

# Dollars, Arms, Words: Barack Obama and the Dilemmas of American Hegemony

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the foreign policy of Barack Obama and the basic elements and contours of what can be described as a putative “Obama Doctrine”. It argues that, while never precisely stated and outlined, this doctrine constituted an attempt to come to terms with the final manifestation of some ingrained and, after the 2008 global economic crisis, inescapable contradictions and flaws of the model of hegemony the United States had built and projected since the 1970s. To address this novel situation, and the multiple arcs of crisis the U.S. was facing, a radical strategic, diplomatic and discursive shift was needed. Cognisant of it, Obama pursued this change, although not always consistently or successfully, achieving results that appear all the more remarkable when compared with the foreign policies of his predecessor and, after almost two years in office, his successor.

**Keywords:** Hegemony; Power; United States; Barack Obama; Crisis; Primacy; Consumption;

Trying to make sense of Barack Obama’s foreign policy requires historicising it: examining how it represented a forced attempt to address the intrinsic, and in 2009 visible and inescapable, dilemmas and contradictions of American hegemony. Such hegemony underwent a major transformation in the late 1970s/early 1980s, after a decade when the Vietnam fiasco, the collapse of the U.S.-centred Bretton Woods monetary regime, the decreasing competitiveness of the US industrial sector and the multiple troubles of the American economy had led many to predict an inevitable decline of America’s power and influence.<sup>1</sup>

I use here a fairly loose and non-dogmatic definition of hegemony: a historical (and historian’s) understanding of the concept. I therefore define hegemony as the ability of a specific subject – in this case the United States – to project and maintain its dominance by force and consent, through the negotiation of a specific international order acceptable (or at least tolerable) to the other main actors of the system, and supported by a broad consensus, social and political, at home (by a broad “historical bloc” or “social bloc of forces,” to use what is still a valid, and often overlooked, Gramscian category). Such “consensual hegemony” is thus exercised through a

1 Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s. A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2011; Daniel J. Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed. The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s*, Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2015; Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment. U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2016.

plurality of factors – economic, cultural, military, and political – that render the power of the hegemon multidimensional, pervasive and ultimately effective.<sup>2</sup>

In a nutshell, we can say that this post-1970s renewed hegemony rested on a redefinition of the *modus operandi* of U.S. post-World War II primacy's three basic pillars: monetary dominance; ideological and discursive clarity; and military preponderance. In the early 1980s, skyrocketing interest rates, a strong dollar and intense deregulation converged in intensifying and accelerating the metamorphosis of the United States from an "empire of production" into an "empire of consumption". The U.S. went from being the most advanced, paradigmatic stage of industrial modernity to becoming a post-industrial superpower that had, in its insatiable and ever-expanding domestic market, a key hegemonic asset: the primary driver of global growth, which export-led economies were eager, and prone to subsidise and feed.<sup>3</sup> Domestic mobilisation around (and support for) an interventionist, global and inevitably costly foreign policy was pursued via a sanguine, nationalist and often binary rhetoric that rejected the dominant discourse of limits that every administration of the 1970s (Nixon, Ford and Carter) had, in one way or another, spoken.<sup>4</sup> Military sufficiency and the contextual contraction of the defence budget – so central in the policies pursued in the previous decade to address what was considered to be the now unsustainable military costs of the Cold War – gave way to rearmament and the search for a full-spectrum dominance, which would mark most U.S. grand strategies of the following three decades.<sup>5</sup>

When observed today, the post-1980s hegemony of the United States, successful as it was on multiple counts, reveals various contradictions and fragilities, of which many contemporary observers were all too aware.<sup>6</sup>

From the mid-1970s, consumption of services as well as durable and non-durable goods skyrocketed, tripling or quadrupling in little more than a decade, with

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- 2 On the notion of a "consensual" U.S. "hegemony" during the Cold War see Charles Maier, 'Alliance and Autonomy. European Identity and United States Foreign Policy Objectives in the Truman Years' in Michael J. Lacey (ed.), *The Truman Presidency*, New York/Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 273–298. See also Giovanni Arrighi, 'The World Economy and the Cold War, 1970–1990' in Melvin P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War: III: Endings*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 23–44; Robert W. Cox, 'Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: an Essay in Method' *Millennium, Journal of International Studies* 2, 1983, pp. 162–175; Eugenia Baroncelli, Mario Del Pero, Giancarlo Schirru and Giuseppe Vacca (eds.), *Studi gramsciani nel mondo: le relazioni internazionali*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2010.
  - 3 Charles Maier, *Among Empires. American Ascendancy and its Predecessors*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2006; Giovanni Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing. Lineages of the XXI Century*, London, Verso, 2007; Thomas W. Zeiler, 'Opening Doors in the World Economy in Akira Iriye (ed.), *Global Interdependence. The World After 1945*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2014; Thomas Oatley, *A Political Economy of American Hegemony. Buildups, Booms, and Busts*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015.
  - 4 Frances Fitzgerald, *Way Out in the Blue. Reagan, Star Wars and the End of the Cold War*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2000; Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Age of Fracture*, Cambridge, Mass., Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011, pp. 15–39; Doug Rossinow, *The Reagan Era. A History of the 1980s*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2015.
  - 5 John L. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment. A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War*, Oxford/New York, Oxford University Press, 2005, 2nd ed.; Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment*, op.cit.
  - 6 For four very different examples see Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers. Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, New York, Random House, 1987; Stephen Gill, 'American Hegemony: its Limits and Prospects in the Reagan Era', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 15, 1986, pp. 311–336; Susan Strange, 'The Persistent Myth of Lost Hegemony', *International Organization*, 4, Autumn 1987, pp. 551–574; Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century. Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times*, London, Verso, 1994.

household savings – eroded first by inflation and then by credit-driven overspending – declining correspondingly (in the United States, family savings as a percentage of disposable income dropped from 17% in 1975 to 7.5% in 1989 to 2.5 in 2007).<sup>7</sup> This booming domestic consumption delivered multiple outcomes. It contributed to making the U.S. even more indispensable to the rest of the world, as the American market operated as the most important catalyst of global growth propelled by record-breaking U.S. trade deficits. It provided a surrogate for a weakening welfare state, private consumption acting as a sort of indirect social cushion. It helped preserve political consensus in an age when work became more precarious and insecure and income inequalities rose steeply, particularly in the United States where the GINI index – the basic measure of wealth distribution – rose between 1975 and 2008 from 0.35 to 0.45.<sup>8</sup> But this consumption frenzy also entangled the United States in a thick web of interdependencies, that limited its autonomy and made it increasingly vulnerable to global dynamics, and more and more dependent on the choices of other actors in the international system. This major power, and with the end of the Cold War the “only superpower,” found itself exposed and constrained. Highly revealing was the paradox, historically unprecedented, of a Hegemon that imported goods and capital – in terms of goods and services, the deficit of the balance of payments went from little less than \$ 20 billion in 1980 to more than \$ 700 billion in 2007<sup>9</sup> – and soon learned to love living with permanent and quasi-structural dual deficits, domestic (budget) and external (trade and current accounts).

The strident exceptionalist language that came to permeate both domestic political discussions and foreign policy *argot* – the “city upon a hill” sort of lexicon, deployed in different ways both by the Right and the Left between the early 1980s and the election of Obama – often irritated and alienated foreign public opinions. The Hegemon was regularly called on to address two publics; to effectively exercise its authority, it needed to build two consensuses – within and beyond its borders – around its foreign policy choices and actions. With all its limits, the moderately liberal internationalist discourse of the first decades of the Cold War proved much more adept in achieving this goal – in rendering those two publics and consensuses somehow complementary – than the nationalist/exceptionalist discourse that occupied centre-stage after the 1970s, and that was epitomised both by Reagan’s inaugural reference to the United States as the “beacon of hope” and the “exemplar of freedom” or by Madeleine Albright’s calls,<sup>10</sup> in 1998, to follow the lead of the

7 Federal Reserve Bank of Saint Louis (FRED), Economic Research, *Personal Saving Rate* (<https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/PSAVERT> last accessed June 7, 2018).

8 U.S. Census Bureau, *GINI Index of Money Income and Equivalent-Adjusted Income: 1967 to 2014*, 16 September 2015 (<https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/2015/demo/gini-index-of-money-income-and-equivalence-adjusted-income--1967.html>, last accessed June 9, 2018), On the US as the quintessential society of mass consumption see the classic Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic. The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, New York, Knopf, 2003; Daniel T. Slesnick, *Consumption and Social Welfare. Living Standards and Their Definition in the United States*, New York/Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001. For a different interpretation see the recent Orazio Annatasio, Erik Hurst and Luigi Pistaferri, *The Evolution of Income, Consumption, and Leisure Inequality in the US, 1980–2010*, “National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 17982” (<http://www.nber.org/papers/w17982> last accessed July 15 2017).

9 U.S. Census Bureau, *Foreign Trade. Historical Series* (<https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/statistics/historical/index.html> last accessed June 7 2018).

10 Bill Clinton’s second Secretary of State

U.S.: “the indispensable nation [who] stand[s] tall and see[s] further than other countries into the future.”<sup>11</sup>

Finally, undisputable military dominance – while adding another burden to an already strained budget – proved to be increasingly valueless in a context where wars were often asymmetric (thus reducing the advantage of the strongest side). Moreover, the public – largely divorced from these conflicts after the end of the draft – had little or no stomach for the costs, human and material, that came with them.

These contradictions were somehow ingrained in the model of hegemony the United States had re-thought and re-launched after the 1970s. In the more complex post-9/11 international landscape, and in the hands of George Bush Jr. and his advisors, they finally exploded and became unmanageable. The “empire of consumption” reached a point of saturation fed by a very loose monetary policy, with interest rates lower than inflation, an increased propensity of international investors to lend to the U.S. – the Federal debt held by international investors more than tripled between 2001 and 2009 – and a further (and final) collapse of domestic savings.<sup>12</sup> When coupled with the self-interested complicity of the Bush administration, keen to facilitate further consumers’ borrowing, a deregulated financial sector fuelled the unsustainable (and highly irresponsible) boom of the real estate market, while most financial institutions became increasingly exposed in opaque investments in securities related to home mortgages. When the two interdependent bubbles – in finance and real estate – finally burst, the consumption binge came to an end, with reverberations that destabilised the global economy.<sup>13</sup>

The rhetorical and strategic over-reaction following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 added fuel to the fire; George Bush’s hyper-simplified and extreme nationalist language was met with scepticism, if not outright resistance, in most of the World. According to the rich polling data of the German Marshall Fund, in the EU area the “desirability of U.S. leadership” dropped from 64 to 36% between 2002 and 2008; in the same years Bush’s approval ratings of plummeted from 38 to 20%. According to polls of the Pew Research Center, and of the Office of Research of the U.S. Department of State, the image of the United States deteriorated almost everywhere: between 2000 and 2007, favourable views of the U.S. declined from 78 to 30% in Germany, from 52 to 9% in Turkey, from 50 to 16% in Argentina, from 75 to 29% in Indonesia.<sup>14</sup>

11 Ronald Reagan, *Inaugural Address*, January 20, 1981, *The American Presidency Project*, The University of California, Santa Barbara (<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=43130>, last accessed June 6, 2018); *Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright, interview on NBC-TV “The Today Show,”* February 19, 1998, U.S. Department of State Archive (<https://1997-2001.state.gov/statements/1998/980219a.html>, last accessed June 7, 2018). On the international reaction to this sort of language, witness, for example, the reaction in Europe to one of the quintessential exceptionalist moments of post-1970s U.S. foreign policy, the two administrations of George Bush Jr. (2001-9), highlighted in the yearly “Transatlantic Trends” of the German Marshall Fund (<http://trends.gmfus.org/> last accessed July 21 2017). See also the reflections in G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan. The Origins, Crisis and Transformation of the Liberal World Order*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2011.

12 *Federal Debt Held by Foreign and International Investors*, FRED (<https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/FDHBFIN>, last accessed June 4, 2018)

13 For a useful and clear overview see Jeffrey A. Frieden and Menzie D. Chinn, *Lost Decades. The Making of America’s Debt Crisis and the Long Recovery*, New York, Norton, 2011. See also Iwan Morgan, ‘The Indebted Empire: America’s Current-Account Deficit Problem’, *International Politics*, 45, 2008, pp. 92–112

14 The German Marshall Fund, *Transatlantic Trends*, cit.; Pew Research Center, *Global Public Opinion in the Bush Years (2001–2008)*, December 18 2008 (<http://www.pewglobal.org/2008/12/18/global-public-opinion-in-the-bush-years-2001-2008/> last accessed June 26, 2017). See also Sergio Fabbrini (ed.), *The United States*

The extreme unpopularity of Bush and the United States was of course linked to the disastrous American wars of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Iraq and Afghanistan (America's "longest war," in the case of the latter). Multilateral in nature and backed by all the major allies of Washington, the intervention in Afghanistan garnered more support and was less controversial, both inside and outside the United States, although enthusiasm for the war declined over time as a consequence of the U.S.'s ineffectual and over-ambitious efforts at nation-building. The intervention in Iraq proved instead extremely divisive from the very beginning and provoked an unprecedented rift within the Atlantic Alliance.<sup>15</sup> The botched occupation/liberation of Iraq paradigmatically highlighted the limits of what the French Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine had once described as the *hyperpuissance américaine* (the "American hyperpower"): the structural gap between what the U.S. spent to enjoy such preponderance of power and the benefits it could reap from it.<sup>16</sup> Initially supported by a public shocked by 9/11 and captured by the promise to transform and redeem the Middle East, this military over-stretch met with increasing resistance outside and inside the United States. According to Gallup, the percentage of Americans who considered the military intervention in Iraq to be a mistake grew from 23% to 63% between 2003 and 2008 (in the case of Afghanistan the shift was more modest, from 9% to 28%).<sup>17</sup>

What Obama found in 2007-8 – and aptly exploited to gain first the democratic nomination and then Presidency – was in many ways a perfect storm: the final explosion of contradictions and dilemmas rooted in the model of hegemony that the United States had embodied and projected for three decades. The dramatic economic crisis and, even more, the Iraq fiasco, nourished the desire for a radical change of action, thus helping outsider candidates like Obama, who, opposed to his main Democratic rival, Hillary Clinton, had not supported a war that in 2008 more than 80% of registered Democrats, and a clear majority of Americans, now considered a major mistake.<sup>18</sup>

Obama's foreign policy has in many ways been a consequence of these factors: an attempt to engage with these dilemmas and offer a solution to them, while recognising the political impossibility of pursuing an orthodox policy of global interventionism. Numerous experts and pundits have accused the 44<sup>th</sup> President of lacking a coherent foreign policy vision and doctrine: of having adopted a low-key, tentative and empirical approach to world affairs, which acknowledged and accelerated the inescapable dwindling influence of the United States.<sup>19</sup>

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*Contested. American Unilateralism and European Discontent*, London/New York, Routledge, 2006.

15 Geir Lundestad (ed.), *Just Another Major Crisis? The United States and Europe Since 2000*, Oxford/New York, Oxford University Press, 2008.

16 Hubert Védrine 'Les États-Unis: hyperpuissance ou empire?' *Cités*, 20, 2004, pp. 139–151 <https://doi.org/10.3917/cite.020.0139>.

17 Andrew Dugan (Gallup), *Fewer in U.S. View Iraq and Afghanistan Wars as Mistake*, June 12, 2015 (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/183575/fewer-view-iraq-afghanistan-wars-mistakes.aspx>, last accessed June 23 2017)

18 Jeffrey M. Jones (Gallup), *Iraq War Attitudes Politically Polarized*, April 8 2008 ([http://www.gallup.com/poll/106309/Iraq-War-Attitudes-Politically-Polarized.aspx?g\\_source=position3&g\\_medium=related&g\\_campaign=tiles](http://www.gallup.com/poll/106309/Iraq-War-Attitudes-Politically-Polarized.aspx?g_source=position3&g_medium=related&g_campaign=tiles) last accessed June 23 2017)

19 For scathing critiques of Obama's foreign policy see Colin Dueck, *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015; Vali Nasr, *The Dispensable Nation. American Foreign Policy in Full Retreat*, New York, Doubleday, 2013 and Robert G. Kaufman, *Dangerous Doctrine: How Obama's Grand Strategy Weakened America*, Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 2016. More moderate, critical assessments are in Leslie H. Gelb, *The Elusive Obama Doctrine*, "The National Interest", 5, September – October 2012, pp. 18–28 and Stephen Walt, *Obama Was Not a Realist President*, "Foreign Policy Blog", April 2016 (<http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/07/obama-was-not-a-realist-president-jeffrey-goldberg-atlantic->

But was it really so? And was America's position in the world in 2017 really weaker than it was in 2009, at Obama's inauguration?

The answer is 'no' on both counts. Obama had a foreign policy vision, which he tried to convey and implement. The results have been mixed, but talks of decline of the United States must be considered against some important achievements of the Obama administrations. More important, the zero-sum-game category of national decline itself appears at best partial and at worst obsolescent in a world characterised by intense forms of global integration and the multiple, structural interdependencies that flow from this.

The basic contours of a very non-doctrinal Obama doctrine can be drawn by identifying its five basic dimensions: a) the language of Obama's foreign policy; b) the nexus between the domestic and the global; c) geopolitics and the redefinition of America's strategic priorities; d) the role (and use) of military power; e) the novel, and more expansive understanding of what national security is, and must be, about.<sup>20</sup>

Obama has offered a fairly specific foreign policy discourse. This discourse has been syncretic – in that it combined different, when not antithetical, rhetorical elements – and eccentric when measured against some basic axioms of post-1945 U.S. internationalism. In brief we can say that such discourse has simultaneously been post-imperial, exceptionalist and realist.

It is post-imperial because it explicitly rejected some fundamental tenets that have informed and justified past U.S. interventionism. Obama recurrently downplayed the transformational power of the *hyperpuissance américaine*: the faith, so ingrained in the creed of many neo-cons and liberal hawks, that the U.S.'s unmatched might could be deployed to transform and shape foreign societies; to nation-build via a combination of intervention, destruction, and reconstruction.<sup>21</sup> This rhetoric of limits, reminiscent of that used by all U.S. Presidents of the 1970s, has clearly been on display in the case of the Middle East and, in particular, in the dramatic Syrian conflict, where passivity and inaction have been justified as the consequences of past lessons that revealed how useless, and potentially counterproductive, American direct intervention could be. Furthermore, Obama's discourse of limits has resonated well with a domestic public prostrated by a decade of war and unwilling to support new crusades in the region. The President was clearly eyeing this public when, in a 2014 conversation with the *New York Times*' columnist Thomas Friedman, he dismissed as "fantasy" the idea that the United States could have done more in supporting the anti-Assad resistance. As Obama caustically remarked

*"The idea that we could provide some light arms or even more sophisticated arms to what was essentially an opposition made up of former doctors, farmers, pharmacists and so forth, and that they were going to be able to battle not only a well-armed state but also a well-armed state backed by Russia, backed by Iran, a battle-hardened Hezbollah, that was never on the cards."*<sup>22</sup>

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obama-doctrine/ last accessed April 29, 2017). For a balanced assessment see Hal Brands, 'Barack Obama and the Dilemmas of American Grand Strategy', *The Washington Quarterly*, 4, 2016, pp.101–125.

20 I have tried to deal with these dimensions in two chapters of my last book *Era Obama. Dalla Speranza del Cambiamento all'Elezione di Trump*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 2017.

21 On the contradictions, dilemmas and frequent hubris of U.S. liberal interventionism see David Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission. Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2011 and Tony Smith, *A Pact with the Devil. Washington's Bid for World Supremacy and the Betrayal of American Promise*, London/New York, Routledge, 2011.

22 'Obama on the World. President Obama Talks to Thomas L. Friedman About Iraq, Putin and Israel', *The*

Obama's sense of exceptionalism was articulated through the deliberate and transparent attempt to exploit the President's unique biography for foreign policy purposes. The message was that with Barak Hussein Obama at the White House the United States was not just back in the world – after the unilateral estrangement of the Bush Jr. years – but could also aim, once more, at representing and subsuming this world in its entirety. Obama's America was meant to be (or be narrated) *in and as the world*, because *in and as the world* was its President and his personal story. Obama's syncretic and global biography – which included Europe, Africa, America and Asia; the Atlantic as well as the Pacific – could be represented as the natural biography of an inherently global and transnational nation such as the United States.<sup>23</sup> Exceptionalism and cosmopolitanism were intimately tied and interrelated. Obama could thus go to Cairo in June 2009 and claim that, as his own experience showed, Islam had “always been a part of America's story”. He could move to Accra a few weeks later and affirm to “have the blood of Africa within” him (“and my family's own story,” he continued, “encompasses both the tragedies and triumphs of the larger African story”). He could represent himself in Japan as “America's first Pacific President” or joke in Ireland about his purported Irishness (“My name is Barack Obama of the Moneygall Obamas. And I've come home to find the apostrophe that we lost somewhere along the way”).<sup>24</sup>

This universalism – centred first and foremost on Obama's “cosmopolitan blackness”<sup>25</sup> – had clear exceptionalist roots: by exalting the plural, diverse, inclusive and ever evolving nature of the United States, it re-affirmed notions deeply ingrained in the history of American progressive nationalism. It was however matched, and tempered, by a realism that Obama rarely missed a chance to display, a realism consistent with the above-mentioned emphasis on limits and connected to his gradualist and evolutionist view of the historical and political process. The President

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*New York Times*, August 8 2014 ([https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/09/opinion/president-obama-thomas-l-friedman-iraq-and-world-affairs.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/09/opinion/president-obama-thomas-l-friedman-iraq-and-world-affairs.html?_r=0) last accessed June 19 2017). The category of “limitationism” had been used, with regard to the anti-interventionist mood of the U.S. public in 1969, by one of Henry Kissinger's closest advisors, Robert Osgood. See Robert Osgood (NSC Staff), *Analysis of changes in international politics since World War II and their implications for our basic assumptions about U.S. foreign policy*, attachment to “Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to the President Nixon”, October 20 1969 in *Foundations of Foreign Policy, 1969–1972, Vol. I of Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS), 1969–1976, Washington DC, Government Printing Office, 2003 (<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v01/d41>, last accessed July 16 2017)

23 Ian Tyrrel, *Transnational Nation: United States History in Global Perspective Since 1798*, Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan, 2007; Thomas Bender, *A Nations Among Nations. America's Place in World History*, New York, Hill & Wang, 2006; A. G. Hopkins, *American Empire. A Global History*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2018.

24 *Remarks by the President at Cairo University*, June 4 2009 (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09> last accessed July 22 2017); *Remarks by the President to the Ghanaian Parliament*, July 11 2009 (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-ghanaian-parliament>); *Remarks by the President at Suntory Hall*, 14 November 2009 (<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-suntory-hall>, last accessed July 22 2017); *Remarks by the President at Irish Celebration in Dublin, Ireland*, May 23 2011 (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/23/remarks-president-irish-celebration-dublin-ireland> last accessed July 22 2017). Cf. Rebecca Chiyoko King-O'Riain, ‘Is “No One as Irish as Barack O'bama?”’ in Andrew J. Jolivet (ed.), *Obama and the Biracial Factor. The Battle for a New American Majority*, Bristol, The Policy Press, 2012, pp. 113–128; Mark Ledwidge, ‘Barack Obama. Cosmopolitanism, Identity Politics and the Decline of Euro-Centrism’ in Mark Ledwidge, Linda Miller and Inderjeet M. Parmar, (eds.) *Obama and the World. New Directions in U.S. Foreign Policy*, London, Routledge, 2014, pp. 67–79.

25 Linda F. Selzer, ‘Barack Obama, the 2008 Presidential Election, and the New Cosmopolitanism: Figuring the Black Body’, *MELUS*, 4, Winter 2010, pp. 15–37

gave doctrinal dignity to this position by frequently referring to Christian realist theologian Reinhold Niebuhr as one of his “favorite philosophers,” and offering a punchy demonstration of it in his acceptance speech for the (very prematurely bestowed) Nobel peace prize:

*“I face the world as it is and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people. For make no mistake: Evil does exist in the world. A non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler’s armies. Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda’s leaders to lay down their arms. To say that force may sometimes be necessary is not a call to cynicism -- it is a recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason”.*<sup>26</sup> (Author’s emphasis added)

But this realism was also practised politically, visible in both Obama’s reluctant interventionism and, one might add, in his disinclination to rely on the very threat/fear-inflation so many of his predecessors had instead exploited (a clear example of this being Obama’s choice to declare, against political convenience, that ISIS was not “an existential threat”).<sup>27</sup>

The second element of Obama’s doctrine was the recognition of the interdependence between the domestic and the international. This “intermestic” dimension was visible in the President’s sensitivity to challenging a public opinion that, as we have seen, had become very averse to interventionist and costly foreign policies.<sup>28</sup> But one could also detect it in the connection between specific policies adopted at home and the global landscape. Let us consider, for example, Obama’s economic policies. Both the 2009 stimulus, and the effort to re-regulate a financial system that had run out of control, aimed not just at offering a response to an immensely destructive crisis that had thrown millions of people out of work – in a matter of months between 2008 and 2009 the rate of unemployment had risen from five to ten% – but also at correcting some of the huge asymmetries generated by the processes of contemporary global economic integration. Along with tax cuts and fiscal transfers to state and local authorities, the 2009 stimulus also provided for public goods as surrogates for the drastic contraction of private consumption and investments. Reining in the financial folly of the previous years, via domestic regulation (Dodd-Frank) and international accords (particularly with the EU), had the effect of rendering impossible those incestuous forms of interaction between the real estate and the financial markets on which the “empire of consumption” had relied in its final, and ultimately untenable, phase.<sup>29</sup>

26 *Remarks by the President at the Acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize*, December 10 2009, (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-acceptance-nobel-peace-prize>) [my emphasis] Obama declared Niebuhr to be one of his favourite philosophers during an interview with New York Times’ columnist David Brooks. See David Brooks, *Obama, Gospel and the Verse*, “The New York Times”, April 26, 2007; On Obama’s “Christian Realism” see the original reflections of Andrew Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy*, New York, Anchor Books, 2012, pp. 610–615 and Erik Owens, ‘Searching for an Obama Doctrine: Christian Realism and the Idealist/Realist Tension in Obama’s Foreign Policy’, *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 2, 2012, pp. 93–111. See also David Milne, *Worldmaking. The Art and Science of American Diplomacy*, New York, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2015.

27 Jessica Stern, ‘Obama and Terrorism. Like it or not the War Goes On’, *Foreign Affairs*, 5, September-October 2015; Max Fisher, ‘Fear Itself. Why Obama Wants to Change How Americans Think About Terrorism’, *Vox*, January 13 2016 (<https://www.vox.com/2016/1/13/10762268/state-union-obama-terrorism-isis>, last accessed May 30 2018).

28 I borrow here the term “intermestic” from Fredrik Logevall and Craig Campbell, *America’s Cold War. The Politics of Insecurity*, Cambridge, Mass., Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009.

29 Viral V. Acharya, Thomas F. Cooley, Matthew P. Richardson and Ingo Walter, *Regulating Wall Street: The*



Here, the idea, implicit, and sometimes even explicit, was that the United States (and U.S. consumers) could not be the chief, and sometimes only, locomotive of global growth. Other actors had to stimulate demand via increased private consumption and public investments, whereas a sort of economic rebalancing was needed to free the United States from the constraints and ties generated by the new, deep, and sometimes contradictory forms of interdependence that developed in the previous decades.<sup>30</sup>

The third pillar of Obama's foreign policy doctrine concerned geopolitics. A realist and pragmatic approach, fully cognisant of limits and possibilities, requires geopolitical selectivity. Strategic particularism ensues: clear priorities must be set and a precise hierarchy has to be defined. Such hierarchy determines where, when, and how the U.S. should focus its attention and concentrate its (not unlimited) resources and means.<sup>31</sup> In the event, the Asia-Pacific region was placed at the peak of this geopolitical pyramid, whereas the Euro-Atlantic and the Middle East had their importance downgraded accordingly.<sup>32</sup>

Why was this so? How do we explain this doctrinal shift? Dangers and opportunities, structure and circumstances combined to produce Obama's geopolitical realignment. Europe was considered to be pacified and stable. The very success of U.S. post-World War II policies seemed to render the Old Continent less significant. Furthermore, old wounds and new tensions were there to nourish a renewed, and sometimes intense, transatlantic divide. Repeating a mantra that had marked the history of the Atlantic alliance, even the Obama administration claimed that the burden was not shared equitably and that it was about time for Washington's European partners to do their part, increasing their defence budgets and contributing more to the global economic recovery. The EU's obsession with austerity, and what Obama's first Secretary of the Treasury, Timothy Geithner, defined as the "Old Testament view", i.e. the German view that sin – in this case Greece's – must be punished, often came under fire from American officials and from the President himself.<sup>33</sup>

The Middle East seemed dysfunctional if not even beyond redemption. The over-commitment of the Bush Jr. years had exposed the limits of American power in the region. U.S. military interventions not only did not achieve their goals, but contributed to a further destabilisation of the area, fostering the hostility to the

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*Dodd-Frank Act and the New Architecture of Global Finance*, Hoboken, John Wiley & Sons, 2011; Christopher Boone, Arindrajit Dube and Ethan Kaplan, 'The Political Economy of Discretionary Spending: Evidence from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act', *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, Spring 2014, pp. 375–42; Morton Keller, *Obama's Time: a History*, Oxford/New York, Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 70–98.

30 Once again, echoes of the debates of the 1970s resounded in this discussion. See for example Sargent, *op.cit.*; Thomas A. Schwartz and Matthias Schulz, *The Strained Alliance. U.S.-European Relations from Nixon to Carter*, New York/Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010; Judith Stein, *Pivotal Decade. How the United States Traded Factories for Finance in the Seventies*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2011.

31 For a classical historical account see John L. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment, op.cit.*

32 Thomas J. Christensen, 'Obama and Asia. Confronting the China Challenge', *Foreign Affairs*, 5, September/October 2015, pp. 28–36. For a skeptical view of the novelty of Obama's "Pivot to Asia" see Bruce Cumings, 'The Obama "Pivot" to Asia in a Historical Context of American Hegemony', in David Wei Feng Huang (ed.), *Asia Pacific Countries and the US Rebalancing Strategy*, London, Palgrave MacMillan, 2016, pp. 11–30.

33 Timothy Geithner, *Stress Test: Reflections on Financial Crises*, New York, Broadway Books, 2014. See also Anne Applebaum, 'Obama and Europe. Missed Signals, Renewed Commitments', *Foreign Affairs*, 5, September/October 2015; Giles Scott Smith (ed.), *Obama, US Politics and Transatlantic Relations*, Bruxelles, Peter Lang 2012 and David Hastings Dunn & Benjamin Zala, 'Transatlantic Relations and U.S. Foreign Policy' in Mark Ledwidge, Linda Miller & Inderjeet M. Parmar, (eds.) *Obama and the World. New Directions in U.S. Foreign Policy*, London, Routledge, 2014, pp. 197–217.

United States and its allies on which radical Islamic groups prospered. The Arab-Israeli conflict appeared intractable, although energy and political capital were invested in what proved once again to be a futile exercise. One of the key catalysts of the strategic importance of the region – oil – was losing its importance, not least because of America’s greater energy self-sufficiency, driven primarily by the shale gas revolution at home. To offer a simple example, U.S. net imports of crude oil and petroleum products declined from 12,400 to 4,800 thousand barrels a day between 2006 and 2016.<sup>34</sup>

The Asia-Pacific was instead ripe with risks and opportunities. On the Transpacific routes ran deep, but in tension with each other, some of the most important forms of contemporary interdependence. Particularly in the realm of security, the region lacked the institutionalised mechanisms of governance that existed in the transatlantic space. The regional primacy of the United States had been challenged and somewhat undermined. A dual hegemony – Chinese in the field of trade and investments and American in that of security – had emerged. These two hegemonies coexisted uneasily and often fed each other, with the greater economic dependence of many Asia countries on China intensifying their requests to Washington to balance it by providing basic security and protection.<sup>35</sup>

The relationship between the two regional giants and hegemonies was itself fraught with dilemmas and contradictions. Integration and antagonism, structural incentives to collaborate and temptations to compete all characterised it. The depth of Sino-American interdependence had reached new heights, beyond the control of state actors who could no longer manage the huge trade imbalances, the monetary tensions, and the increased dependence of the U.S. (and of U.S. consumers) on China’s willingness to finance American debt, public and private.

In a nutshell, scaling up the U.S. commitment in the region – “pivoting to Asia,” as the slogan went – meant: a) increasing the role of the United States as the main security provider, via many bilateral agreements and commitments; b) altering some of the above-mentioned interdependencies to reduce America’s dependency and vulnerability; c) devising mechanisms to counter-balance Beijing’s influence through the promotion of forms of transpacific trade integration (that was one of the goals of the ultimately abortive Transpacific Partnership, TPP); and d) co-opting China as a “responsible stakeholder” of a liberal international order that had to be revised in order to include and accommodate the rising Chinese giant.

Some of these objectives were contradictory and reflected the inner, dialectical, tension between competition and collaboration, rivalry and integration that distinguishes contemporary Sino-American relations. Furthermore, there was a clear mismatch between rhetoric and policies, words and actions. Nevertheless, the foreign

34 U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), *Petroleum and Other Liquids. U.S. Net Imports by Country* ([https://www.eia.gov/dnav/pet/PET\\_MOVE\\_NETI\\_A\\_EP00\\_IMN\\_MBBLPD\\_A.htm](https://www.eia.gov/dnav/pet/PET_MOVE_NETI_A_EP00_IMN_MBBLPD_A.htm) last accessed June 10, 2018). On Obama’s policy in the Middle East see Fawaz A. Gerges, ‘The Obama Approach to the Middle East: the End of America’s Moment’, *International Security*, 2, 2013, pp. 299–323; Marc Lynch, ‘Obama and the Middle East. Rightsizing the U.S. Role’, *Foreign Affairs*, 5, 2015, pp. 18–27. A severe denunciation of Obama’s policy in the Middle East can be found in Vali Nasr, *The Dispensable Nation*, *op. cit.*

35 On this see original reflections of G. John Ikenberry, ‘Between the Eagle and the Dragon’, *Political Science Quarterly*, 1, 2016, pp. 9–43. See also Stephen G. Brooks & William C. Wohlforth, ‘The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-first Century: China’s Rise and the Fate of America’s Global Position’, *International Security*, 3, Winter 2015-16, pp. 9–53.

policy of “America’s first Pacific president” was clearly Asia-centric: possibly the clearest example that the long “Transatlantic century” was finally breathing its last.<sup>36</sup>

This geopolitical shift went hand in hand with increasing scepticism about the possibility of the U.S fully exploiting its awesome military power. Obama put it quite bluntly in one of his many conversations with *The Atlantic*’s journalist – and now editor in chief – Jeffrey Goldberg. The President maintained that

“There’s a playbook in Washington that presidents are supposed to follow” – “it’s a playbook that comes out of the foreign-policy establishment. And the playbook prescribes responses to different events, and these responses tend to be militarized responses . . . dropping bombs on someone to prove that you’re willing to drop bombs on someone is just about the worst reason to use force.”<sup>37</sup>

Unlike any other post-World War II President, Obama has criticised the over reliance on military power and the obsession with the necessity to constantly reassert the credibility of American global commitments that often drove it. For him, using this power with limited discrimination, and often for broader, political purposes (as in the multiple nation-building exercises of the last two decades), had been counterproductive on several counts. It contributed to an erosion of support for U.S. foreign policy, at home and abroad. As Vietnam and more recently Afghanistan paradigmatically exemplified, it damaged the very credibility that the use of force was meant to confirm and bolster. It has nurtured the illusion that there could be easy solutions to muddy and complex problems. It revealed its decreasing usefulness and efficacy in the many asymmetrical conflicts in which U.S. armed forces were embroiled. It bolstered the image and prestige of a virtuous soldier, more inclined – as Obama rapidly discovered – to challenge political and civilian authority. This led to a new political necessity: of making these wars as invisible as possible – of veiling them under a structural cloud of opacity, a kind of filter that prevents the public from seeing and understanding these new conflicts. The ultimate consequence was the acceleration of the further expansion of a shadow state of private contractors and security agencies.<sup>38</sup>

The fifth and last pillar of this putative Obama Doctrine was the more capacious (and less Manichean) understanding of what national security is and ought to be about. Broad and holistic, this notion of national security was itself influenced by scepticism towards the militarised strategies of the previous administration and the belief that threats and opportunities, dangers and possibilities, stemmed from multiple, and less conventional, sources. Environmental issues are a case in point. Climate change went more or less unmentioned in the two National Security Strategies (NSS) produced under Bush Jr. in 2002 and 2006.<sup>39</sup> Obama’s first NSS,

36 Bruce Cumings, *Dominion from Sea to Sea. Pacific Ascendancy and American Power*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2009; Mary Nolan, *The Transatlantic Century. Europe and America, 1890-2010*, New York/Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

37 Jeffrey Goldberg, ‘The Obama Doctrine’, *The Atlantic*, April 2016 (<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/> last accessed July 19 2017).

38 On the *longue durée* of America foreign policy’s obsession with the notion of credibility see Frank Ninkovich, *Modernity and Power. A History of the Domino Theory in the XX Century*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1994. See also Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism. How Americans Are Seduced By War*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2013; Kateri Carmola, *Private Security, Contractors and New Wars*, Londra/New York, Routledge, 2010; Ann Hagedorn, *The Invisible Soldiers: How America Outsourced our Security*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2014.

39 Climate change was mentioned just once in 2002 NSS; it went instead completely unmentioned in the 2006

released in May 2010, mentioned instead “climate change” 23 times, presenting it as a key security issue. “The danger from climate change” – the document stated – “is real, urgent, and severe. The change wrought by a warming planet will lead to new conflicts over refugees and resources; new suffering from drought and famine; catastrophic natural disasters; and the degradation of land across the globe.” National Security imperatives required thus both multilateral practices and specific domestic policies. On this, the “intermestic” dimension was clearly visible, as the 2010 NSS proclaimed: “our effort begins with steps that we are taking at home”.

<sup>40</sup> Specific domestic actions – reducing greenhouse emissions, imposing rigid fuel-efficiency standards, and subsidising investments in renewables – were functional contributions to a new global dialogue that culminated in the Sino-American agreement of December 2014 and the historic Paris agreement – the COP21 – of the following year.<sup>41</sup>

The COP21 is just one of the many achievements of Obama’s foreign policy. Its relevance, its strict interdependence with domestic environmental policies and, also, the rapid implementation of some of its key provisions help explain why it has been so severely attacked by Obama’s successor, who finally decided to withdraw from the accord. Several other specific foreign policy successes of the Obama years could also be mentioned, from the opening to Cuba to the Iranian nuclear deal in 2015. The policies adopted in response to the crisis of 2007-8 crucially contributed to halting and reversing dynamics that could have led to a global economic meltdown. Finally, if we look at some of the parameters frequently invoked by those who theorise the decline of the United States – often blaming Obama for allegedly accepting and accelerating it – the picture appears quite different and less clear-cut. The reality of interdependence, and the constraints it imposed on even the American superpower, is unquestionable. But it is hard to argue that the position of the United States has deteriorated between 2009 and 2017 and that the country is weaker because of Obama’s policies and choices. To offer two banal, but illustrative examples, U.S. GDP as percent of the world total was higher at the end of Obama’s tenure at the White House than it was at the beginning; and so was the share of U.S. dollars in global foreign exchange reserves, the primacy of dollar being fortified by the very weak performance of the Euro.<sup>42</sup>

The perception, particularly within the United States, was nevertheless different. Obama’s popularity progressively plummeted at home, whereas it remained stable (and remarkably high) in Europe and most of the world. In common, however, was the impression that he had been presiding over a weakening of the position of the United States in the world, if not the end of the “American Era” *tout court*. Many

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NSS. See *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, September 2002 (<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/63562.pdf>, last accessed July 17 2017) and *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, March 2006 (<https://georgewebush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2006/> last accessed July 17, 2017).

<sup>40</sup> *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, May 2010 ([https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/rss\\_viewer/national\\_security\\_strategy.pdf](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf) last accessed July 21 2017).

<sup>41</sup> Guri Bang, ‘The United States: Obama’s Push for Climate Change Policy Change’, in Guri Bang, Arild Underdal & Steinar Andresen (eds.), *The Domestic Politics of Global Climate Change: Key Actors in International Climate Cooperation*, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar, 2015, pp. 160–81; Robert Falkner, ‘The Paris Agreement and the New Logic of International Climate Politics’, *International Affairs*, 5, 2016, pp. 1107–1125

<sup>42</sup> YChart, *U.S. GDP as % of World GDP* ([https://ycharts.com/indicators/us\\_gdp\\_as\\_a\\_percentage\\_of\\_world\\_gdp](https://ycharts.com/indicators/us_gdp_as_a_percentage_of_world_gdp), last accessed July 21 2017); International Monetary Fund, *Currency Composition of Global Exchange Reserves*

different elements converged in informing the conviction that the United States was on a wrong path and Obama was the one to blame for it: political polarisation and legislative gridlock; a solid but not stellar economic recovery; the vivid memory of the artificial, and unsustainable, debt-driven land of plenty of the Bush years; the appearance and territorial conquests of a new, obscurantist enemy, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS or Daesh).

Gallup polls on U.S. foreign policy clearly reveal the public's disillusion with the U.S.'s first black president. Between 2009 and 2015, the percentage of Americans who believed that leaders of other countries respected the President dropped from 67 to 37; the percentage of those satisfied with U.S. "position in the world" declined from 68 to 61.<sup>43</sup>

Achievements have indeed been matched by failures, results by unfulfilled promises. From the dramatic Syrian civil war to Russia's new aggressiveness, from the multiple tensions with China to the frequent transatlantic quarrels, Obama's foreign policy – just like those of his predecessors – has been marred by disappointments and frustrations. It is beyond the scope of this article to examine them in detail. It is, however, useful to briefly list the structural impediments to, and inner contradictions of, the Obama doctrine in order to understand the origins and proximate causes of its mixed results and, also, of a general dissatisfaction with U.S. foreign policy that has contributed to drive the unexpected rise of Trump and Trumpism.

Domestic politics, and the hyper-partisan climate of the Obama years, posed a first, crucial obstacle. The combination of a divided and fractious Democratic party and a radicalised and rigidly obstructionist GOP proved to be lethal, even in the foreign policy realm. This placed several roadblocks on the path of a President not inclined to act decisively and often chasing the chimera of impossible mediations and compromises. Two examples, among many, could suffice. The first concerns the effort to co-opt China within the U.S.-led (and often designed) liberal international order. Immensely complicated in itself, this effort was rendered even more difficult (if not impossible) by a Sinophobia that cut across the political board, but was particularly acute among Republicans. A key element of the Sino-American collaborative revision of the international order was represented, for instance, by the reform of the International Monetary Fund that granted greater say (i.e. increasing voting rights) to Beijing. This crucial reform stalled for years in the U.S. Senate, opposed by many conservatives fearing China's rise and denouncing the concomitant reduction of U.S. voting rights in the organisation (from 16.7 to 16.5% of the total; Beijing's would rise from 3.8 to 6%). The reform was finally ratified in 2015, but in the meantime China's unilateralism was reinforced, as highlighted by its decision to launch the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank as an explicit, regional alternative to the IMF and the World Bank.<sup>44</sup>

Domestic politics also greatly affected, and in fact derailed, the attempt to correct, at least in part, some of the monumental asymmetries of the current economic

43 Gallup, *U.S. Position in the World* (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/116350/position-world.aspx>, last accessed July 19 2017); Jeffrey M. Jones (Gallup), *Americans View of U.S. Position in the World Steady*, February 25 2015 (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/181685/americans-views-position-world-steady.aspx>, last accessed July 21 2017).

44 Peter Trubowitz and Jungkun Seo, 'The China Card: Playing Politics with Sino-American Relations', *Political Science Quarterly*, 2, Summer 2012, pp.189-211; Robert A. Galantucci, 'The Repercussions of Realignment; United States-China Interdependence and Exchange Rate Politics', *International Studies Quarterly*, 3, 2015, pp. 423-435.

system. As we have seen, Obama's response to the crisis – and the 2009 stimulus – aimed at altering a condition, that of the U.S. as voracious “empire of consumption”, which had proved to be unsustainable. This effort fell victim to partisan divisions and Republican obstructionism. It came, *de facto*, to an end in 2011 during the never-ending dispute on a new Congressional authorisation to increase the debt ceiling, which the Republicans exploited to impose what political scientist Vanessa Williamson aptly defined as “austerity by gridlock”.<sup>45</sup> Available data seems to indicate that under Obama, and increasingly so after 2013, the United States has progressively resumed its role of consumer of last resort. The U.S. has reassumed its place as the main driver of a global growth catalysed, once again, by American consumption and debt: by the peculiar form of private Keynesianism which has been at the centre of the unique post-1970s U.S. hegemony. Combined with the economic recovery and decreasing unemployment, this has contributed to a new deterioration of the U.S. trade balance, which experienced between 2014 and 2016 some of its highest deficits ever (e.g., in the bilateral relationship with China and Germany), whereas the personal savings rate – i.e. personal savings as a percentage of disposable personal income – declined rapidly from the peak of 11% of December 2012 to the 3.2% of four years later.<sup>46</sup>

Domestic pressures combined with external constraints, the second natural obstacle the foreign policy of Barack Obama had to deal with. Many pieces of Obama's geopolitical puzzle simply failed to fall into place. New strategic hierarchies notwithstanding, pivoting to Asia proved easier said than done. The Ukrainian crisis and Russia's annexation of Crimea conferred new centrality on the European theatre; they cemented, at least temporarily, a renewed transatlantic cohesion centred on the German-American axis, while definitely sinking any chance of the reset with Moscow which the administration had initially pursued as part of its more Pacific-centric vision.<sup>47</sup>

Similarly, the accurate recognition that the Bush administration had overstretched America's commitments and resources in the Middle East did not simplify the required strategic downgrade of the region. Efforts to revive the Arab-Israeli dialogue hit the usual wall. The illusions and hopes that accompanied the Arab Spring were rapidly destroyed by subsequent events, particularly in Egypt. U.S. inaction puzzled and then alienated many long-standing allies of Washington. The idea of using the negotiations with Iran as a way to re-involve Teheran in the regional diplomatic game, sound as it was, encountered strong political opposition in the U.S. and offered at best a very long-term perspective.<sup>48</sup>

45 Vanessa Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Shift to “Austerity by Gridlock” in the United States*, Paper Presented at the APSA Annual Conference, Chicago, August 29-September 1, 2013 (accessible at <https://scholar.harvard.edu/williamson/working-papers> last accessed July 23 2017).

46 On the U.S. balance of trade see the updates at United States Census Bureau, *Trade Highlights* (<https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/statistics/highlights/index.html>, last accessed July 21 2017); Federal (FRED), Economic Research, *Personal Saving Rate* (<https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/PSAVERT>, last accessed July 21 2017).

47 Kimberly Marten, ‘Putin's Choices: Explaining Russian Foreign Policy and Intervention in Ukraine’, *The Washington Quarterly*, 2, 2015, pp. 189–204 ; Richard Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2014; Lawrence Freedman, ‘Ukraine and the Art of Crisis Management’, *Survival*, 3, 2014, pp. 7–42

48 Milena Sterio, ‘President Obama's Legacy: the Iranian Nuclear Agreement’, *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law*, 1, 2016, pp. 69–82; Camille Grand, ‘L'accord avec l'Iran: un pari stratégique’, *Commentaire*, 1, 2016, pp. 37–44; Laurent Fabius, ‘La genèse de l'accord du 14 juillet 2015 sur le nucléaire iranien’, *La*

Again, mistakes were undoubtedly made, particularly in the aggressive anti-Russian stance taken by some sectors of the State Department. But the limited and partial fulfilment of Obama's geopolitical vision reflected a more general – quasi-structural – problem: the fact, well known by historians, that foreign policy is (and must be) often reactive to events and processes that are frequently unpredictable; that even the most sophisticated, coherent, and comprehensive doctrine can offer at most a compass to navigate the turbulent waters of international politics.<sup>49</sup>

Finally, Obama's attitude towards the use of military force and war more generally caused problems. After the Iraq fiasco, a majority of Americans clearly rejected the military interventionism that the United States had promoted since the end of the Cold War. The 2011 Libyan war – for example – was not broadly supported in the United States despite the unequivocal “humanitarian” rationale for acting, and a few weeks into the conflict most Americans disapproved of it (perhaps sensing the chaos bound to follow Gaddafi's downfall).<sup>50</sup> This anti-interventionist mood did not extend, however, to new, unconventional and, on the offensive side, apparently cost-free military tools. Under Obama military disengagement coincided with a remarkable escalation in the use of drone strikes. This intense use of drones has opened a legal, ethical and operational Pandora's Box, while setting a key precedent in international politics.<sup>51</sup> This decision has, to a degree, rendered incoherent some of Obama's reflections on war and the use of force, as his anguished and often convoluted justifications for using drones (and shrouding the decision-making process in a cloud of absolute secrecy) have clearly revealed.<sup>52</sup> International reaction has been even more important; at least until late 2015 – the Paris terrorist attack of November of that year possibly marking a turning point – a vast majority of non-Americans disapproved of a policy that was, by contrast, broadly supported within the United States.<sup>53</sup>

The ambivalent attitude towards war in its many forms has contributed to render Obama's discourse somehow erratic and his doctrine less coherent and solid. Despite his remarkable global popularity, even Barack Obama has had to deal with a quintessential, modern American foreign policy dilemma: how to offer a discourse and a strategy capable of capturing consensus and support both at home and abroad; how to make the rhetoric and policies needed to mobilise domestic public opinion

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*Revue Internationale et Stratégique*, 2, 2016, pp. 6–37; Steven Hirst, ‘The Iranian Nuclear Negotiations as a Two-Level Game: The Importance of Domestic Politics’, *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 3, 2016, pp. 545–67.

49 H.W. Brands, ‘Presidential Doctrines: an Introduction’, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 1, March 2006, pp. 1–4.

50 Jeffrey M. Jones (Gallup), *Americans Shift to More Negative View of Libya Military Action*, June 24 2011 (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/148196/americans-shift-negative-view-libya-military-action.aspx>, last accessed July 21 2017).

51 See for examples the essays in the monographic issue of the “The International Journal of Human Rights” titled *Legal and Ethical Implications of the Use of Drone Warfare*, 2, 2015. See also Christian Enemark, ‘Drones, Risk, and Perpetual Force’, *Ethics and International Affairs*, 3, 2014, pp. 365–381 and Rosa Brooks, ‘Drones and the International Rule of Law’, *Ethics and International Affairs*, 1, 2014, pp. 83–103.

52 See for example Barack Obama, *Remarks at the National Defense University*, May 23 2013 (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/23/remarks-president-national-defense-university>, last accessed July 22 2017).

53 For two unequivocal examples see German Marshall Fund, *Transatlantic Trends 2013* (<http://trends.gmfus.org/files/2013/09/Trends-2013-Key-Findings-Report.pdf>, last accessed July 22 2017) and Pew Research Center, *Global Opposition to U.S. Surveillance but Limited Harm to America's Image*, July 14 2014 (<http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/07/14/global-opposition-to-u-s-surveillance-and-drones-but-limited-harm-to-americas-image/>, last accessed July 22 2017).

complementary, or at least compatible, with those necessary to preserve international consensus on U.S. global leadership.

This leads us to the inevitable elephant in the room of any attempt to examine and historicise the Obama years: making sense of what has followed and the unimaginable election of Donald J. Trump. It is hard to conceive of a more radical rhetorical and symbolic departure from the Obama years than that embodied by Trump. And it seems evident that some of the above-mentioned dilemmas and contradictions of post-1970s U.S. hegemony played a role in the process that, against all odds and predictions, has brought Trump to the White House.

Rough, extreme, and self-caricaturing, Trump's nationalistic discourse reveals little or no interest in a world opinion that – with few exceptions – has been extremely negative. According to a first Pew Research Survey spanning 37 countries, in the shift from Obama to Trump the “confidence in the U.S. President” has declined from 64% to 22%. Subsequent polls have confirmed this trend and highlighted a stunning worldwide drop in the approval of U.S. leadership.<sup>54</sup> Trump's success, however, seems to have been driven by matrices that are not so dissimilar from those that catapulted Obama to the White House, and which the 44<sup>th</sup> President then tried to address: the effects of global and asymmetrical interdependencies; the decreasing value of the U.S. military *hyperpuissance*; the basic unsustainability of the American “empire of consumption.” What Trump has promised – protectionism, unilateralism, financial and environmental deregulation, low taxes and supply side recipes – is of course fundamentally different, less sensible, and possibly dangerous and impractical. Against Obama's “U.S. in and as the world” formula, the new President has offered an “America vs. all” sort of vision that is remarkably eccentric when measured against the basic tenets of post-1945 U.S. internationalist discourse, in all its possible variants.

Trump's crude conception of the international system, and of the role of the United States, seems to express a sort of highly simplified ultra-realism. Particularly when it comes to trade, international relations are represented (and narrated) as a brutal, take-no-prisoners sort of competition: a zero-sum-game, where the equilibrium is preserved by offsetting the victory of one side with the equal loss of another.<sup>55</sup> This is actually Trump's primitive and unrealistic form of realism; a binary and superficial vision that provides an inadequate toolbox to deal with the many intricacies of global interdependence. But in its own way, it is itself illustrative of how deep, complex and perhaps even intractable are the dilemmas of contemporary U.S. hegemony and of the world it has helped to bring about.

54 Richard Wike, Bruce Stokes, Jacob Poushter and Janell Fetterolf (Pew Research Center), *U.S. Image Suffers as Publics Around World Question Trump's Leadership*, June 26 2017 (<http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/06/26/u-s-image-suffers-as-publics-around-world-question-trumps-leadership/>, last accessed January 19, 2018); Gallup, *Rating World Leaders: 2018* (<http://news.gallup.com/reports/225587/rating-world-leaders-2018.aspx>, last accessed June 10, 2018).

55 For a very rich discussion on Trump's foreign policy involving historians and political scientists see the many contributions in ISSF Policy Series: *America and the World, 2017 and Beyond* (<https://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-5A-policy-series-introduction>, last accessed June 10, 2018).



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