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## The Obama Administration and Human Rights: Between International PR and American Values

The foreign policy of the United States is considered to be a global phenomenon and a unique case in international relations. It entails a strong and visible connection between American internal values, social awareness, the decision-making process and international considerations. This uniqueness contrasts even more strongly when compared with the foreign policies of other important players in international relations. Since the American Revolution, relying on its unique domestic values formulated in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, U.S. foreign policy has been carefully crafted in order to meet national interests. It is also much more honest and direct than the foreign policies of the Great Powers in the 18th and 19th centuries.<sup>1</sup>

Together with technological advancement and growing strength, the same values have compelled American society to abandon its isolationism in response to the spread of despotic ideologies around the globe. The evolution of these values can be traced for more than 230 years in a mixture of Christian principles, isolationism, Manifest Destiny's mission, internationalism and the quest to defend the Free World. It seems that U.S. international activity, embedded in a clear set of values and sound rationale, will be able to maintain its dominant position in the international relations of the 21st century. Ultimately, globalization itself has been a result of democracy's domination in international relations after the Cold War.

However, the prospects for the near future seem to be much grimmer. The current American foreign policy seems to depart from its strong attachment to liberal values. More and more often arguments criticizing Obama's foreign policy emerge as a consequence of developments in international relations. Although these arguments are often politically motivated, they also have

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<sup>1</sup> A sound argument for the uniqueness of American values is made by McCormick 2005: 10 [including footnote 10].

a very sound empirical basis. They constitute a firm background for criticism, additionally reinforced by the economic downturn of the United States and the political, economic and military growth of new rivals in the international arena. These developments bring to mind the most peculiar period of American history, prior to the Second World War. Part of the answer can be linked to the core values on which the Obama administration is building its foreign policy.

Already in 2009 the former U.S. envoy to the United Nations, John Bolton, called Barack Obama the first post-American president, emphasizing his greater devotion to the international image and global tendencies than reliance on American values. Bolton's criticism targeted the philosophical foundations of the new president's approach towards international relations and, in particular, the dangerous tendency of identifying what is American with universal values (Bolton 2010: 19-27).

Indeed, over five years ago, when President Obama took office, he was determined to introduce a new quality in American foreign policy under the omnipotent slogan of "change." On one hand, the new administration had to face the difficult legacy of Obama's predecessor, in terms of declining support for the U.S.'s international activities and increasing internal economic hardships. On the other, a strong temptation toward crafting a "better" image of the United States was noticeable. These preconditions seemed to be the bottom line of the new foreign policy philosophy (Bolton 2010: 19-27). Daniel Drezner identifies these preconditions as "strategic convictions," which he summarizes as economic rejuvenation, overextended American presence around the globe [literally "... in all the wrong places" – SD] and the deteriorating U.S. image.<sup>2</sup>

The 2008 election of Barack Obama was considered to be a turning point in American foreign policy and a "new beginning" for the international image of the flagship of Western democracy. Obama's success in the presidential race was directly linked with George W. Bush's unilateral international activities, which often contradicted the globally accepted principles of international relations. Furthermore, the essence of the global war on terror and its supporting activities were also contradictory to the international standards

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<sup>2</sup> Obama came into office with three firm strategic convictions. First, domestic rejuvenation was crucial for any long-term grand strategy, a point he has stressed in all his foreign policy speeches. "[We have] failed to appreciate the connection between our national security and our economy," Obama said in his December 2009 address on Afghanistan. "Our prosperity provides a foundation for our power. It pays for our military. It underwrites our diplomacy." Second, the United States was overextended in all the wrong places, fighting two counterinsurgencies and a war on terrorism in the Middle East while neglecting other parts of the globe. Third, the Bush administration's mistakes had pushed the United States' standing in the world to an all-time low. Drezner 2011: 57-68.

of human rights protection (Roth 2010: 10-16). Hence, at least partially, the contemporary roots of anti-Americanism stem from the assessment of American actions in international relations around the world. Since the Bush administration flagrantly neglected the standards of international human rights promoted by the Western world, he simply provided “useful” examples revealing the “Western hypocrisy,” and thus strengthened the arguments for anti-Americanism.

The two wars, deteriorating economic conditions and tangible decline of sympathy for the United States provided Barack Obama with a sufficient amount of arguments, which he used during the election campaign to convince the majority of Americans that he is the one able to make a difference. Every election campaign is a battlefield of ideas and promises, where the more convincing and trustworthy candidate wins. The main credo of the Obama campaign was change, and this was what the general public expected from him – including the foreign dimension. Furthermore, even if the internal and international condition were not favorable for the new president, Obama was aware of the challenges and had enough time to set up his own set of priorities, agenda, and strategy, and to select the most appropriate means and tools by which to accomplish his aims.

The main directions of Obama’s change in U.S. foreign policy concerned the improvement of the economic situation in the United States and repair of the American image abroad. It included improving relations with European partners and, in particular, with Germany, France and Russia, replacing Bush’s unilateralism with multilateralism, and introducing much milder and consensual policies which were supposed to ease the tensions in international relations. Obama was also willing to improve the negative record of open confrontation with Bush’s “axis of evil” and openly anti-American pariahs such as Venezuelan Hugo Chavez. American foreign policy was also supposed to drift towards greater respect for international commitments and a policy of consensus rather than unilateral dictate and the search for new forms of international activism. Therefore, Obama’s presidency was supposed to change and reshape American foreign policy, to improve the image of the country abroad, thus reinforcing the dominant and leading position of the Western world in international relations. Part of these expectations was the hope that under the new president, the United States would decrease its determination to achieve everything immediately and would return to “common sense” international relations.

Theoretically, behind the concept of multilateralism there is a hidden presumption that close cooperation and commonly agreed international actions possess more legitimacy and decrease the threats posed by the realist “anarchic” order. The idea that actions are a result of consensus and careful evalua-

tion of each case aims to consider the interests of particular states in international relations and through international norms, to establish a clear legal and politically acceptable framework. Naturally, within this context human rights should not be forgotten. Hence, Obama's administration was supposed to reignite global enthusiasm for the United States by ending unilateralism and returning to a pursuit of a common international meaning.<sup>3</sup> During his Oslo Nobel Prize speech, President Obama reinvigorated those hopes by claiming that "... the United States cannot insist that others follow the rules of the road if we refuse to follow them ourselves." He also affirmed the U.S. government's respect for the Geneva Conventions.<sup>4</sup> However, his first term record creates a very different picture.

## The first term and human rights: between demagogy and reality

One of the characteristic features of American foreign policy is its identification with the president in office and his administration. For many people, the reasons for the growing anti-Americanism during the Bush administrations were identified with the unpopular, peculiar and rather negative image of the president and his aides, and particularly with the means used within the framework of the war on terror, undermining the axiology of universal human rights. Thus, the popular worldwide support for Barack Obama was rooted in the belief that the new president would bring a new quality of American leadership into international relations, diminish the use of force and return to multilateralism as a key principle in U.S. foreign policy. These seemed to be the popular expectations for solutions to the American aggressiveness and arrogance associated with the Bush administration.

## Obama's doctrine?

Another important source of criticism of Obama's administration's foreign policy is the lack of a long-term strategy for the role of the United States in international relations. While summarizing the negative comments, Daniel

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<sup>3</sup> See: Skidmore 2012: 43 [footnote 1]; see also: Lobe 2008; Kerler 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Compare: "Remarks by the President at the Acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize," The White House, September 10, 2009. Quoted also by Roth 2010.

Drezner provides an attempt to identify the general trends in Obama's activities (Drezner 2011: 57-58). He recognizes not one, but two strategies marking the path of America's international activities since 2009. "The first strategy, multilateral retrenchment, was designed to curtail the United States' overseas commitments, restore its standing in the world, and shift burdens onto global partners. This strategy was clearly articulated, but it delivered underwhelming policy results," and the second "... is focused on counterpunching" (Drezner 2011: 57-58).

Drezner's approach exemplifies the inconsistency of actions within the first strategy, which naturally leads to the necessity of applying the second one. Indeed, the United States' overseas commitments played a pivotal role in the deterioration of the American image abroad. However, instead of a new doctrine, Obama's first strategy appeared to be an ideologically biased short-term policy, aimed at undermining the political activities of the former president as having been wrong in substance. No matter how negative the general assessment is of Bush's military escapades in Afghanistan and Iraq, at least the former had an understandable national security rationale. Secondly, the idea of multilateralism in a deeply polarized world, where anti-Americanism is a formula for political success, meant nothing more than giving up ground to those players who were less attached to any values. The presumption of Obama's aides that multilateralism would enhance support for American global leadership was devastated by the much less flexible foreign policies of the other important regional players. One can hardly imagine that only because of the American elections the former Venezuelan president, Hugo Chavez, would have abandoned his policy of depicting America as the Devil on earth, or that Iranian President Ahmadinejad would terminate, or at least reveal, his nuclear program as a sign of good will. The Obama administration had to decide how to cope with the Afghan/Iraqi legacy and to carry the political costs of any action. However, the concept of rejoining the global public opinion in order to improve the image of the United States was in fact a decision to give up the American superiority without being practically challenged.

Naturally, the second strategy defined by Drezner as "counterpunching" needed to be implied, because comparatively weaker political adversaries saw an opportunity to take advantage of the U.S.'s self-restricting actions and to promote opportunities and solutions fairly contradictory with American values and, respectively, interests. Thus, the Obama administration was urged to reassess its international activities, seeing the devastating consequences of a political retreat for short-term PR benefits. The counterpunching became a logical consequence of the reflection that others are not going to naively follow the USA's preaching, but will pursue their own interests in the global en-

vironment. Thus, the counterpunching had to be embedded in the same old values, which were gladly abandoned as deviations of Bush's administration.

In a sense, a symbolic moment of this metamorphosis of Obama's foreign policy was his visit to Poland, which was criticized by Obama's administration because Warsaw had been a staunch ally in George W. Bush's war on terror. Once the question of values was reformulated by Obama in late 2010, Poland was back from the wilderness.<sup>5</sup> This tendency was also visible in the more assertive attitude towards China in the case of Chen Guangcheng and restrictive actions against the Russian ruling elites involved in the case of Sergei Magnitsky (Kramer, Shevtsova 2012). Thus, after the preliminary period of radical modification of U.S. foreign policy, the Obama administration had to evaluate the gains and losses and reconsider its philosophy after being able to see the undesirable effects of its preliminary calculations. Washington's relations with Beijing and Moscow provide interesting examples in this respect.

## China and Obama's human rights record

A major role in the shaping of President Obama's foreign policy was played by the economic crisis which was an acute internal problem requiring either prompt resolution or prospective defeat in the quest for reelection. In order to handle this challenge, President Obama introduced a policy of closer relations with China, aiming the involvement of the PRC's financial resources towards providing financial security for the American economy, thus securing the financing for his crisis management activities. As Hillary Clinton stated in February 2009, "... human rights 'can't interfere' with other U.S. interests in China" (Roth 2010).

However, American relations with China seem to constitute an unsolvable riddle. On one hand, during Obama's first mandate, the United States decided to confront China's growing geopolitical influence by strengthening its military presence in the Far East. On the other, President Obama's administration's numerous meetings with China's officials revealed a pragmatic attitude based on the supremacy of economic considerations in the mutual relations. At the same time, on a number of issues directly linked to the question of human dignity, which constitutes a core American value, the U.S. president was ready to step back in order to secure Chinese support for his attempts to improve the economic situation on a national level.

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<sup>5</sup> For Obama's visit to Poland, see: Ostrowski, Smoczyński 2011; Stępień 2011.

The side effect of this Chinese-American rapprochement was a gradual exclusion of the human rights questions from the mutual agenda. The case became visible after President Obama refused to meet the Dalai Lama in Washington D.C. in 2009, slightly less than a month before his visit to Beijing. It was, as the *Daily Telegraph* described it, “to keep China happy.”<sup>6</sup> In this way, Barack Obama became the first U.S. president to postpone a meeting with the Dalai Lama since 1991.<sup>7</sup>

However, what Obama’s administration sacrificed in this case was much more than a meeting with a popular leader of an oppressed nation. The Dalai Lama’s impact on the situation in Tibet and in the overall region should not be overestimated. Nevertheless, every American president welcomed him for a completely different, even if symbolic, purpose. The short meetings with the Tibetan spiritual leader aim to emphasize the position of the United States concerning the equality of states, attachment to human rights and the readiness to support any oppressed group or nation. They also tend to underline the fact that the United States was not linking the questions of values to the international mainstream and was ready to send a sound signal to violators of these values. This was no longer the case. Although later, amid typical Chinese criticism and threats of deteriorating mutual relations, Barack Obama met the Dalai Lama twice in February 2010 and July 2011, the earlier mistake could hardly be repaired, because values are not negotiable.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, even Obama’s Nobel Prize of 2009 was not obliging enough to criticize Beijing’s decision not to allow the Chinese dissident and human rights activist Liu Xiaobo to be released and to attend the 2010 Nobel Prize ceremony. Thus, the U.S. administration sent a clear signal to China’s communist authorities that values can also be traded when it comes to short-term economic and political objectives. Beijing understood that signal not as an improvement in bilateral relations, but as a *carte blanche* for conducting an unrestrained policy of intimidation for political or religious nonconformism in China.

President Obama visited China for four days in November 2009. During his visit he refrained from addressing the state-orchestrated policy of assimilation of Uyghurs in Xinjiang province, where resettlement of the Chinese Han population, linked with destruction of the Uyghurs’ historical heritage, caused riots and civilian victims. His failure to address the questions of human rights in the context of Tibet or political repressions, freedom of ex-

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<sup>6</sup> See: Spillius 2009.

<sup>7</sup> See: “Obama Meets with Dalai Lama Despite Chinese Objections,” CNN, February 19, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> On the Obama-Dalai Lama meetings, see: note 14 supra and MacAskill, Branigan 2010; “Obama Meets with Dalai Lama Despite...”; and the White House Press Releases: Lee 2010; Schulman 2011.

pression and religious freedom were immediately stressed by observers and analysts.<sup>9</sup>

Another moment during Obama's visit to China described by Kenneth Roth portrays the place of values in the hierarchy of priorities of the president's early first term.

Before a handpicked audience of "future Chinese leaders" in Shanghai, he spoke of the United States' journey up from slavery and the struggles for women's and workers' rights, making clear that the United States, too, has a far-from-perfect human rights record. He affirmed the United States' bedrock belief "that all men and women are created equal, and possess certain fundamental rights." However, in a question-and-answer session, he seemed to suggest that China's draconian "great firewall" on the Internet was a reflection of different "traditions," rather than demanding that it be torn down. That remark led to a storm of criticism from Chinese bloggers, and Obama left the country appearing to be in thrall to Chinese economic power and barely interested in risking anything to protect the rights of the 1.3 billion Chinese still living under a dictatorship (Roth 2010).

Attempts to weaken the negative impression of Obama's human rights record of this visit can be noticed in the argumentation provided by Elizabeth Lynch, who argued that Obama was talking about human rights both publicly and privately, but the Chinese were not listening.<sup>10</sup>

Unconsciously, Lynch raises a very important point: Why, in fact, did the Chinese not listen? One explanation could be that Beijing did not have to, because it was aware that the mutual relations were focused on a completely different set of issues, wherein both sides see ground for mutually promising cooperation, which has nothing to do with human rights. Thus, by adding internal economic hardships to the bilateral agenda, the Obama administration had to make a concession with its own principles.

Obama's administration quite quickly realized that the abandonment of human rights issues was not the key to improving American credibility, and as Evan Feigenbaum reported in *The Guardian*, in spite of Obama's efforts in the first year to build confidence, "there is an enduring lack of trust and confidence on both sides."<sup>11</sup> Once this was realized, Obama returned to gestures of caring about human rights by meeting the Dalai Lama. The subsequent issues on individual cases of public attorneys being persecuted in China and, in particular, the case of Chen Guangcheng<sup>12</sup>, steadily increased the tensions be-

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<sup>9</sup> Obama was accused of kowtowing to China on human rights issues. This was aptly summarized in Politico, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1009/27942.html>, and quoted by The Guardian as "Bottom Line: Don't Piss Off Your Banker"; Weaver 2009.

<sup>10</sup> See: Lynch 2009.

<sup>11</sup> See: MacAskill, Branigan 2010.

<sup>12</sup> See: "China's Blind Activist Chen Guangcheng," BBC News, May 19, 2012; Buckley 2013.



tween Washington D.C. and Beijing. However, it is not appropriate to blame human rights rhetoric for creating obstacles in mutual relations. The general tendency in mutual relations was not dependent on human rights considerations. Rather, a compilation of much more pragmatic geopolitical evaluation and unsolved problems such as the trade surplus, arms sales to Taiwan, the value of the Chinese currency and Iranian sanctions have forced Washington to take the necessary political and strategic steps to improving its position towards China's growing ambitions. Obama's visit to Myanmar, Cambodia and Thailand in November 2012 is of significant importance. Although China and the United States claimed that it had no impact on mutual relations, for Washington it was an opportunity not only to "renew old friendships," but also to open up new geopolitical perspectives. Especially the visit to Myanmar, supporting the process of democratization, can provide new opportunities for Washington in the closest proximity of China.

The Pacific reorientation of U.S. foreign policy has been taking place for already several years. The establishment of a U.S. military base in Australia and active political and military involvement in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan are only part of what Leon Panetta has called "efforts to strengthen alliances and partnerships in the Asia-Pacific to advance a common security vision for the future."<sup>13</sup> However, it did not necessarily go together with the American demand for human rights during the first years of Obama's presidency (Kurlantzick 2010: 9).

## "Reset"

Similarly, Obama's administration searched for a new quality in its relations with the Russian Federation. The famous "Reset" was embedded in the same philosophy aiming to introduce more pragmatic relations by abandoning the former administration's political activities, causing tensions between Washington and Moscow.<sup>14</sup> George W. Bush's attachment to the Missile Defense System and NATO's eastward expansion were considered to be unnecessary and provoking activities. Instead, new challenges of mutual importance needed to be faced and Moscow was an indispensable partner. Without Russian approval, the American military activities in Afghanistan could be disturbed by logistic obstacles. However, what was even more important was the

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<sup>13</sup> See: O'Malley, Garnaut, Welch 2012.

<sup>14</sup> For more details, see: "Button Gaffe Embarrasses Clinton", CNN News, March 7, 2009; Crabtree.

renewal of the legal bonds securing the Russian nuclear arsenal. From this perspective, the signing of the Treaty between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms in April 2010 proved that the “Reset” managed to accomplish its aim. It was, as Michael Weiss calls it, “... the one tangible accomplishment of the reset – in retaliation for the placement of an American missile defense shield in Eastern Europe.”<sup>15</sup>

However, the geopolitical concessions did not lead to a practical improvement in mutual relations. After the Libyan military operation and the death of Muammar Gaddafi, Moscow felt cheated and took a much firmer position on the political situation in Syria. The reinforcement of the Russian influence in Ukraine and Georgia and the Moscow relations with Teheran proved that the Russian perspective on the “Reset” meant making room for the reestablishment of the Russian sphere of interests.

The Obama administration was not hesitant to criticize the mockery which Putin made of democratic principles by becoming the Russian president again, strengthening his position by destroying non-governmental organizations and continuing repressions of the media. Remarkably, once the Obama administration decided to return to the language of human rights with the introduction of the Magnitsky Law, the “Reset” was replaced by the same rhetoric known from the Cold War or the G. W. Bush period.<sup>16</sup>

As in the Chinese case, Russian-American relations exemplify the consequences of a euphoric pursuit of contemporary pragmatism with the unintended consequences weakening the American position in international relations.

## The war on terror

George W. Bush’s war on terror is considered to be the most recognizable symbol of American unilateralism and arrogance. During his election campaign, Obama echoed these international concerns and made promises to handle the matter by closing the Guantanamo U.S. Military Base detention center for “enemy combatants,” which had become one of the most prominent examples of the American image of hypocritical behavior in international relations. The establishment of the detention center for insurgents within the framework of the so-called “war on terror” was a practical response to

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<sup>15</sup> See: Weiss.

<sup>16</sup> Valuable analysis of the Reset policy is made by Sestanovich 2012.

the contemporary challenges of asymmetric warfare, which are still not settled by international law. This unresolved issue was, and still is, internationally condemned as an unacceptable violation of the international principles of human rights. Thus, Obama's campaign promises were perceived as a declaration of a fundamental shift in American foreign policy. Indeed, among the first documents signed by President Obama were three executive orders addressing the essence of the war on terror's international criticism: closing Guantanamo Bay, banning torture by ending the Bush administration's CIA program of enhanced interrogation methods and establishing an interagency task force to lead a systematic review of detention policies and procedures, and a review of all individual cases.<sup>17</sup> However, this optimistic rush turned out to be premature and dangerous. John McCain accurately commented that "... the decision needed to consider what would happen to the prisoners held at Guantanamo before ordering the facility to be closed."<sup>18</sup>

However, over four years later the detention facility in Guantanamo still exists. Although Obama introduced some technical changes concerning military commissions and has pressured to clarify the status of the detained individuals, he eventually resigned from closing the camp. His administration tends to blame Congress for depriving the necessary finances in order to execute the order, but it seems that the reason is buried somewhere else. The alternative for Guantanamo is supposed to be a detention facility in the United States. Thus, apparently Obama wishes to eliminate the symbol but does not have a solution for how to deal with the essence of the problem, which is indefinite detention.<sup>19</sup> It seems that, ultimately, the Obama administration has understood the practical complications which preceded the idea of the Bush administration to establish Guantanamo and the fact that it was an attempt to provide a practical solution to a vague and unclear challenge for the United States. Thus, despite his earlier promises, Obama preferred continuity in American foreign policy, simultaneously putting the responsibility on Congress for the unfulfilled promise. What seems to have appeared from beneath the Executive orders is an attempt at a prompt PR success without the necessary diligent analysis of consequences stemming from political actions.

President Obama was also devoted to improving the American image abroad in an attempt to diminish the spread of anti-Americanism and to reinvigorate relations with a number of important partners dismayed by the

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<sup>17</sup> Executive orders of 22.1.2009, no.: 13491 Ensuring Lawful Interrogations; 13493 Review of Detention Policy Options; and Executive Order – Review and Disposition of Individuals Detained at the Guantánamo Bay Naval Base and Closure of Detention Facilities, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/executive-orders?page=15>.

<sup>18</sup> See: "Obama Signs Order to Close Guantanamo Bay Facility," CNN Politics.com, January 22, 2009; and also Malendowski 2012: 550-551.

<sup>19</sup> Compare: Greenwald 2013; Greenwald 2012.

Bush administration. Thus, the relations between the U.S. and key European players such as France and Germany were supposed to reaffirm the importance of the transatlantic ties. Indeed, Obama's first visits to Paris and Berlin were spectacular "celebrity-like" appearances, aiming to meet the European expectations, but they ultimately did not lead to noticeable improvement in the bilateral and transatlantic relations. Simultaneously, the new administration started cutting off ties with Bush's "war on terror" allies as an inconvenient ballast depriving Obama's administration of the ability to maintain ultimate flexibility in international relations.

The reorientation of Obama's foreign policy was also forced by the common priorities with Russia in Afghanistan and the urgent need to reaffirm the mutual guarantees for securing nuclear arsenals. His attempt to bring the relations with Moscow to a new level overshadowed events in the Middle East, where Obama's speeches emphasizing the universal values of human rights were confronted by the rise of radical Islamist movements that were much more dangerous than the old authoritarian regimes. President Obama was also not able to exercise the necessary pressure on Israelis to return to negotiations aimed at finding a solution to the "unsolvable" Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Furthermore, a number of issues which had a direct impact on the deterioration of transatlantic ties during the Bush administration remained unresolved, since the American position during Obama's first term was practically not modified. Apart from the already discussed question of Guantanamo and the alleged CIA human rights violations, Europeans were expecting significant improvement in the attitude of the United States towards the International Criminal Court's efficiency,<sup>20</sup> the U.S. position on the Ban of Land Mine Convention and the collapse of the Kyoto Protocol. In all of these questions, the American position did not evolve considerably if compared to the status quo during Bush's presidency. Thus, on a number of issues U.S. foreign policy remained on the same course, reaffirming the legitimacy and rationale of the Bush administration.

However, in his 2013 State of the Union Address, President Obama declared the establishment of a new level of relations between the U.S. and the EU, which might become not only a turning point in transatlantic relations, but also an important change in the U.S.'s attitude towards Europe. This, however is a perspective for the future and the recent list of achievements is much

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<sup>20</sup> Although the Obama administration emphasizes essential improvement of the American attitude towards the ICC, in terms of ceasing conscious obstruction of the Tribunal activities and providing assistance in response to specific requests, no practical steps have been made either since the United States re-signed the Rome Statute or became a member of the ICC. See also: Domaradzki 2012: 205-214.

shorter. As John Bolton admits, "... on a number of issues Obama's foreign policy practically didn't change and where it happened it had rather a deteriorating impact for the notion of human rights in the U.S. foreign policy."<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

These selective examples of American foreign policy during the Obama administration depict a complicated picture of American priorities, in which human rights are not necessarily among the primary sources of U.S. activities abroad. The economic crisis and the extremely negative image of American foreign policy in international relations have shaped the scope of possible activities for the Obama administration. A clear position on human rights had to be reconciled with the urgency of the economic factor.

The United States is still a unique player in international relations, being the only country to directly link its foreign activities with internal values. The Obama administration had a remarkable chance to reinstate the American leadership in the global competition for moral values. However, due to internal difficulties, it seems that another compromise was made. Unlike the Bush administration, which sacrificed human rights on the altar of national security, based on the urgency of the day and the need to establish sound policies in times of "war on terror," the Obama administration traded these values for financial security and a more accommodating approach towards those international partners who were not supportive of Washington. Often comments can be heard that Obama's second term should bring many more results in the field of values and, in particular, human rights. Time will show if this is going to be the case, but a lesson should be learned. Often economic opportunities are not in line with values. The more these values are suspended for economic gain, the more they become a useless utopia, and then John Bolton is proven to be right.

Foreign policy is a set of internal convictions, ideological presumptions, tactical moves and strategic vision. In each case, the appropriate set of proportions determines its final shape and allows the accuracy and effectiveness of political activity to be evaluated. In the case of Obama's administration, it seems that it is too early to draw final conclusions, but certain preliminary remarks can be made.

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<sup>21</sup> John Bolton explains this tendency with the brute force of reality rather than Obama's personal inclinations. See: Bolton 2013.

David Milne describes Obama as a person who "... abhors absolutism and is comfortable with pursuing policies that test and probe, reaping incremental progress, rather than those that seek to unveil or validate universal truths. The world is uncertain and constantly evolving. Framing policies informed by modesty and provisionality is the best way to avoid dangerous conflict" (Milne 2012: 937). Indeed, this seems to be a conscious and tempered intellectual approach, but the question is whether it matches the position, perspective and image of the world's only superpower leader. Joseph Nye recalls a Brookings Institution publication acknowledging that Obama had an "activist vision of his role in history," intending to "refurbish America's image abroad, especially in the Muslim world; end its involvement in two wars; offer an outstretched hand to Iran; reset relations with Russia as a step toward ridding the world of nuclear weapons; develop significant cooperation with China on both regional and global issues; and make peace in the Middle East." But his record of achievements in these issues has been mixed (Domaradzki 2008).

Already during his election campaign, Barack Obama announced that he was ready to speak with everybody, including all the rogue states and openly hostile leaders around the globe, such as Hugo Chavez and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.<sup>22</sup> This attitude was supposed to bring a new, inspiring and presumably peaceful attitude into international relations. Remarkably, none of these leaders changed their anti-American rhetoric, most probably because this hatred is their *raison d'être*.

Once in the White House, Barack Obama decided to soften the rhetoric of American foreign policy, particularly towards those who had criticized the Bush administration the most openly. What was omitted, though, was the fact that the criticism of non-democratic regional players such as Russia or China was not caused by the Bush's administration's disrespect for universal human rights, but because his activities directly undermined the regional interests and positions of these countries. Thus, Obama's diplomatic rhetoric was perceived by Beijing and Moscow as a sign of weakness and uncertainty, rather than good will or a new era in post-Bush international relations.

The smoothness and flexibility of the Obama administration were a part of the "principled pragmatism" justified by Hilary Clinton at Georgetown University (Roth 2010). The question is, how much pragmatism is appropriate in U.S. foreign relations with non-democratic states? It seems that pragmatism is a tool for making appropriate choices when the existing conditions are not dependent on one's ability to have an impact on them. Being still the only global superpower, this approach seems absolutely inappropriate. How-

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<sup>22</sup> Domaradzki 2008.

ever, pragmatism leads to flexibility and flexibility forbids a detachment to values, because they naturally stiffen it. This is where Obama's human rights arguments became a lofty ideal detached from American foreign policy.

The results of this mistake appeared rapidly. China and Russia actively crushed every attempt to bring change into their societies, Europeans continued to mistrust Americans under Obama, and the authoritarian rulers of regional American allies became worried about their future, reminiscing about the confusion of the Carter administration's reliance on human rights.

Subsequent American appeals for freedom of the internet or the recalling of human rights in Obama's speech in Cairo confronted the reality of increased state control on the internet in non-democratic countries and the rising popularity of radical Islamist alternatives to Western secularism in Egypt. The pragmatism explains also the American attitude towards Syria, where the thousands of people killed in the civil war are not enough to generate sufficient international determination to cease the slaughtering. Instead, the pragmatic approach of Obama tends to assure Moscow that no geopolitical changes will occur which might reconfigure the Middle Eastern riddle.

The curse of Obama's multilateralism is that it is doctrinally linked to the innovative "smart power," which is supposed to link hard power with the ability to gain the appropriate political environment in international relations stemming from soft power. Joseph Nye's recognition of soft power is an unquestionable contribution to the research in international relations. The curse of this term, however, is that many scholars have decided that soft power can be programmed, managed and exploited. The fact is that the more effort is put into enhancing soft power, the more it becomes cheap propaganda. Therefore, smart power, being logically inconsistent, cannot meet the demands of contemporary international relations.

Joshua Kurlantzick makes the point that "... owing to a range of factors, from the global recession to the rise of China, the age of global human-rights advocacy has collapsed, giving way to an era of realism unseen since the days of Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon" (Kurlantzick 2010). Indeed, there is no high tide for human rights in international relations, but Obama's administration decided to go with the flow of cost-calculated pragmatism, rather than standing for the core American principles. Only after realizing that the costs of this pragmatism are too high, Obama decided to return to these values.

Obama's pragmatism is most visible in the famous "open microphone" conversation with Russia's President Medvedev in March 2012, recalled also by John Bolton, "where Obama asked for 'space' for his own political safety before the November election, seemingly clueless about the actual signal he was sending" (Bolton 2013). Some argue that this is the "kitchen" of world politics and no general conclusions should be made. However, it seems that

this is the essence of pragmatism. It is not about promoting values considered as pillars of who we are, but about remaining in power for another term. The question is whether these retreats from American values and concessions to non-democratic regimes are, as it was mentioned, caused by short-term internal political considerations, or constitute part of a wider doctrinal shift towards an interconnected world of global economic interests in which values become obstacles.

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