

The Obama Doctrine: A Recipe for Failure Overseas

RCP realclearpolitics.com/articles/2015/05/21/the_obama_doctrine_a_recipe_for_failure_overseas.html

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May 21, 2015

Saudi King Salman's decision to skip President Obama's Camp David summit last week with leaders of the six Arab states that compose the Gulf Cooperation Council delivered a diplomatic rebuke. It broadcast skepticism on the part of Saudi Arabia—by far the largest and most powerful member of the GCC—of Obama's assurances that U.S.-led negotiations won't pave the way for their archenemy, the Islamic Republic of Iran, to complete its decades-long quest to acquire nuclear weapons.

By declining Obama's invitation just two days before the May 13 White House meeting—in favor of a horse show outside London—Bahrain King Hamad bin Isa al Khalifa underscored that the Saudis are not alone among their Gulf Arab brethren in believing that the Obama administration is determined to empower America's Shia and Persian adversary Iran at the expense of America's Sunni and Arab GCC friends. In the end, only two heads of state—from Kuwait and Qatar—along with lesser officials representing the other four GCC members attended the meeting, which concluded with presidential promises that America would assist the Gulf States in meeting their security needs.

Nothing emerged from Camp David, however, likely to alter the calculations of the Saudis, who have increasingly indicated that if the United States signs what they judge a bad deal with Iran, the kingdom will buy or build their own nuclear arms. Should the Saudis take that fateful step, chances are that two other Middle East powers—Egypt and Turkey—will attempt to follow suit. That would turn the world's most unstable and volatile region into a poly-nuclear powder keg.

Why has Barack Obama, who has long proclaimed a desire to reduce nuclear proliferation, aggressively pursued a rapprochement with a resolute American adversary that is provoking several longtime U.S. allies to go nuclear?

It's tempting, although not reassuring, to surmise that the problem is that the president lacks a plan. The temptation is intensified when one considers America's halting and equivocal response to the wars that have swept the Arab world since the winter of 2011, to increased Russian adventurism in the Ukraine, and to Chinese muscle flexing in the East and South China seas.

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that the president's foreign policy has proven ineffective for want of an overarching conception of America's role in the world, according to author Colin Dueck. In "The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today," Dueck

argues that Obama does “have a kind of implicit grand strategy.” It consists of “overarching American retrenchment and accommodation internationally, in large part to allow the president to focus on securing liberal policy legacies at home.” In Dueck’s view, America’s position abroad has deteriorated *because* of Obama’s grand strategy.

An associate professor of government at George Mason University's School of Policy, Government, and International Affairs, Dueck draws on the president’s speeches and writings to distill his understanding of the benefits of retrenchment—cutting costs and scaling back America’s overseas presence—and of accommodation, which in the president’s hands means showing respect for adversaries’ interests and ambitions by offering unilateral concessions in the hopes of reducing their enmity. Dueck examines the Obama Doctrine’s shortcomings as a strategic outlook and Obama’s mistakes in implementing it, the domestic politics of foreign affairs, and several conservative alternatives. Finally, he defends what he calls “conservative American realism.” With this multifaceted book, he takes his place among our premier scholars of foreign affairs.

Insofar as Obama’s grand strategy aims “to secure progressive policy legacies, win domestic political victories, and preserve the strength of his center-left coalition,” Dueck observes, “then it must be conceded that—during his first term, at least—the strategy worked fairly well.” At least in the short term, Obama prevented world affairs from interfering with his ambitious progressive reform agenda: expanding the government’s role in health care and financial regulation, easing barriers to immigration and naturalization, legitimizing same-sex marriage, and pushing liberal solutions in an array of fields ranging from higher education to the environment. And he won re-election.

But Obama’s strategy of foreign policy avoidance, Dueck shows, has cost the United States. Retrenchment and accommodation have produced no detectable gain in international cooperation, even as the president’s coddling of adversaries and neglect of friends has eroded the world order that is indispensable to America’s long-term interests.

Consider the mismatch between Obama’s rhetoric and, in the seventh year of his presidency, international realities.

Early on, he announced that he would take concrete steps to eliminate nuclear weapons around the world. In the middle of his second term, he is farther from that goal than when he took office, and not only because his pending deal with Iran legitimizes the world’s leading state sponsor of terror as a threshold nuclear power and is likely to spark a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. Rogue state North Korea has defiantly tested its nuclear weapons and long-range missiles. Meanwhile, nuclear powers Russia, the United Kingdom, France, China, India, and Pakistan have shown no inclination to abandon nuclear arms. Israel continues to decline to confirm or deny possession of nuclear weapons.

Despite this administration's engagement with Iran, reset with Russia, and pivot to Asia, leaders in Tehran, Moscow, and Beijing continue to view America as an impediment to their regional ambitions. All three nations have grown more assertive during Obama's tenure. This failed accommodation of rivals—combined with an energetic retrenchment that is substantially reducing the size of the U.S. military—has, Dueck maintains, “unnerved American allies in Central and Eastern Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East.”

Obama has also exaggerated his successes in combatting transnational terrorism. The detention facility at Guantanamo Bay is still open. Al-Qaeda has become a growth enterprise; affiliates have spread throughout the Middle East. Unwilling to call Islamic terrorism by its name, the president has resorted to the euphemism of “countering violent extremism.” At the same time, and much more aggressively than the Bush administration, the president has employed drone strikes to kill jihadists. While a vital component of the struggle against the Islamists, this practice—which involves considerable risk of harm to noncombatants—raises difficult questions of tactics, law, and morality of the very kind that Sen. Obama had insisted depended on a false dichotomy between our security and our respect for rights.

Obama displayed high hopes of winning over adherents of Islam. In his June 2009 Cairo speech, he reached out to the world's approximately 1.6 billion Muslims as a single people. Yet in most Muslim countries today, the United States is no more popular under Obama than under Bush, and in some it is decidedly less so.

Six years after the Cairo speech, all sides in Egypt—the secular liberals, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the military, represented by democratically elected President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi—scorn Obama. In Libya, the United States began by “leading from behind” in a 2011 multinational operation intended to oust Moammar Gadhafi.

Soon after the dictator was dragged through the streets and killed by an angry mob, America abandoned any pretense of leading; the intervention left in its wake a failed state that serves as a “safe haven for Islamist terrorists, warlords, and organized crime.” In Syria, Obama has vacillated, moving from support for President Bashar al-Assad to calls for his removal to acquiescence in his reign to lukewarm support for the rebels. Having inherited a relatively stable Iraq, Obama precipitously withdrew all American troops in 2011 to honor a reckless campaign pledge, thereby opening the door to radical Islamists who now control much of the northwestern region of the country, including the just-captured city of Ramadi, 70 miles from Baghdad.

One constant in this disarray is the president's decision-making process. In the mainstream press his approach is frequently characterized as calm and careful; in Professor Dueck's telling, it often amounts in practice to dithering and timidity. Another cause of American setbacks is that Obama and several members of his inner circle are better versed in and more focused on the impact of foreign policy on the president's domestic popularity than on its

consequences for vital American interests abroad. But, according to Dueck, “The essential problem with the Obama Doctrine is that it is based upon a sincere but fundamentally mistaken and unrealistic theory of international relations.”

Obama seems to believe that international conflict primarily arises from misunderstanding, and that therefore greater conciliatoriness by the United States will yield dramatic improvements in international cooperation. In the real world, however, where all-too-many international conflicts spring from adversaries who understand all too well each other’s irreconcilable ambitions, retrenchment and accommodation by the world’s sole superpower signal weakness and generate disorder.

Dueck presents his alternative “conservative American realism,” in opposition to both the Obama Doctrine and the rise of Republican anti-interventionists led by Sen. Rand Paul. This alternative, Dueck argues, possesses a strategic coherence that will advance America’s vital security interests, and a popular appeal that can unite much of the GOP and win majority support within the country.

Conservative American realism, he writes, stands for “bedrock support for American allies overseas, firm deterrence of U.S. adversaries, assertive counterterrorism, reinforced national defenses, and an overarching mentality of peace through strength.”

Out of a prudent concern for liberty and limited government at home, conservative realism seeks to preserve America’s preeminence in the international order. Skeptical of international institutions—beginning with the United Nations, which is often hijacked by authoritarian states—and firmly opposed to subordinating American sovereignty to them, it would instead advance human rights through cooperation with fellow democracies. It would de-emphasize nation building while subjecting foreign economic aid and humanitarian intervention to stricter cost-benefit analysis.

What a conservative realism would certainly not do is, under the guise of preventing nuclear proliferation, accelerate the acquisition of nuclear weapons in the Middle East, a region vital to the international economic order and therefore essential to American security and prosperity.

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