

International Social Science Review


Volume 92 | Issue 1

Article 6

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Recommended Citation

Potts, Jacob C. () "Extended Commentary: Action or Inaction? An Analysis of President Obama's Foreign Policy," *International Social Science Review*: Vol. 92: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr/vol92/iss1/6>

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Extended Commentary: Action or Inaction? An Analysis of President Obama's Foreign Policy

Cover Page Footnote

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Action or Inaction?

An Analysis of President Obama's Foreign Policy

The date is November 2016. A little over two and a half years ago, militants in Crimea took over major governmental buildings in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine as a result of a revolution that ousted Pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich from power.¹ This provided an excuse for Vladimir Putin to seize lands traditionally owned by Russia. Crimea was annexed via referendum in March of 2014,² and the rest of Ukraine was annexed in late 2015. Foreign governments imposed economic sanctions and attempted to reach a peace agreement between the “rebel groups” and the Ukrainian government, but these actions failed to curb the Russian plan.³ Now, Russia has set its sights on Estonia. Estonia is ripe for Russian annexation because of its Russian population of 25 percent and because of its lowlands.⁴ However, the fundamental difference between Ukraine and Estonia is that Estonia is a member of NATO. As “rebels” begin to take control of airports and governmental buildings in eastern Estonia, Estonia assumes that the United States and its NATO allies will act in support of their NATO alliance. Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia prepare to act with United States at the head of the NATO alliance, both as an assurance to Estonia and for their own protection from Russian aggression. President Obama is a lame-duck president and is interested in setting a good precedent for his successor. What would President Obama do in this real world situation, and what does this say about his doctrine? If NATO upholds its commitment to Estonia, there will be military engagements between NATO and the Russians. If NATO does not act militarily, President Obama would most likely first put into place economic sanctions and use diplomatic pressure.

Estonia and NATO

In 2004, Estonia joined NATO. In early 2015, after fear of Russian invasion, NATO (mostly American) forces moved into the Baltic States in order to conduct military training exercises and to prove their commitment to their NATO members. This history will prove to be very important when predicting the behavior of major leaders in general. However, one could question if NATO would act based on their actions regarding the Budapest Memorandum. The Budapest Memorandum was signed by Ukraine, the United States, Great Britain, and Russia in 1994 as a way to remove nuclear weapons from the former Soviet Union.⁵ A fundamental component of this treaty is that these countries will respect the territorial integrity of Ukraine and not attack it.⁶ This was obviously not respected by Russia. While the United States and Great Britain would say they remained faithful to the treaty because of their economic sanctions and diplomatic actions against Russia, this did not protect the territorial integrity of Ukraine. The implication of the treaty is that the memorandum would not allow the violations of Ukraine's integrity to happen, and this clearly did not happen. This puts into question if President Obama would respect his commitment to NATO. While this is a possibility that must certainly be addressed, it is more likely that he will respect the NATO Charter, which claims an attack against one is an attack against all.⁷ First, Estonia has traditionally been a part of Russia, and one might speculate that this was one of the reasons Putin chose to attack Estonia in the first place.⁸ Second, there is a precedent of friendly relations between Estonia and the Western Powers. This longstanding relationship may sway governments to act and defend their allies in Eastern Europe. Third, the actions taken by NATO, particularly the United States indicates that NATO is interested in maintaining the independence of their fellow members.

Predictions

My predictions about the action President Obama would take will be based upon a variety of sources. President Obama's response will be based on how he has responded to major foreign policy events during his presidency. This includes his actions in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the NATO intervention in Libya, his involvement with chemical weapons in Syria, his actions in Ukraine, the mediation of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, handling ISIS and Al-Qaeda Affiliates, and his actions handling combatants outside of combat zones, such as in Yemen, Somalia, and Pakistan. I will not only consider what he has done but what he has not done. This includes his lack of action against Boko Haram, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and most revolutions in the Arab Spring. In regards to news sources, I chose them from as wide of a spectrum of news sources as possible in order to limit bias. I also want to assume that President Obama does not fulfill the United States' obligations to NATO. I am doing this because by assuming President Obama will act with NATO; there will be no reason to predict his actions beyond predicting his options militarily.

Possible Actions

President Obama will have many options available to him when dealing with a possible crisis in Estonia. First, there are economic sanctions. This could mean forbidding arms sales to Russia, blacklisting senior Russian leaders, placing limits on exporting industrial technology, or expelling Russians from organizations like the World State Organization of the G20. Many of these sanctions have been put into place in Ukraine, with varying degrees of effectiveness.⁹ Second, he has diplomatic pressure. This could be as simple as a discussion between the US Secretary of State and the Russian Foreign Minister, or it could mean something as complicated

as negotiating a cease-fire or a peace treaty. These have also been used in Ukraine with varying degrees of success. Third, there is military action, of which there are degrees of severity as well. The lowest level of military involvement would be selling arms to the Estonian government. In addition, he could send military trainers to the Estonian Military in order to prepare them against the Russians. American jets would either be stationed in Estonian (NATO) bases or on United States aircraft carriers and could attack rebel military bases, offer supporting fire in offensive or defensive operations, and offer general air superiority. This could lead to potential Russian retaliation, which must be taken into account. The next step would be actively sending NATO forces into Estonia in order to conduct offensive operations against the “rebels.” Finally, there are other miscellaneous options. There is the use of covert operations, such as espionage. This would include sabotaging rebel facilities, secret raids on high value targets such as military leaders, or training resistance groups. Another option would be doing absolutely nothing. However, this would be almost as unlikely as invasion.

Course of Action

In my view the situation in Estonia will come to pass in the following way. All of these actions will clearly have historical precedent. First, pro-Russian “rebels” would take over Estonian police stations, governmental buildings, and attack military installations. This is similar to the actions that were taken in Ukraine¹⁰ and Georgia.¹¹ Russia will offer support in the form of direct military action (like what happened in both Ukraine¹² and Georgia.¹³) Estonia will appeal to its NATO allies, demanding a military response. Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia will most likely place pressure on NATO to act in order to protect themselves from further Russian aggression (similar to what they said in Ukraine).¹⁴ Obama would sanction Russia economically with coordination with NATO (as he did to Russia in Ukraine,¹⁵ Libya in regards its civil war,¹⁶

Syria in response to the Syrian Civil War).¹⁷ President Obama could claim that he was supporting the NATO charter, but not doing so in a military fashion. After this, Obama would most likely use diplomatic pressure by attempting to put together a cease-fire in Estonia (attempted in Syria in 2013¹⁸ and attempted between Israel and Hamas in 2014.)¹⁹ However, if this fails, Obama might consider taking other actions. He might consider selling weapons to Estonia (considered in Ukraine in 2014²⁰ and supplied to the Kurds in Syria to support opposition to ISIS).²¹

However, the main focus of this essay is based on the way the situation would have to evolve in order for President Obama to become militarily involved in Estonia. If President Obama does decide to act militarily, he will most likely act in coordination with NATO. However, there is a chance that President Obama does not act with NATO. This would be if opposition existed within NATO from countries such as France and Germany. If this does happen, the United States may act alone or in coordination with the NATO allies in the Baltic Sea. President Obama's actions depend on a wide variety of factors. First one must consider how close the Estonians are to capitulating. While most of Estonia is plains and thus easy to conquer,²² there are hills in the south that may be defensible.²³ Also, one might consider if and to what degree the Russians in Estonia are interested in joining Russia. Russian Estonians are fairly well distributed across the country, with a slight increase near the Russian border.²⁴ The Russian community in Estonia is fairly isolated, with very strong links to Russia.²⁵ At the most, 64 percent of Russian Estonians feel as though Russia is their home and are critical of Estonian politics.²⁶ However, there is no economic motive to join Russia. The Russian economy has been faltering in recent years,²⁷ whereas the Estonian economy has been growing rapidly. Therefore, it is hard to determine if Russian Estonians will support Russian Annexation. If these people would

welcome Russian annexation, which will make Estonian defense more challenging.²⁸ These people could do things to sabotage the Estonian military by staging protests, dodging conscription, or helping the rebels. With this in mind, it is hard to know how well the Estonians would fair against the rebels. Given the small size and military of the country, it is unlikely that Estonia can resist Russian military power for very long. If Estonia is close to being conquered completely, President Obama might feel that action must be taken in order to protect a NATO ally. If the Estonians do manage to hold their own against the rebels, President Obama may not feel so pressured to act immediately. However, the chances of this happening are slim, as Russian military intervention will most likely increase if the rebels fail to conquer Estonia quickly. A second consideration would be the case of genocide. Genocide, as defined by the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, is “any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, as such: killing members of the group; causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; [and] forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”²⁹ Genocide was one of the primary reasons President Obama listed when intervening in Libya,³⁰ and it was a primary motivation listed when acting against ISIS to protect the Yazidis in Iraq from mass murder.³¹ However, this proves to be a contradictory issue for President Obama. While President Obama cited the Yazidis as one of the reasons to intervene in Iraq and Syria, Yazidis were only offered support for about two months.³² After this, the United States focused on other military objectives, forcing the Yazidis to be protected by only the Merga.³³ Additionally, the actions against Boko Haram in West Africa have been virtually nonexistent.

The United States offered intelligence equipment³⁴ and some military advisors³⁵ to Nigeria, but it has done little to curb Boko Haram's offensive. Additionally, President Obama failed to act in certain Arab Spring states. For example, Bahrain, a small state in the Persian Gulf, had democratic protests as a part of the Arab Spring in 2011. These protests were crushed with a disputed number of people dead.³⁶ There were numerous reports of the torture of protestors³⁷ in a country whose human rights record is considered dismal.³⁸ While the United States condemned the violence,³⁹ no real action was taken to curb it. Therefore, it is hard to say what President Obama would do in regard to genocide. The third and probably most important factor is the death of United States citizens. However, there are certain conditions to be considered in this regard. First, the person must be either a neutral party or in support of the Estonians. This is a requirement because if a United States citizen is killed supporting an organization seen as an enemy of the United States, there will be no action. Additionally, there must be direct action against citizens. Indirect or accidental deaths would lead to furthering of peace talks instead of military action. Direct action, such as the execution of several Americans,⁴⁰ would most likely lead to action by President Obama. This would be the only way that President Obama would act militarily in Estonia, unless he acts in order to support the NATO charter.

But, if President Obama wants to use military action, what exactly can he do? First, he would most likely seek multi-lateral support. As has been seen in the fight against ISIS,⁴¹ the assistance given to the African Union in fighting al-Shabab in Somalia⁴² and the NATO intervention in Libya,⁴³ President Obama wants to work with a wide variety of allies. This would include the NATO powers and countries from the geographic region in question.⁴⁴ For this reason, President Obama would most likely work with NATO allies in the region (Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovakia, Czech Republic), along with the allies to which are usually made,

such as Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, etc. (known from actions in Libya,⁴⁵ Syria,⁴⁶ Afghanistan, and Iraq). However, if these nations are against action, President Obama would still act. I believe he would also pursue air strikes. This could be conventional airplane air strikes, which have been seen in Syria⁴⁷ and Libya.⁴⁸ This could also be drone strikes, which have been used in conventional war zones such as Iraq when fighting ISIS and Al Qaeda affiliates,⁴⁹ Afghanistan,⁵⁰ Libya,⁵¹ and Syria.⁵² Additionally, there have been drone strikes in countries where the United States is not usually active, in countries such as Somalia,⁵³ Yemen,⁵⁴ and Pakistan.⁵⁵ If President Obama is interested in killing individual, high value targets, he would most likely use drones. If he is interested in more general military action, President Obama would most likely use a combination of conventional air strikes with aircraft and drone strikes in Estonia, with more of a focus the former. President Obama would also most likely use military trainers. He has done this in a wide variety of situations, such as fighting Boko Haram in Nigeria,⁵⁶ helping to fight ISIS in Iraq,⁵⁷ in Libya to help fight against Gadhafi,⁵⁸ and in Uganda to help find Joseph Kony.⁵⁹ It is probable that President Obama would send military advisors in order to help the Estonians to learn Russian tactics and in order to give them proper counter-terrorist training.

President Obama's Theoretical Doctrine

It would be helpful to understand President Obama's actions in a theoretical sense, in order to provide a framework for his actions. There are many different theories that are used to explain behavior on the international stage, but the most mainstream theories are "Liberalism" and "Realism." There are many different variations of these theories, but for the purposes of this essay I will focus on the basic definitions of them. Realism has several distinguishing traits. First, the state is the primary actor on the international stage.⁶⁰ Second, sovereignty is a

fundamental characteristic of a state.⁶¹ Third, the fundamental goal of international politics is survival, and “immoral acts” are justified if it is for the greater good.⁶² Also, since there is no higher power to protect states they will act in order to protect themselves from other states.⁶³ This will generate a balance of power, as each state attempts to match the other.⁶⁴ Realists additionally think that humans are naturally evil.⁶⁵

Liberalism has several traits entirely opposite to that of Realism. A fundamental concept of Liberalism is that individuals are naturally good.⁶⁶ Liberals argue for the respect of human rights, parliamentary democracy, and free trade, all while insisting that these goals must happen within a state.⁶⁷ Liberals also think in the international system, progress is possible, whether it be progressing to peace or to a better recognition of human rights.⁶⁸ They firmly believe in peace, and they recognize the need for transnational actors.⁶⁹ Liberals also firmly believe in the idea of transnational cooperation with organizations such as NATO and the United Nations.⁷⁰

With these definitions in mind, one can speculate authoritatively about the actions of President Obama. President Obama offers evidence suggesting he is both a Realist and a Liberal. When it comes to President Obama’s Realist tendencies, the most significant evidence in support of this is his frequent use of drone strikes. Drone strikes, while first used by the Bush Administration, were greatly expanded by the Obama administration as a way to weaken extremist groups by eliminating their top leaders and denying them safe havens.⁷¹ These actions are fundamentally Realist for several reasons. First, these drone strikes take place not only in nations where the United States has a formalized presence (Iraq,⁷² Afghanistan⁷³), but also in countries such as Pakistan,⁷⁴ Syria,⁷⁵ and Yemen.⁷⁶ This is a clear violation of another country’s sovereignty, which would be in direct violation of Liberal doctrine. This, however, conforms to the Realist doctrine because it provides security for the United States in the best way possible,

even if it means disregarding borders and sovereignty. Additionally, these drone strikes have robbed individuals of human rights, something that would be unacceptable to a Liberal. A particular example would be Anwar al-Awlaki, a United States citizen who was a recruiter for Al-Qaeda.⁷⁷ Al-Awlaki was killed in Yemen in 2011 without a trial, which is considered a fundamental human right.⁷⁸ A Realist would justify this action because his death protected the United States.⁷⁹ Another action taken by President Obama that suggests he is a Realist is the targeted killing of Osama Bin Laden. President Obama discovered that Osama Bin Laden was in a compound in Western Pakistan.⁸⁰ He intended to kill Bin Laden, but he feared that the corrupt Pakistani military, if informed of his intentions, would inform Bin Laden and he would escape.⁸¹ President Obama thus decided to act without the support or knowledge of Pakistan.⁸² This is a greater violation of the sovereignty of a country than the drone strikes because the Obama administration usually uses drone strikes with the permission of the state in which it is operating.⁸³ This would once again be justified because it is necessary to protect the United States, a fundamental motive of Realism.

That said, President Obama seems to also act in a Liberal manner. President Obama signed an executive order ending enhanced interrogation once he entered office. He was also very insistent on having memos regarding torture made public,⁸⁴ in order to help the government with its transparency regarding the issue.⁸⁵ While this could be seen as a way to respect human rights, President Obama also refused to prosecute those who did the torturing,⁸⁶ which contradicts the previous claim. President Obama's commitment to nuclear disarmament could also be considered Liberal. Nuclear non-proliferation is a fundamental component of moving towards world peace, a Liberal trait. During his presidency, President Obama worked with Russia for continued disarmament⁸⁷ and has stated that he envisions a world without nuclear

weapons.⁸⁸ Additionally, President Obama made several decisions to intervene based on human rights, a fundamental component of Liberalism. President Obama chose to intervene in Libya because he wanted to prevent genocide.⁸⁹ President Obama also sent soldiers to Uganda to find Joseph Kony, a man who was indicted on war crimes for abducting children and making them sex slaves and soldiers.⁹⁰ Additionally, President Obama pursues a policy of multilateralism, a fundamental component of Liberalism. President Obama first demonstrated his commitment to multilateralism in Libya, where he gathered a coalition of NATO and non-NATO allies to protect civilians and enforce a no fly zone in Libya.⁹¹ This is also illustrated by his actions in Somalia, where President Obama used air strikes⁹² to help support the African Union in creating a transitional government for Somalia,⁹³ a country that has been plagued by Civil War since 1991.⁹⁴ President Obama additionally created a broad coalition of forces against ISIS in 2014,⁹⁵ a terrorist organization that quickly took over areas in both Syria and Iraq.⁹⁶ This commitment to multilateral action greatly adds to the argument that President Obama is in fact a Liberal.

President Obama's actions do not provide a clear view into what he believes. However, I think that President Obama is a Realist, and only acts in a Liberal manner when it is convenient or may benefit his international standing or his administration's public image. His speeches regarding foreign policy often refer to Liberal policy, but President Obama rarely acts upon these words. The speech to the United Nations previously mentioned is a good example. His belief that nations cannot redraw borders was weakly contested by President Obama in Ukraine, and the same thing can be said about his statement that bigger nations should not bully smaller ones. President Putin annexed Crimea with only limited economic sanctions placed upon Russia by the United States,⁹⁷ making President Obama's commitment to such Liberal action seem limited. Additionally, his Liberal actions in foreign policy usually can be understood to have Realist

principles involved. For example, President Obama's frequent use of multilateralism benefits the United States by limiting casualties for the United States and helping to create allies in the Middle East, to which he usually appeals when intervening.⁹⁸ Another example would be where he chooses to intervene. President Obama became involved in Uganda in hunting for Joseph Kony after the infamous documentary *Kony 2012* caused many Americans to pressure President Obama to act.⁹⁹ While this could be seen as a Liberal act, Joseph Kony had been active in Central and Eastern Africa for decades,¹⁰⁰ and had been documented by the United Nations in 2006.¹⁰¹ President Obama did not take steps thanks to his own Liberal ideals; he was instead motivated by polling and external pressure.

Conclusion

The conflict in Ukraine was the newest example of Russia attempting to increase its power in areas traditionally considered "Russian." Russia has had a long history of conquest.¹⁰² The flatness of their terrain in the west has allowed for easy invasion, and this invasion has forced Russia to become insecure and militaristic.¹⁰³ A significant factor that led to this conflict was the insistence by the Ukrainian people of becoming aligned with the West instead of Russia—something Putin could not allow to happen in order to maintain his sphere of influence in Eastern Europe.¹⁰⁴ If President Obama wants to maintain the legitimacy of NATO and to protect American interests, he must act with a show of force. While his current actions have stifled the Russian economy, it is clear that this will not be enough to end Putin's ambitions. In order for President Obama to do this, he must use military force.

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