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## **THE OBAMA DOCTRINE – U.S. STRATEGIC RETRENCHMENT AND ITS CONSEQUENCES**

### **Preface**

The Obama Doctrine is not a coherent strategy that can be precisely defined. However, there are some key elements of U.S. foreign policy conduct that can indicate the main purpose of the administration was the partial withdrawal from the world, especially when it comes to military presence. The plan was simple: reduction of military spending and overseas commitments, avoidance of further military conflicts, especially those which heralded a long engagement, and reallocation of the saved resources to solve the domestic problems. A bigger role of allies and partners in burden-sharing was also part of the plan. President Obama was very persistent in the realization of this strategy, even when the political and military outcomes in some regions were disturbing and led to new regional conflicts. Unforeseen consequences of sticking to this strategy, like the outbreak of war in Ukraine and the creation of ISIS, forced the U.S. administration to make some adjustments but did not change the general direction, which was retrenchment. The grand strategy is first and foremost about balancing ends and means in order to achieve the best realization of national interest. Barack Obama decided that the most relevant strategy for his country is to reduce the means and set more modest ends.

### **Principles of retrenchment strategy**

“There are roads which must not be followed, armies which must not be attacked, towns which must not be besieged...”

Sun Tzu

The grand strategy of retrenchment has become more and more present in public debates because it claims to allow the United States to secure its interests at a lower cost

than the current grand strategy, and moreover it claims to represent a necessary adaptation to what many perceive to be an unavoidable geopolitical shift in international power from a period of unipolarity to a more multipolar world (Popescu 2014, p. 224).

Retrenchment is a term most commonly used in business and management. It is a strategy used by corporations to reduce the diversity or the overall size of the operations of the company. This strategy is often used in order to cut expenses with the goal of becoming a more financially stable business. Typically the strategy involves withdrawing from certain markets or the discontinuation of selling certain products or services in order to make a beneficial turnaround (*Business Dictionary*, 2015).

The strategy of retrenchment can also be used by states facing the threat of overextension of power. States can use the retrenchment strategy just like companies do in order to avoid bankruptcy. Political scientists are not unanimous on whether or not there is something that can be called the Obama Doctrine, but they rather try to analyze the general conduct of U.S. foreign policy. Many commentators incline to the view that the Obama Doctrine has many features of a retrenchment strategy and can be defined as a policy of retracting grand strategic commitments in response to a decline in relative power. This means decreasing the overall costs of foreign policy by redistributing resources away from peripheral commitments and toward core commitments (MacDonald, Parent 2011, p. 5).

Peter Trubowitz described retrenchment as a strategy designed to reduce a country's international and military costs and commitments (Trubowitz 2011, p. 36). Colin Dueck listed the most important elements of this strategy as follows: cutting defense spending, withdrawing from certain alliance obligations, scaling back on deployments abroad, or reducing international expenditures (Dueck 2015a, p. 1-2). The overall aim of implementing this strategy is to lower the costs that the state bears without harming its most vital, strategic interests. In order to do that, the state has to set priorities and decide which international commitments can be reduced and which cannot. It is also important to influence the allies and partners to take over some of the burdens in their regions and to make sure they are able to deal with them on their own. Only when the situation is spiraling out of control and crucial U.S. interests are at stake can the U.S. military move in. This approach, called “offshore balancing” and popularized by John Mearsheimer, is the best way for the U.S. to make sure that no major power will dominate Europe, Asia or the Middle East, and at the same time it will make others bear the burden. Local powers will balance one another without the need for substantial and permanent U.S. military presence (Mearsheimer 2001, p. 234).

Policymakers asking whether retrenchment is the correct strategy at a given point in time must consider two main factors: the security position and the fiscal/economic position (Miller 2014, p. 10). It is crucial to find a proper balance between overextension and decline. Critics of the retrenchment strategy argue that its implementation only accelerates decline, those in favor claim that it is the best way to stop the decline and reverse it. Declining great powers are less likely to enter or escalate disputes. This, of course, can save blood and treasure of a state but it can also harm reputation and credibility, which are elements of the soft power. The risk may cause a snowball effect. If a great power reduces its presence or fails to address the emerging crisis in one region, it can lose its allies in other regions. Because of this, the retrenchment needs to be very subtle and cautious.

Robert Gilpin wrote about the downsides of strategic retrenchment, which can be an indication of relative weakness and declining power and thus can have a deteriorating effect on allies and rivals. Sensing the decline of their protector, allies try to obtain the best deal they can from the rising master of the system. Rivals are stimulated to close in and frequently they precipitate a conflict in the process (Gilpin 1983, p. 194).

Barry Posen, who used the name “restraint” rather than “retrenchment” for the new U.S. Grand Strategy, argues that the United States has performed poorly over the last two decades, and given ongoing changes in the world it will perform less and less well. The strategy has been costly, wasteful, and counterproductive. The United States has spent hundreds of billions of dollars on unnecessary military preparations and unnecessary wars, billions that it can no longer afford. The wars have needlessly taken the lives of thousands of U.S. military personnel and hurt many thousands more. The strategy molds the U.S. military in a way that will leave it simultaneously large, expensive, and fundamentally misshapen (Posen 2014). The main argument of the proponents of retrenchment is that geopolitical realities have changed, and the world is becoming more multipolar. For this reason, a retrenchment strategy is better suited for the world that is emerging.

## Retrenchment in practice

Barack Obama took office in 2009. The legacy of his predecessor was not to be envied. U.S. Armed Forces were bogged down in two bloody wars in the Middle East for almost a decade and there was no sign that the situation would get better soon. Financial crisis, a weakening economy and a banking system that was losing its credibility were the issues

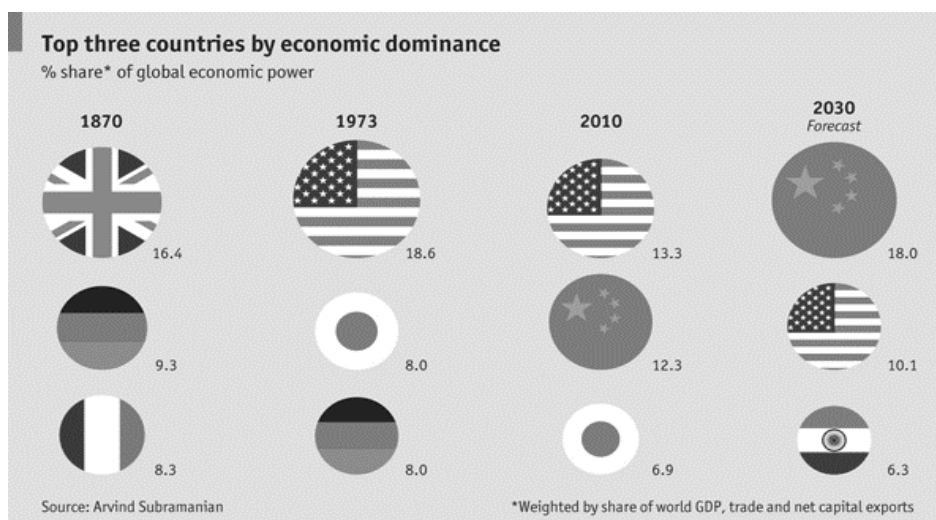
that needed to be taken care of fast. To make things worse U.S. reputation among the allies was compromised. Especially Germany and France the two most important countries in the EU, who opposed the intervention in Iraq in 2003, had to be mitigated somehow. And last but not least, when the USA was completely absorbed in the war on terror, it has completely overlooked one important fact – the rise of China. It seems that the diagnosis of the new administration was that U.S. commitments around the world exceeded the resources available to support them. If the commitments and resources are out of balance there are two options: reduce the first or increase the latter. Barack Obama has chosen to reduce the commitments and save the resources, and aside from some minor corrections he is consistently implementing the strategic retrenchment and focusing on nationbuilding at home.

What were the moves of new U.S. President when he took office? Is his foreign policy working? The list of U.S. actions and inactions around the world that can be explained by the introduction of a retrenchment strategy is long. First of all, it was seeking accommodation rather than confrontation with Russia and Iran. Secondly, there was disengagement from Iraq as soon as possible and avoidance of any new land operation in the Middle East. Thirdly, there was the famous “Pivot to Asia”, which was one of the reasons of the retrenchment from other regions. In theory the plan was to reduce the commitments in Europe and the Middle East with the reduction of military expenses, especially in the land forces. Then a relocation of the resources to the Asia-Pacific region with a concentration on strengthening the Navy and Air Force.

The main concern was the growing power of China, and military planners concentrated on the Air-Sea Battle Concept (The Air-Sea Battle Concept). At the same time, there was Hillary Clinton’s diplomatic offensive in Asia to encircle China and re-establish a stronger presence in the Asia-Pacific region. The U.S. opened a new base in Australia and did not oppose the Japanese re-militarizing efforts taken by prime minister Shinzo Abe. However, the situation around the world changed rapidly and in practice the U.S. could not fully realize both plans: one of retrenchment and one of pivot. Besides the rhetoric the real U.S. Navy power in Asia-Pacific is not much stronger than it was at the beginning of the pivot, and in relative terms compared to China the American naval presence in the region is weaker. Because of that China’s policy in the South China Sea is even more assertive. Building artificial islands to expand its sea borders is a way to show the world that the rules established and protected by the USA are no longer so obvious. China is also trying to nullify the American control of the oceans and world trade by creating the New Silk Road to connect Asia and Europe. Asian Infrastructure

Investment Bank (AIIB) that was created by China to finance this project is challenging the old financial institutions created by Americans after the Second World War. So far only the USA and Japan have not joined the AIIB, while many European countries have. According to the vast majority of forecasts (see fig.1) year 2030 will be the year in which China will overtake the USA economically. However, a number of additional factors will still continue to tip the scales of economic leadership in the United States, like: the US dollar as the global reserve currency, U.S. financial markets dominance, and the innovation of the economy. The rise of China is without a doubt the biggest threat to American hegemony since the collapse of the Soviet Union, but it is not certain that American power will decline and that the Chinese economy will not face its own problems.

**Fig. 1.** Top three countries by economic dominance (% share of global economic power)



Source: *Global economic dominance. Spheres of influence* 2011.

It seems that main concern of president Obama was not China but the condition of the U.S. homeland, and because of that, the strategy has been to retrench America's military presence abroad and accommodate international rivalries, in large part to allow the president to focus on transformational domestic goals (Dueck 2015b).

Richard Haass few years ago wrote about the need to concentrate on improving condition of the American economy and infrastructure because in order to preserve the American power abroad, first the house must be put in order (Haass 2013). According

to Haass, the biggest threat to America comes from within. From the aging railway system, airports that are lagging behind the other developed countries, outdated immigration system, etc. The foundations of American power are eroding because of the years of negligence.

Barack Obama poured money into the economy, employment programs and his flagship project Obama Care – a medical insurance program. The trend was obvious when one looks at the numbers. The defense spending was reduced significantly as a proportion of the U.S. federal budget, while domestic spending went up. The military budget which was 5 % of GDP in 2010 is expected to be 3 % in 2016 (The World Bank Website). The National Defense Budget in 2010 was \$722 billion and in 2015 it was \$580 billion (*The Military Balance 2015* 2015), which is a significant reduction that did not go unnoticed both by friends and foes of the USA.

The retrenchment strategy is not costless and may have many unintended consequences, which are to be seen after some time. The 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance outlined some of the key strategic foundations of the American strategy under Obama: whenever possible, we will develop innovative, low-cost, and small-footprint approaches to achieve our security objectives, relying on exercises, rotational presence, and advisory capabilities (*Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for a 21st Century Defense*, p. 3).

In other words the U.S. military will no longer engage in protracted wars and will reduce military presence and bases around the world. What is especially important in this document is the conclusion that the U.S. military will no longer be able to fight two major wars at once. Instead of being ready to fight two major wars, as it was in previous strategic documents, it states that: even when U.S. forces are committed to a large-scale operation in one region, they will be capable of denying the objectives of or imposing unacceptable costs on an opportunistic aggressor in a second region (*ibidem*, p. 4). This shows a significant shift in U.S. military capabilities, which are to be lowered.

In all grand strategies there is always a trade-off between costs and risks. Usually, the higher the costs, the bigger the risks of a chosen strategy. Obama's strategy consists of lowering the costs, but is it also reducing the risks for the United States? It seems that U.S. adversaries have taken advantage of the new retrenchment strategy started in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As Walter Russell Mead observed: Obama came into office planning to cut military spending and reduce the importance of foreign policy in American politics while strengthening the liberal world order. A little more than halfway through his presidency, he finds himself increasingly bogged down in exactly the kinds of geopolitical rivalries he had hoped to transcend (Mead 2014).

The U.S. disengagement from Iraq that happened in 2011 was one of the promises that helped Obama win the elections. It was a promise that ought to be kept and staying in Iraq would seriously damage the political position of the president and his credibility. Even though it was at the expense of the stability in the region, there was no other option for the president. Barack Obama also drew a “red line” suggesting military action against Syria if president al-Assad used chemical weapons on civilians, but when it actually happened he abstained from taking action. The “red line” was an obvious mistake. The president should not have drawn it. But the intervention in Syria would have been a complete denial of the chosen policy and would repeat the mistakes made in Iraq and Afghanistan. American society was not ready for another war in the Middle East (Fig. 1).

Americans opposed military intervention in Syria in the Gallup survey. In that poll, by 68% to 24%, Americans opposed any military action (Dugan 2013). One of the consequences of this retrenchment from Iraq was the resurgence of the jihadists groups in the region, with the infamous ISIS gaining ground and creating a quasi-state since the U.S. forces had left. Another consequence was the power vacuum in the Middle East that allowed Russia to intervene in the Syrian conflict and build up its military capabilities in the region to protect the Bashar al-Assad regime. The implementation of retrenchment in the Middle East resulted also in deterioration of U.S.–Israeli relations. Israel became alerted by the U.S.–Iranian nuclear agreement. Normalization of the relations with Iran, a country that officially wants to annihilate Israel, had to make Israelis feel insecure. If the U.S. was unwilling to intervene in Syria, it would be even more unwilling for a military operation against Iran, and the Nuclear Deal with this country was the second best option to stop its nuclear ambition.

Once more president Obama showed his preference for a diplomatic solution rather than military one. In Libya, the U.S. supported the intervention to topple Muammar Quaddafi, but did it from the back seat and let the French and British be in the foreground. After that the U.S. disengaged completely, and nowadays Libya is a failed state in much part controlled by self-proclaimed militias and the jihadist movement.

Failed policy towards Russia is also a reminder that U.S. rivals will not be so forgiving. The reset with Russia that started in 2009 was supposed to accommodate Vladimir Putin and his worries about a planned missile defense shield in Poland and the Czech Republic. The abandoning of the initial plans must have been seen in Moscow as American concession and in Warsaw and Prague as a warning. Russian military intervention in Ukraine triggered an immediate response from the United States, which has increased its military

presence in the NATO countries that share borders with Russia. The U.S. sent six additional F-15 fighters jets and two KC-135 refueling tankers to Siauliai airbase in Lithuania within the Baltic Air Policing Mission and a dozen additional F-16 fighter jets with 300 personnel to Łask airbase in Poland.

**Fig. 2. Views on Proposed U.S. Military Actions**

Country/Region	Polling dates	Favor	Oppose	No opinion
		%	%	%
Syria	Sep 3-4, 2013	36	51	13
Iraq	Mar 14-15, 2003	64	33	3
Afghanistan	Oct 5-6, 2001	82	14	4
Kosovo/The Balkans	Feb 19-21, 1999	43	45	12
Iraq/Persian Gulf	Jan 11-13, 1991	55	38	4

Source: Dugan 2013.

The United States also fielded company sized units of paratroopers for exercises in the Baltic states and in Poland. The U.S. Navy sent the frigate USS Taylor to the Black Sea for joint exercises with the Romanian Navy (Department of Defense 2014). The American and NATO presence continues, as well as the sanctions on Russia. There are also several hundred American military trainers in Ukraine, but the overall assessment of the American response to Russia is rather modest. It is obvious that Barack Obama is neither willing to establish a permanent military presence in the region, nor to give substantial help to Ukraine.

All that could be done under the retrenchment strategy was a bigger rotational presence in the region, and the placement of military equipment in Poland and the Baltic states. As long as the retrenchment strategy is in place, permanent and significant American military presence on the eastern flank of NATO is unlikely. The annexation of Crimea, protracted conflict in Ukraine and power projection in Syria shows that Russia has acknowledged the new American strategy and will ruthlessly exploit it to its needs.

## Conclusion

It is not a foregone conclusion that America's relative international power is in decline. Barack Obama decided to implement the retrenchment strategy because he thought that



this would be the best way to preserve the American power and to soften the decline. However, as Robert Lieber proves in his work, the United States still holds unmatched capabilities, and its inevitable decline is premature (Lieber 2012).

On the other hand Colin Dueck warns that the risk today is that the excessive and ill-managed American retrenchment in recent years feeds into a perception of U.S. decline unnecessarily (Dueck 2015a). The Obama Doctrine encountered escalation of many international crises, which demanded U.S. attention and proved that without American engagement the world will sink into even greater chaos. The question of whether America will lean forward or pull back will definitely fall to the next president.

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In this article the author writes about the features of a strategy of retrenchment and how it can be applied to the analysis of the foreign policy of the United States during the presidency of Barack Obama. Many of the decisions made by the United States in the international arena resulted from a desire to limit involvement in world affairs, to reduce military spending, and to persuade allies to take a greater responsibility for their own security. Such a policy was motivated by strengthening the weakened position of the USA, but it also contributed to the growth of chaos in the world.

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