

Saving the Homeland: Obama's New Smart Power Security Strategy

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Barack Obama's election, along with a Democratic majority in Congress, was a historic opportunity to build a new security agenda that would also be central to Washington's foreign policy. This new agenda was not merely a response to the change in administration and party, but was deemed urgent and necessary given the precarious international situation in which the U.S. found itself after the imposition of hard power during the George W. Bush administration.

Obama faced the challenge of containing foreign threats and recovering the international legitimacy of the United States. This called for a fresh foreign policy strategy, based on the fundamental tenets of the theory and practice of smart power.¹ As Obama's current term of office draws to a close, discussions have centered on the feasibility of the strategy's progress and for him to fully implement the security agenda as originally put forward, measured against the high expectations raised by his proposal for a transformative change and given the restrictions imposed by the Republicans'



The two U.S. presidents of the new era.

winning a majority in Congress at the 2010 midterm elections. So far it has been possible to implement a part of this agenda given the need to recover the country's international legitimacy, since this strategy has enabled Washington to create the necessary conditions to develop a safe environment for itself.

U.S. SECURITY AND THE BUSH LEGACY

Bush's administration, along with the second generation of neoconservatives in power,² clearly represented a return to a realistic foreign policy. This coincided with, and became strengthened by, the 9/11 terrorist attacks. After that, the

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administration focused its energy on fighting against global and state-sponsored terrorism. In this sense, the entire world, not just the United States, underwent a process of securitization, as a result of the reductive discourse brought about by this new war on terror. Bush warned the whole world, “Either you are with us, or with the terrorists.” Ultimately, a global geopolitical design was being created, based on the transposing of borders.³ New security frontiers were drawn, right up to the boundaries of the “axis of evil” countries: Iran, Iraq, and North Korea. This all combined to create a unilateral foreign policy and the application of the doctrine of preventive action, or the Bush doctrine.⁴

Bush overestimated the effectiveness of the use of force by thinking that his recalcitrant approach would reflect the United States’ overwhelming power and that it would reinstate the nation as the global police force. However, it achieved precisely the opposite: Washington’s credibility plummeted and its power was undermined; its traditional allies and public opinion were shocked by the United States’ course of action, both in the invaded territories and with regard to its own image.⁵ Moreover, the U.S. economy began to slip, and this was exacerbated by the cost of the war: up until 2008 the combined cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan was US\$963 billion, while the budget deficit had reached US\$459 billion.⁶

Topping it all, the United States had failed to create the security it craved both domestically and abroad, with the resulting threat for the country itself and its allies. Its international borders remained porous —organized crime has penetrated 232 cities, while the flow of immigrants, representing a threat to security according to the far right, dropped by just one per cent in 2008. Osama bin Laden was still alive, and al-Qaeda and the Taliban had not been defeated, and both Iran and North Korea continued their nuclear programs.

OBAMA AND THE SMART POWER STRATEGY

On his arrival at the White House, Barack Obama faced a bleak situation, although this did not spell the end of U.S. supremacy by any means. Despite losing international legitimacy, the United States continued to be the world’s leading economic and military power.⁷ Its political authority had indeed weakened due to the straining of diplomatic relations with some of its traditional allies such as the European Union, and to the global financial crisis. Expectations were sky-high after Obama’s election, both at home and abroad. He was not

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only seen as a politician with a different (progressive) approach, but as the first African-American president, he automatically represented a turning point in the country’s history. Rather than the global situation itself, it appeared that the arrival of a non-establishment president was what truly marked the beginning of a new era.

But did this really mark a turning point that would change the direction of the security agenda for the U.S. and the rest of the world? Would it provide an effective guarantee of security, averting another 9/11 and dispensing with preventive action? The new strategy’s substantial change was the recognition that the U.S. could not face the world’s security problems alone, given the political and economic costs of such an approach. Obama’s main challenge was not just to identify and tackle security threats, but also to regain the credibility lost. He needed an alternative strategy that would genuinely work, both in practice and politically, to the satisfaction of the majority; a plan that would position the country as a leading international player that still had a viable and necessary role in maintaining international order.

With a view to forwarding U.S. interests in the world,⁸ security strategy was redesigned using the idea of smart power, “the skillful combination of both hard power and soft power.”⁹ Therefore, “to meet today’s challenges, the United States must harness ... [its] military, diplomatic, economic, information, legal, and moral strength in an integrated and balanced fashion.”¹⁰ By recognizing that “no one nation —no matter how powerful— can meet global challenges alone,”¹¹ the strategy favors soft power over hard power, with the latter used as a last resort in case diplomacy, the best means of resolving conflicts, proves ineffective. Therefore the United States sought to strengthen its commitments with traditional allies and even create new ones with key actors (for example, with the BRIC countries). This would show the world its new face, one of a country involved and interested in the common good by embracing the achievement of the *global good*. The ultimate goal was to expand U.S. influence, helping to legitimize its actions.

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DEPLOYING SMART POLITICS: TOWARD A NEW SECURITY AGENDA?

The strategy that led to the war on terrorism did not produce the desired outcome. This fact, added to the critical economic and political situation facing the world and the United States, required an urgent and fundamental reformulation of the U.S. security agenda. Security could no longer be seen as a purely military issue, but also as an economic, political, and social one. Not only because the United States' international legitimacy had been damaged, but also because Americans themselves had become disenchanted with the Bush administration's predominantly dogmatic foreign policy and neglect of domestic politics.

Given Obama's recognition that "our prosperity provides a foundation for our power, it pays for our military [and] it underwrites our diplomacy,"¹² he has been cautious in dealing with foreign policy and security issues (Libya is a good example). He has chosen pressing matters that had spilled over into the start of his term in office from the Bush administration. Therefore he prioritized the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, fighting al-Qaeda, withdrawing troops from Iraq, recovering the United States' international respectability and leadership, all related to the rebuilding of the economy and promotion of American values abroad.¹³

There was still concern that weapons of mass destruction could fall into terrorist hands. Obama therefore modified U.S. nuclear strategy, which was complemented by the signature of the START treaty with Russia. This move helped defuse the tension created by Bush after he abandoned the ABM treaty and deployed the anti-missile shield, and it also subsequently facilitated Russian support in applying sanctions on Iran. He also displayed a cautious willingness to enter into dialogue with Iran and North Korea.

For Obama, the United States must still be defended against the threat of terrorism. But he broke with Bush's discourse of the war against global terrorism, so he applied a demilitarization policy principally focused on Iraq and Af-

ghanistan.¹⁴ In Afghanistan, he raised the number of troops by 30 000, and refrained from reporting on all his activities in Pakistan, which resulted in the killing of Bin Laden, hastening the troop withdrawal.¹⁵

Afghanistan is still in chaos and unable to develop a democratic regime as a failed state and given the Taliban's presence (although for now the U.S. government negotiates with them in order to bring an end to hostilities). After Bin Laden's assassination, Washington considers al-Qaeda to be on the verge of collapse.¹⁶

Obama's 2009 speech in Cairo showed his willingness to shore up relations between the United States and the Muslim world. And the Arab Spring presented an even greater opportunity to deepen the relationship with Muslim countries and to redefine U.S. policy toward the Middle East.¹⁷ But while Muslim countries reacted favorably to Washington's newly conciliatory message, the U.S. position on the Israel-Palestine dispute has raised suspicions and caused discomfort among some actors in the region.¹⁸

Domestically, the United States remains unable to protect itself from insecurity, its goal since 9/11. Obama is pressured from all sides, especially by the more radical elements in U.S. politics, currently led by the Tea Party movement.¹⁹ These sectors protest the lack of border security that in their view would contain the immediate threat to national security: immigration and organized crime. But they are not just protesting. Recently they have carried out specific measures to apply pressure (such as SB1070), in an attempt to challenge Obama, to show that an outsider cannot meet the responsibilities of being president. These political setbacks have entangled the United States in an economic and financial crisis along with the rest of the world. On the one hand, questions are being asked about the U.S. government's credibility in tackling economic issues; at the same time Obama's hands are tied to prevent him from effectively and fully deploying his smart policy on all fronts and international arenas as originally planned.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The break with George W. Bush's foreign policy was not only a result of Barack Obama's type of political project, but also because of international events. The security agenda has been designed to prioritize conflictive issues, rather than conflictive relations, which help restore the United States' in-

ternational credibility. In this sense, U.S. security no longer depends solely on mounting a defense against traditional and cross-border threats, but also on the handling of foreign policy and the ability to persuade allies using solid arguments, and obviously on its domestic situation, too.

For the time being Obama's administration has been focused on a transitional period, to clear the way for Washington to start a process of returning and regaining its international standing. Smart power seems likely to remain a valid strategy, not just as a means to meet these objectives but also given budget cuts: the agreement to raise the debt ceiling to US\$14.2 trillion dollars entailed a major cut (US\$350 billion) in defense spending for the next decade.

Expectations were sky-high after Obama's election; both at home and abroad it appeared that the arrival of a non-establishment president was what truly marked the beginning of a new era.

Therefore, the next U.S. president will have to design his or her security agenda very carefully, especially if choosing to use hard power. This could be the opportunity for the country to consolidate its image-rebuilding exercise and to reap the fruits of Obama's smart power strategy that so far has shown more strengths than weaknesses. **VM**

NOTES

¹ Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), and *The Future of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011).

² Jesús Velasco Grajales, *Neoconservatives in U. S. Foreign Policy under Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. Voices behind the Throne* (Washington, D.C. and Baltimore: Woodrow Wilson Center Press/The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

³ This term is used to describe the virtual movement of frontiers by a state as it charts its global course, re-creating geopolitical spaces.

⁴ According to this doctrine, the U.S. could launch an attack in anticipation of an enemy attack, should the enemy represent an imminent security threat.

⁵ In a survey carried out in 25 countries in 2007. 49 percent of those interviewed believed that the U.S. was playing a negative role in the world, while 32 percent considered it positive. Over 50 percent disapproved of how Bush handled specific issues: Iran and North Korea's nuclear programs, the Iraq war and the Israel-Hezbollah war. See "World View of US Role Goes From Bad to Worse," BBC World Services, January 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/23_01_07_us_poll.pdf.

⁶ Office of the Under Secretary of Defense, "National Defense Budget. Estimates for FY 2012," March 2011, http://comptroller.defense.gov/defbudget/fy2012/FY12_Green_Book.pdf.

⁷ The U.S. has the world's largest economy with a GDP of US\$14.5 trillion; it also spends the most on security and defense (US\$698 billion, or 4.8 percent of its GDP), according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). Sam Perlo-Freeman, Julian Cooper, Olawale Ismail, Elisabethsköns, and Carina Sol Miran, "Military Expenditure," *SIPRI Yearbook 2011. Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*, <http://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2011/files/SIPRIYB1104-04A-04B.pdf>.

⁸ These interests are the security of the United States, its citizens, allies, and partners; a strong U.S. economy; an open international economic system; respect for universal values within the U.S. and around the world; and an international order advanced by U.S. leadership that promotes peace, security, and opportunity through cooperation. See White House, "National Security Strategy," May 2010, http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf.

⁹ For more information, see R. L. Armitage and J. S. Nye, *CSIS Commission on Smart Power: A Smarter, More Secure America* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2007), http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/071106_csissmartpowerreport.pdf, and Joseph S. Nye, *The Future of Power*, op. cit.

¹⁰ The White House, "Defense Guiding Principles", <http://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/defense>.

¹¹ White House, "National Security Strategy," op. cit.

¹² Quoted in Daniel Drezner, "Does Obama Have a Grand Strategy?" *Foreign Affairs* vol. 90, no. 4 (July-August 2011).

¹³ White House, op. cit.

¹⁴ Obama's announcement of a complete withdrawal of troops in Iraq for December this year is consistent with the agreement signed with Baghdad during the Bush administration in November 2008. However, the Iraqi prime minister intends to renegotiate for troops to remain, fearing the withdrawal will reignite insecurity in the country.

¹⁵ "In June 2011 Obama announced a drawdown of 33 000 U.S. troops (10 000 by the end of 2011 and 23 000 by 2012), leaving 66 000-68 000 on the ground who will be withdrawn in 2014." See Kenneth Katzman, "Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy," Congressional Research Service, October 21, 2011, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL30588.pdf>.

¹⁶ Greg Miller, "U.S. Officials Believe al-Qaeda on Brink of Collapse," *The Washington Post*, July 26, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/al-qaeda-could-collapse-us-officials-say/2011/07/21/gIQAfu2pbI_story.html?tid=sm_twitter_washingtonpost.

¹⁷ White House, "Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa," May 19, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa>.

¹⁸ Arab American Institute Foundation, "Arab Attitudes 2011," http://aa.i.3cdn.net/5d2b8344e3b3b7ef19_xkm6ba4r9.pdf.

¹⁹ José Luis Valdés Ugalde, "The Ugly Right," *Excelsior*, August 24, 2011, p. 23, <http://excelsior.com.mx/PlugIn/flipbook/periodico.php?seccion=flip-nacional&fecha=24-08-2011>.