

Reviving American Leadership: The Next President Should Continue on the Path Obama Has Set

In April 2009 President Barack Obama announced: “I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that Brits believe in British exceptionalism, and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism. . . . I see no contradiction between believing that America has a continued extraordinary role in leading the world towards peace and prosperity and recognizing that that leadership is incumbent, depends on, our ability to create partnerships.” Though Obama meant it as an endorsement of burden sharing, Republican candidates in 2012 have latched on to this comment, arguing loudly and often that not only is America special, but that conservatives believe this more than the president does.

In the eyes of former Republican candidate Rick Perry, “the exceptionalism of America . . . makes it the last best hope for mankind.” For Ron Paul, this “exceptional country” sets the example that “others will emulate.” Likewise, Herman Cain, Michele Bachmann, and Jon Huntsman have all remarked that America is an “exceptional nation.” Mitt Romney put it most cuttingly when he said that Obama “went around the world and apologized for America.”

AUTHORS



Bruce Jones
Senior Fellow,
Foreign Policy
Director,
Managing Global Order



Thomas Wright
Fellow,
Foreign Policy,
Managing Global Order



Jane Esberg
Special Assistant,
New York University,
Center on International
Cooperation

While such rhetoric captures the headlines, what should be of greater concern is the likely effect of the 2012 election on U.S. foreign policy and the future of the U.S.-led international order. The next president—whatever his party—will face a series of domestic and international constraints that will press for the continuity of Obama’s policy, rather than significant change. In fact, there is already broad agreement on three principles concerning reform of the international order, advocacy for human rights, and the use of military force. Bipartisan support for these principles should be fostered and communicated to allies, enemies, and “swing states” alike. Building on that foundation, the next administration should

- Concentrate on economic diplomacy designed to preserve economic openness, promote international trade, and correct financial imbalances that make the order crisis prone.
- Foster a more just and stable international order. Where feasible, that means relying less on nondemocratic regimes and building ties with communities inside authoritarian states and states newly transitioning toward democracy.
- Broaden and intensify efforts to form creative new multilateral arrangements in which emerging powers take on responsible roles, and efforts to enhance the credibility and efficacy of existing instruments.
- Retain the option for credible use of force, but make more effective use of diplomacy, civilian engagement, and other forms of power and influence, so as to minimize the times and circumstances in which force is necessary. The new administration should therefore avoid cuts to the State Department’s budget and ensure that savings in the Defense Department are linked to a strategy designed to deal with future threats and challenges, with some burden sharing from new and old allies, where possible.
- Strengthen and deepen America’s traditional alliances in Asia and Europe and develop new strategic partnerships.

The Progression in Obama’s Foreign Policy

When Barack Obama took office, he outlined three major foreign policy goals: “reestablish America’s standing in the world; create dialogue with friends, partners, and adversaries based on mutual respect; and work together in building partnerships.” Yet arguably the greatest foreign policy successes of the ensuing three years—the deaths of Osama bin Laden and Anwar al-Awlaki and the overthrow of Muammar Qaddafi—rested

not on American soft power but on the uses of hard power, applied unilaterally in two of the three cases. Moreover, two of the acts probably violated some elements of international law. This does not mean that his focus on engagement has been replaced, but that increasingly it has been balanced by overt and covert military action, coercive diplomacy, and a deepening of alliance commitments.

Such changes reflect a shift in Obama's foreign policy vision resulting from the experience that just as American power is limited so too is the willingness of other states to cooperate. At the same time, Obama still seems open to forging an international order in which emerging powers take on greater responsibility, but as yet those powers do not seem ready for prime time.

Obama's campaign platform of peace through diplomatic engagement and military restraint played off the post-Bush distaste for war. Just before announcing his candidacy, Obama called for a "strategy no longer driven by ideology and politics but one that is based on a realistic assessment of the sobering facts on the ground and our interests." Pragmatism also drove his policies of high-level engagement with allies and adversaries alike, including rogue regimes like those of Iran and North Korea. Thus high-level dialogue aimed at constraining and reasoning with governments meant in part tacitly supporting rogue or dictatorial regimes.

During the Green Revolution, for example, Obama avoided showing direct support for protestors for fear that it would backfire. In a 2007 debate, he called China "neither our enemy or our friend. . . . But we have to make sure that we have enough military-to-military contact and forge enough of a relationship with them that we can stabilize the region." To promote dialogue, Obama publicly supported the One China initiative and postponed a visit with the Dalai Lama. He also called for "direct and aggressive diplomacy" to address the North Korean nuclear program. He was wary of using military force outside of addressing a direct national interest, saying in 2007 that he would not leave troops in Iraq even in the event of genocide: "if that's the criteria by which we are making decisions on the deployment of U.S. forces, then by that argument you would have 300,000 troops in the Congo right now." Thus above all else, stability and peace drove Obama's foreign policy rhetoric.

By the early months of 2011, however, Obama's goal of engagement with adversaries had shifted. The discovery of a secret nuclear facility in Qom, Iran's refusal to negotiate, and the regime's crackdown on the Green Revolution persuaded Obama to

seek UN Security Council authorization for sweeping sanctions. These passed, even though the move alienated Brazil and Turkey, which were negotiating a fuel-swap deal with Iran. In the same period, China became increasingly assertive in the South China Sea, submitting claims to vast amounts of the maritime territory and harassing U.S. naval vessels on a surveillance mission. It also proved intransigent on discussions of nuclear weapons reductions. These moves would eventually result in Obama's "rebalancing to Asia" in the winter of 2011. Engagement also failed to mend relations with North Korea, which unveiled an advanced uranium enrichment facility and began provocations against South Korea that included sinking its navy corvette *Cheonan* and shelling the coast. High-level talks seemed most effective in Russia, where Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) discussions created a new strategic reduction treaty and American concessions on missile defenses bought Russian support for sanctions on Iran and the cancellation of S-300 missile sales to Iran. Ironically, when discussing Russia during the campaign, Obama had supported "pushing for more democracy, transparency, and accountability" and called a "resurgent" and "aggressive" Russia "a threat to peace and stability."

What changed was not Obama's belief in America's special role in the world but his understanding of how that must manifest itself, given that other states were not always willing to cooperate and differed from the United States in their perception of threats. As a result, Obama's foreign policy shifted in three respects: it showed greater readiness to use America's military reach, put greater emphasis on the United States leading the way in the design of new institutions, and intensified the focus on human rights and democracy abroad. Thus Obama sent troops into Pakistan without permission, in violation of Pakistani sovereignty, to conduct the raid that killed Osama bin Laden. He agreed to the assassination of al-Awlaki, an American citizen and al Qaeda operative, in Yemen. Iran's nuclear timeline was delayed in large part because of likely U.S. or Israeli covert actions, such as use of the Stuxnet computer virus and probable assassinations of Iranian scientists and engineers. To reorient American power toward the Asia-Pacific, the United States announced that marines on rotation would operate from a base in Darwin, Australia, and that Washington would provide new littoral battleships to Singapore and naval support for the Philippines. To promote cooperation on issues of American interest, Obama spearheaded the creation of new global arrangements, including the Nuclear Security Summit (NSS), the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), and the Open Government Partnership (OGP), and he also announced the creation of a U.S.-led economic framework

for Asia. In addition, during Hu Jintao's January 2011 visit, Obama twice referred to the need for China to improve its human rights record, and he repeated the sentiment in his speech to Australia's parliament.

The deployment of resources to the Asia-Pacific and the use of drones has been called a form of "offshore balancing," which in this context means greater reliance on air, sea, and naval power, a reduction in major troop presences in the greater Middle East, and fostering strategic regional alliances. The logic is that a step back from costly land-based commitments will provide the United States with additional options to achieve its geopolitical objectives. This position is hardly new. With intellectual roots in the cold war, Obama's policies in many ways represent a return to tradition. What is novel about Obama's version of offshore balancing is its moral dimension, which centers on America's exceptionalism—including its respect for human rights—rather than just its hegemony. Although Libya was, after all, an exercise in U.S. and allied airpower, the strict realist interpretation of offshore balancing considers it a means to undermine any potential challengers. By contrast, Obama's version also stresses ethical responsibility: "Some nations may be able to turn a blind eye to atrocities in other countries. The United States of America is different." Even the development of new global arrangements like the NSS, GCTF, and OGP can be seen as a form of diplomatic offshore balancing, ensuring American interests while indirectly pressuring other governments to fall in line by building partnerships and setting global norms.

In this regard, the foreign policy actor that Obama most closely resembles may be James Baker, secretary of state to George H. W. Bush. Initially using traditional offshore balancing through deployment of troops to Saudi Arabia to protect Kuwait, Baker also pushed for direct Western intervention in the Bosnia-Herzegovina crisis: "The only way to solve [the situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina] is selective bombing of Serbian targets." However, he balked at unilateral action, stating that the United States "cannot be the world's policeman." Baker effectively balanced American power, alliances, and international institutions to achieve national interests, and Obama has followed suit.

The Republican 2012 Debates

Despite ongoing hostilities in Afghanistan, tensions with Iran, regime transition in North Korea, the Arab Spring, the Eurocrisis, and America's tense relationship with China, foreign policy has been a minor theme of the Republican primary debates. In fact, it was

hardly mentioned in the numerous debates in the summer and fall of 2011. Even when several conservatives expressed concern about the exclusion of international issues from the contest and candidates held two national security debates in response, one received only an hour of live televised time and was relatively lackluster, while the other concentrated on Iran and terrorism-related issues. The second debate also veered throughout into domestic politics—such as entitlement reform and immigration—and had no discussion of Asia or the European crisis. Despite Egypt’s second wave of protests in Tahrir Square, which coincided with the first round of its elections, the Arab Spring was only touched on at the very end.

The debates reflected the substance and style of the primary campaign as a whole. Whenever foreign policy realities—the Arab Spring, Libya, Europe—intruded, the candidates’ positions were underdeveloped and subject to change. One candidate, Herman Cain, managed to dominate the news cycle for several weeks despite committing several major foreign policy gaffes, including not knowing that China had nuclear weapons, promising to release all prisoners in Guantánamo in exchange for U.S. prisoners held by the Taliban or al Qaeda, and being unable to offer a view about the Libya intervention. This was less significant for what it said about Cain than about primary voters’ lack of interest in a candidate’s foreign policy views. Of all the candidates, only Mitt Romney ever had anything approaching a foreign policy infrastructure similar in size and scope to that of John McCain or the two top Democratic contenders of 2008.

In the absence of a substantive debate or conversation on foreign policy, the candidates engaged the issues of national security and foreign policy rhetorically and by invoking themes that resonate with the base—notably that of American exceptionalism and Obama’s penchant for underplaying it. When a May 2011 article in the *New Yorker* by Ryan Lizza included a quotation from an unnamed White House official describing the president’s strategy on Libya as “leading from behind,” GOP candidates immediately jumped on this statement and returned to the theme in the fall. Issues that seem compatible with the narrative of Obama the naïve appeaser (on Iran and Russia) are embraced, and inconvenient facts (such as covert activities against Iran) are ignored. Issues that do not lend themselves to the narrative—such as Obama’s Asia strategy of balancing China—are avoided entirely. The harsh criticism is of a general nature and fails to provide substantive arguments on major issues such as the Arab Spring, counterterrorism, the European crisis, or the intervention in Libya.

When the Republican candidates have focused on foreign policy, they have conceived it narrowly and in 2004 terms, focusing on terrorism, Iran's nuclear weapons, and sovereignty. America's broader role in the world—particularly in such regions as Asia and Europe—has been given short shrift. For example, Romney's foreign policy speech made no mention of any of America's Asian allies, even though it emphasized a commitment to alliances. Only Israel and the United Kingdom made the cut. Not only have the candidates not offered policies to deal with the international dimension of the financial crisis, they have shown little sign of understanding it at all. On other transnational issues, such as climate change and foreign aid, the Republican position has weakened since the Bush administration, as made clear during the second GOP foreign policy debate when Paul Wolfowitz, deputy secretary of defense during the Bush administration and a leading hawk, implicitly admonished the candidates for proposing to cut aid to Africa. Grand strategy appears to have contracted as well. Bush made the promotion of democracy and freedom the central pillar of his worldview, but with the exception of Rick Santorum, no candidate for 2012 has taken up his banner. Indeed, the Republican notion of the national interest and security has shrunk considerably since George W. Bush left office.

What is more, though seemingly united in their criticisms of Obama, the Republican Party is sharply divided on its view of America's role in the world. Henry Kissinger once wrote, "It is above all to the drumbeat of Wilsonian idealism that American foreign policy has marched since his watershed presidency and continues to march to this day." While accusing Obama of Wilsonianism, the Republican foreign policy line itself has proved confused, split between three separate—and often contradictory—strains of thought: machoism, isolationism, and engagement. These correspond very roughly to the Jacksonian, Jeffersonian, and Hamiltonian foreign policy traditions. Most candidates incorporate at least two such concepts into their rhetoric, though all reveal a different vision of what it means for America to be exceptional.

Perhaps the clearest offshoot of exceptionalism is American machoism, which implies that by grace of its strength the United States can shape the rest of the world into what it wants. Saber-rattling on Iran has been its most overt sign in the debates, as well as in Romney's call for increased military spending. However, this current machoism is more expansive than its Jacksonian roots: while similarly uncompromising and lacking a moral dimension, it has developed a cockiness about the nation's ability to promote its interests short of force. Newt Gingrich, for example, stated that the United States needs to start

“taking back” the United Nations and to refuse engagement with the “terrorist” Palestinian Authority. Romney denounced the “reset” of relations with Russia as “caving in” to demands on Iran. Such comments essentially argue that the United States can have its way in any scenario—and that President Obama simply hasn’t been demanding forcefully enough.

If this machoistic rhetoric seems like a natural extension of exceptionalism, it is also reminiscent of Bush’s policies, so the candidates have almost universally tempered it. To avoid the appearance of warmongering, they have balanced it with a Jeffersonian emphasis on avoiding “entangling alliances.” Current Republican isolationism rests on two beliefs: first, that America is “exceptionally” self-sufficient and thus does not need to engage extensively to preserve its own security; and second, that engagement weakens America by draining its resources. Foreign aid in particular rankles isolationists. Rick Perry promised to drop all aid to zero and to reevaluate whether recipients “deserve” it, a proposition with which Gingrich agreed. He also promised a “very serious discussion of defunding the United Nations.” Gingrich called for the suspension of UN funding in response to the vote on Palestinian statehood. None of the candidates espousing such arguments have explained how this foreign policy vision takes into account the realities of an interconnected global economy.

However, some Republicans favor a Hamiltonian emphasis on engagement to promote American interests, in close alignment with Obama’s foreign policy. Unsurprisingly, Jon Huntsman became the symbol for this strand of Republican thought, supporting talks with China, Pakistan, and other key states in the interest of U.S. security. Romney, too, thinks the United States should “employ all tools of statecraft” and “exercise leadership in multilateral organizations.” Though recently critical of the United Nations, even Gingrich encouraged the United States to increase funding for certain UN programs when cochairing a 2005 task force on UN reform for the United States Institute of Peace. In the debates, Michele Bachmann and Rick Santorum stated that staying engaged with Pakistan is of vital importance to U.S. security.

Most candidates avoided embracing any single policy strain fully: machoism too closely aligns with Bush’s Iraq invasion, isolationism too clearly ignores the transnational threats the United States still faces, and engagement too closely echoes Obama. With the exception of Ron Paul and Jon Huntsman, the candidates have pieced together parts of multiple lines, with somewhat schizophrenic results. In one breath, Romney states the United

States should “embrace the challenge . . . not to crawl into an isolationist shell,” in another that it “ought to get the Chinese to take care of the people [in need of humanitarian aid].” That is to say, America—strong as ever—should lead, but why not let someone else do it. Such competing policies are highly suggestive of an actual Republican administration’s stance.

Facing Reality

The Republicans have strived to differentiate themselves from Obama, but part of the reason for the inconsistencies in their foreign policy line lies in the evolution of his thinking. Defining an “Obama Doctrine” is a challenge. He is not an interventionist (in Sudan and Congo), except where he is (in Libya and in Uganda in a small way). He addresses threats cooperatively (in the Nuclear Security Summit), except when he doesn’t (in the bin Laden raid and allegedly in the case of the Stuxnet attack on Iran). He calls for democracy (in the Middle East), except when he by and large stays silent (on Russia). He does not fit neatly into a realist or an idealist box. Obama has evolved to a position that might be termed ethical offshore balancing. While, as Walter Russell Mead has argued, he campaigned on Wilsonian-Jeffersonian ideals, he has developed a hybrid Wilsonian-Hamiltonian foreign policy.

Any candidate will face a number of foreign policy challenges and have limited policy options to manage them. China’s growth and influence are a fact of life: hard containment is at odds with the reality of U.S.–Chinese economic entanglement, but allowing China unfettered dominance of Asia is hardly a viable or desirable option either. Obama’s balancing effort contains most of the right notes, and it is hard to see how any Republican president might differ substantially from Obama’s eventual position on this. Brazil and India are playing an increasingly important role in the global order, and the United States must find ways to engage them or else risk alienating important regional players and leaving their potential contributions to a stable order on the table. But equally, no American president in the foreseeable future is going to offer these countries anything like a veto over American foreign policy programs (or a veto in the UN Security Council). The shaky economic foundations of the global financial system need urgent attention, and it is striking to recall that it was George W. Bush—hardly America’s greatest multilateralist—who authorized the most important expansion of International Monetary Fund (IMF) powers in recent times to deal with the global financial crisis. Obama has continued strengthening the IMF, and although no Republican candidate has mentioned the IMF explicitly,

Gingrich's and Romney's foreign policies seem unlikely to radically change the stance at the IMF or in the G20. Neither isolationism nor machoism addresses the reality that the United States has clear and important stakes in the global economy that make it vulnerable to the actions and behaviors of other nations. Similarly, transnational threats mean isolationism is not an option.

Hints of the same basic policies can already be seen in the Republican field. The most developed foreign policy statement of any of the Republican campaigns came in a Romney speech, and its parallels with Obama's foreign policy are striking. On major doctrinal matters—including the use of military force, advocating for human rights, and reforming the international order—the positions are similar.

Indeed, many on both sides of the aisle believe that a healthy global economy is integral to a functioning and effective international order. The next administration should intensify its economic diplomacy to preserve economic openness, foster international trade, and correct financial imbalances that invite crisis. Many would also agree that the United States has a unique role both in fostering a stable international order and in promoting justice and dignity. As mentioned earlier, America should rely less on autocratic regimes and more on building ties with communities inside authoritarian states and those moving toward democracy. These are better achieved through quiet policy than declarative rhetoric, given the inevitable reality that there will be important exceptions—as in the case of Saudi Arabia.

Equally important, U.S. power and security need to be embedded in multilateral institutions and alliances. The next administration should intensify U.S. efforts to foster such arrangements and encourage emerging powers to take on responsible roles, and to enhance the credibility and efficacy of existing instruments.

As also mentioned earlier, the credible use of force must remain an option, although the emphasis should be on more effective use of diplomacy, civilian engagement, and other forms of power and influence. It is therefore vital to keep the State Department budget at its current level and to ensure that savings to the Defense Department's budget are linked to strategies to deal with future threats and challenges and to make sure that allies and partners will share some of the burden, where possible. In its relations with China, the next administration should aim to retain a judicious blend of efforts to balance and efforts to engage. As a new generation of leadership takes over in Beijing, it will be important to communicate the resolve to balance China's regional muscle *and* a desire to

see China succeed at economic growth, social development, and gradual political liberalization.

For now, the Republican candidates tend to favor continuity in their general worldview, although some may diverge on climate change and arms control. Whichever party finds itself occupying the White House in January 2013, America's international order strategy seems likely to be shaped not by minor differences between the two parties but by the twin realities governing present times: American reliance on the global economy and global reliance on American power.