to understand

his defense of Assad more fully we need to recall Syria’s place in Russia’s cold war strategy. When Egypt took a US turn after a disastrous war against Israel in 1973, Syria was Moscow’s sole ally in the Middle East. The utility of the alliance for both parties to it did not evaporate when the USSR fell. And yet, much contemporary discourse on Syria and the wider Arab Spring forgets this history.34

Obama’s Russian ‘reset’ assumed the US was at fault for tensions in the US-Russian relationship. The application of an American humility would solve this, said Obama’s advisors. This effort to transcend the cold war stand-off by increasing the latitude (President Obama’s word was ‘flexibility’) Moscow was to enjoy did not transform Vladimir Putin’s assessment Russia’s national interest. As his detractors argued, Obama did not consign ‘to history’s dustbin the writings of Thucydides, the venerable Athenian historian who, roughly 2,300 years ago, observed that nations, like men, pursue what they perceive as their interests.’35 Engaging Russia with American soft power realized possibly less advantage than confronting it with hard. If Obama sought to forget the cold war, Putin persisted in its shadow, mourning its passing.

In Syria and Iran, Russia stuck to cold war diplomacy. Rather than facilitate Obama’s isolation of these regimes, Putin offered diplomatic cover and arms to the embattled Assad regime in Damascus. Russian technology was sold to Tehran as it moved toward a nuclear weapons capacity. Putin’s motivations in both cases were not only to advance Russian interests but to stymy Obama’s. In August 2011, to demonstrate how little he cared about the purported ‘reset,’ he labeled Americans the ‘parasites’ of the

35 Douglas J. Feith and Seth Cropsey, ‘How the Russian “Reset” Explains Obama's Foreign Policy,’ Foreign Policy, October 16, 2012; http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/10/16/how_the_russian_reset_explains_obama_s_foreign_policy
global economy. Whilst he did not anticipate his presence at their funeral, Putin’s posturing was a direct echo of Nikita Khrushchev’s – the Soviet leader who claimed he would bury American capitalism. As a Washington Post editorial concluded, ‘Mr. Obama’s apparent faith that Mr. Putin is ready to do business with him is at odds with the strongman’s recent behavior.’

Russia continued to accrue diplomatic capital at Obama’s expense. In 2013, it was widely agreed that the Assad regime in Syria had used chemical weapons against civilians. In August, Obama threatened the use of US military force but only if, firstly, Congress authorized it and, secondly, if Russian mediation failed. In one prime time speech, the president managed to make his Syria strategy conditional on the approval of his domestic opponents (on Capitol Hill) and his long term adversary (the Kremlin). Putin’s invasion of Ukraine seven months later was suggestive of the minimal diplomatic capital Obama had accrued in his engagement of Moscow.

President Obama has claimed the legacy of several cold war administrations. His liberal vision came from JFK and LBJ – though Obama’s contribution to Libyan freedom was mild in comparison to that underlining their defense of South Vietnam. His realism was routed in a combination of Eisenhower and Bush Sr. Whilst his desire to limit US military exposure in the Middle East copied something from George H.W. Bush, his use of Ike was more problematic. The ‘new look’ president did not retreat and was never as unpopular at home as Obama came to be. Obama may have articulated a public

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36 In Singh, Obama's Post-American Foreign Policy, p. 162.
37 http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/time-for-us-leadership-on-syria/2012/05/29/jQQRdX0zU_story.html
preference for a more passive foreign policy but at the cost of strategic dissonance. In this last respect, he broke with cold war precedent.