

# A Liberal Defense of Barack Obama's Foreign Policy

Written by Benjamin E. Goldsmith

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## A Liberal Defense of Barack Obama's Foreign Policy

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BENJAMIN E. GOLDSMITH, OCT 6 2014

Barack Obama's foreign policy has come under sustained criticism during his second term. While no set of policies and actual achievements by a national leader will be beyond reproach, in this article I make the case that Obama has been a truly exceptional steward of U.S. foreign affairs. In a nutshell, he has provided wise and moral leadership, tempered with political realism. He has pursued worthy and important goals, and achieved a great deal, advancing core U.S. national interests. I also believe he should be given credit for avoiding major foreign (or domestic) policy disasters. While bad luck can (and does seem to) hit every occupant of the White House, Obama's avoidance of major mistakes and miscalculations is something that he is due significant credit for, and indeed for which he rightly takes credit. But "don't do stupid stuff" is only one logical implication of his broad and well-crafted foreign policy vision, which he has stated clearly and consistently, and which has brought significant actual results. [1]

One author who has written sympathetically about Obama is *The New Yorker's* David Remnick. Remnick (2014a) wonders whether Obama is a "realist," given that "idealism" in Washington since the 1990s has been framed in terms of military intervention. Others have also argued that Obama is a foreign policy realist, privileging "cold-blooded realpolitik" (Douthat 2011) over ideals such as human rights in his response to the Arab Spring, for example. References to the main academic schools of thought on international relations (IR) are appropriate in assessing foreign policy, but often ideas are lost in translation from social science to the realm of policy and politics. I think it is clear that Obama is not an IR Realist, but neither does his foreign policy reflect a superficial or one-sided Idealist understanding of international affairs. Obama's foreign policy is consistent with the ideas and empirical findings most often associated with "Liberal" IR theory. A fundamental premise of Liberal theory is that the overlap of states' interests is a variable, not a constant. This fundamental enabling and constraining factor in international affairs varies in systematic and identifiable ways that can be understood. That understanding can guide foreign policy. In this essay I make the case that Obama's foreign policy thinking rests solidly on the logical foundation of Liberal theory, and embodies the kind of clarity and sophistication that are both consistent with U.S. values and capable of achieving the best outcomes for the national interest.

### Critics

Criticism has focused on Obama's supposed excessive caution, unnecessary degree of compromise or other forms of "weakness," and lack of vision. I do not agree with any of these. I do see some merit in another criticism: that his communication skills (surprisingly, given his natural eloquence) have not been used to great effect in many instances in explaining his foreign policy to the public, or in sending clear signals to foreign friends and adversaries. But overall his leadership has been appropriately decisive, tempered with wisdom and steely patience. His flexibility has served the country's interests well, and his vision is clear and consistent with his actions. The U.S. is lucky to have him.

One prominent recent critic is his former Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton. As she appears to ramp up for her next run at the presidency, understandably, Clinton feels the need to distinguish herself from a president with sagging poll numbers. In a recent interview she grabbed headlines by pointing to Obama's "failure to help build up a credible fighting force" of moderate anti-regime forces in Syria, which "left a big vacuum, which the jihadists have now filled." A second criticism from the interview was of the negotiating position over Iran's nuclear program: Clinton asserts that she would pursue a "maximalist" position of no uranium enrichment, or almost no enrichment, while implying that the current U.S. position is too weak relative to the "maximalist" position of the Iranian regime. A third criticism was of

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Obama's lack of vision: "Great nations need organizing principles, and 'Don't do stupid stuff' is not an organizing principle."

But these sorts of criticisms do not stand up to scrutiny. The first requires a degree of certainty about the "what if" or counterfactual scenario that is implausible: if the U.S. had tried to support "moderates" fighting Assad, would enough genuinely moderate forces have been identified, would the aid have had any effect, and would the weapons not have fallen into the hands of the much stronger and more effective jihadist fighters? What was the pre-June 2014 intelligence assessment of the probability that Islamic State would prove as effective as it has? The second is more obviously simplistic and relatively meaningless posturing about complex negotiations, probably meant to score points with voters concerned about Israel's security (as with many other comments in the interview). And the third simply latches on to a key phrase and pretends that Obama expressed this as a strategy, when he did not. In fairness to her, Clinton did acknowledge both the first and third arguments in her interview. But she may also have expected that such subtleties would get lost in public discussion, while her headline-grabbing criticisms would not. Remnick (2014b), somewhat surprisingly, also seems to take the "don't do stupid stuff" mantra as the substance of Obama's foreign policy.

Another characterization of Obama's foreign policy is that it is an over-reaction to George W. Bush's perceived mistakes. This would be a valid criticism if it were the case that Obama reacted in ways that under-valued the role of military force or aggressive intelligence gathering, for example. But Obama is not guilty of placing undue emphasis on these most recent historical lessons, to the detriment of more distal but equally relevant lessons, or of getting too wrapped up in the game of competing historical analogies which is part of sub-optimal decision processes in general.

Rather, Obama's foreign policy, as stated and implemented, is wise and well-grounded. It strikes a balance that can serve the U.S. well in the short and long term. In his May 28 speech at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, Obama (2014) robustly defended some core foreign policy principles. It was not especially eloquent, but in spite of its somewhat lacklustre form, the substance strikes the careful balance that Liberal theory demands. He shows the possibility of a U.S. that genuinely sees force as a last resort, values allies enough to use compromise and patience in order to work with them, sets priorities based on the relative importance of the issues and countries concerned for U.S. interests, and has a clear sense of what it takes to keep the U.S. safe. He also outlines what real steps – using all available tools – the U.S. can take to make the world of the near- and mid-term future a place where the U.S. can do well, and in the process can contribute to making the world a safer and freer place. In my view, this is among the most prescient combinations of steely (small "r") realism and fidelity to the U.S.'s better principles that a president has realized since World War II. In the remainder of this article I elaborate on this interpretation of Obama's foreign policy, and in the conclusion I draw what might seem an unlikely analogy to one of the most Realist of past presidents: Obama's foreign policy bears considerable likeness to a post-Cold War Nixon doctrine.

## **Obama's Liberalism**

Realists like John Mearsheimer (2001) and Charles Glaser (2011) see a world of usually unavoidable security threats, which can be managed through the age-old method of balancing military power. The "security dilemma" means that absent world government, one state's efforts to make itself more secure necessarily reduce the security of other states. While some "optimist" Realists like Glaser argue for conditions under which some states might cooperate with each other, these are not likely to regularly exist among the world's biggest powers (e.g., their motives are clear to each other and they are certain none is "greedy"). There is usually no escape from this situation because ultimately states, especially great powers, cannot trust each other enough to abandon their preference for self-reliance to ensure survival. With no supra-national power possible among sovereign states, there can be no guarantee other than one's own "self-help."

Liberals recognize the possibility and frequent reality of such a world, but argue for several types of conditions under which the security dilemma can be ameliorated and even made irrelevant. Authors such as Bruce Russett and John Oneal (2001) have resurrected a "Kantian tripod" of democracy, economic interdependence, and international institutions on which such peaceful relations might rest. Ideas of "security community" based on common experiences and identity, as in the European Union (Deutsch et al. 1969 [1957]), or of "capitalist" or "contractual"

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peace (Gartzke 2007; Mousseau 2009), tell similar stories, but focus on some different variables. Within the realm of Liberal IR theory there is wide debate, but that some factors can allow states to safely shift concerns from survival via self-help to welfare via mutually beneficial cooperation is a common denominator.

Often, Liberal authors point to virtuous circles of mutual reinforcement among the key variables. For example, democracy gives leaders incentives to improve economic welfare, which can lead to expanded trade. This creates mutual interests in maintaining economic cooperation, which can be reinforced by international institutions to prevent cheating and build confidence through transparent rules. The transparency of democratic governance further reduces suspicion of hidden motives, while also providing norms of peaceful domestic conflict resolution through compromise that can serve as focal points for dealing with potential conflict between democratic states. Importantly, the empirical support for Liberal propositions has turned out to be considerable. Jack Levy's (1989) oft-quoted characterization of the idea that democracies very rarely go to war with each other – the “democratic peace” – as “the closest thing we have to an empirical law in international relations” is still relevant. As Helen Milner (2009) has written of institutional Liberal theory, “in this increasingly globalized world, it may be the most useful international relations paradigm we have.”

As a guide to foreign policy, Liberal theory points decision makers to distinguish between situations in which the great benefits of international cooperation can be reaped, and those in which realpolitik and self-help must be applied. In his West Point speech, Obama specifically rejects both the realist and idealist labels. His approach is recognizably Liberal. [2] He clearly acknowledges the existence of major threats to U.S. security, and the need to take unilateral military action when self-help is the only option: “The United States will use military force, unilaterally if necessary, when our core interests demand it... America should never ask permission to protect our people, our homeland, or our way of life.” But he identifies this as a last resort, and the least preferred tool for ensuring security and pursuing interests.

Obama recognizes the negative consequences for the U.S. of a purely Realist foreign policy: not only in foregone gains from cooperation, but also in creating enmity and conflict spirals unnecessarily. Rather, he notes the main powerful and pragmatic tools that the U.S. has to promote its interests and security in other ways. And these are quintessentially Liberal. He points to international institutions, democracy, economic interdependence, and the need to build international trust. His speech is an argument for U.S. leadership in multilateral efforts, always with a preference for working with allies and others with common interests where possible. He provides examples of working through international institutions ranging from NATO allies imposing military and economic costs on Russia for its aggression against Ukraine, to OECD monitors and the limited but real positive impacts of post-World War II institutions such as the United Nations, World Bank, and IMF. He directly references the democratic peace and its potential for improving global stability, but also lauds democracies as the best alliance partners for the U.S. He emphasizes the role of economic interdependence engendered by free trade and investment, leading to prosperity through capitalist competition and entrepreneurial innovation.

But he also notes the utility of economic sanctions – something of considerable importance in imposing costs on Russia where military force, even via proxy, is almost certainly not an option for success. Economic “opportunity costs” to aggressors is a key aspect of Liberal theory. It is important to make the costs of aggression as high as possible, relative to the benefits that otherwise would have been enjoyed. The implications of this for managing present and future relations with China are important, and he also notes the role of international law: “we’re supporting Southeast Asian nations as they negotiate a code of conduct with China on maritime disputes in the South China Sea. And we’re working to resolve these disputes through international law.” While international law is usually not enforceable, especially against a great power like China, it can provide a focal point for settlement, and a face-saving path to resolving territorial and other disagreements. But the military aspect of Obama’s “pivot” to Asia makes clear that tools for dealing with China’s territorial ambitions include force.

The Realist path is always open, but better options should be pursued, and this includes a willingness for the U.S. to make important compromises, recognize others interests, and build trust. “Regional aggression that goes unchecked — whether in southern Ukraine or the South China Sea, or anywhere else in the world — will ultimately impact our allies and could draw in our military.” While he takes a multilateral approach to checking Chinese expansion, he also

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recognizes that the U.S. should be able to compromise and lead by example. "We can't try to resolve problems in the South China Sea when we have refused to make sure that the Law of the Sea Convention is ratified by our United States Senate, despite the fact that our top military leaders say the treaty advances our national security. That's not leadership." This sense of responsibility and capacity for self-criticism shows a maturity that other states can respect.

What is perhaps most distinct about Obama's Liberalism is the strong emphasis on how the U.S. is perceived abroad, and the belief that that matters. This is clearly related to the importance of democracy, and the ability of the U.S. to cooperate with other democracies, instead of losing the support of key allies like France and Germany as happened under George W. Bush. It is also related to recent Liberal emphasis on "soft power" (Nye 2004). Obama refers to the importance of "international support and legitimacy" for the success of U.S. military efforts. Similar statements are frequent in the West Point speech. "International opinion matters." "We must not create more enemies than we take off the battlefield." "[W]hen we cannot explain our efforts clearly and publicly, we face terrorist propaganda and international suspicion, we erode legitimacy with our partners." After Russia invaded Ukraine, "our ability to shape world opinion helped isolate Russia right away... And this mobilization of world opinion and international institutions served as a counterweight to Russian propaganda and Russian troops." While the concept of soft power might be criticized for some lack of theoretical rigor, my research with Yusaku Horiuchi (2012) develops some rigorous hypotheses regarding soft power and provides strong empirical evidence that international public opinion has "hard power" consequences for the success of U.S. foreign policy. Obama's emphasis on international opinion about the U.S. speaks to repairing and maintaining the North Atlantic security community, and for traditional Liberal concerns for a wider community of international legitimacy and trust.

Obama is clearly aware of the potential for good outcomes based on mutual interests, democracy, and constructive human endeavors, but he is fully capable of taking the hard decisions and making the trade-offs that foreign policy requires when these gains are not accessible. He presents his choices regarding relations with Egypt in this light:

In countries like Egypt, we acknowledge that our relationship is anchored in security interests — from peace treaties with Israel, to shared efforts against violent extremism. So we have not cut off cooperation with the new government, but we can and will persistently press for reforms that the Egyptian people have demanded.

When he believes core U.S. interests are best served by living in the Realist world, Obama can make the necessary compromises.

But the logic of mutual or overlapping interests pervades Obama's thinking, and is key to understanding the emphasis on working through regional partners of all types. He recognizes the potential of mutual interests not only in the usual areas of international economic interdependence, or cooperation among democracies, but also, for example, in the core security concerns of authoritarian states in the Middle East, as did Richard Nixon. In an interview with Remnick (2014a), he argued that both Sunni and Shia dominated states can recognize a potential equilibrium of common interests in stability and curtailing extremist movements. But use of force by the U.S. cannot alone move the region to the equilibrium point. This can form the basis of good strategy. Indeed, although the failure to anticipate the rapid expansion of Islamic State into Iraq can be seen as an important intelligence failure by the U.S. for which Obama can to some extent be faulted, his strategy and patience allowed for the ouster of the sectarian Nouri al-Maliki as Iraqi leader, and the inclusion of five Arab states in the military coalition currently fighting IS. He appears to have been right about the potential equilibrium.

## **Judging Foreign Policy**

What is the yardstick? A key consideration in evaluating the success or otherwise of a president's foreign policy is of course the standard to be used. I believe much of the criticism of Barack Obama uses implausible yardsticks. In social science, the problem (and necessity) of counterfactual reasoning is well known. There is no factual answer to questions that begin: "What would have happened if...?" But these are the sorts of questions that have to be asked if we are to assess a president's performance. For example, if we want to pin the Iraq War on George W. Bush, we'd need to know whether Al Gore would have done something similar, had he been elected. If so, the choice would be due to other, more general, national imperatives, not some atypical preferences held by Bush but few other potential

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White House occupants.

One reasonable yardstick for measuring Obama's presidency, I contend, is comparison with other actual presidents, rather than speculation about what would have worked better or what amounts to "fantasy politics" about missed opportunities. This allows for comparative analysis, using general counterfactual logic, but thinking across types of successes and failures, rather than trying to ask "what would FDR have done after 9/11?" for example. Each president confronts the reality of domestic and international constraints. These have perhaps become more severe over time since the end of World War II. The proper evidence to compare, it seems to me, is major accomplishments and failures, rather than the smaller setbacks and successes that loom large at any given moment.

Obama expressed his "don't do stupid stuff" guideline in the following way in his West Point speech:

Since World War II, some of our most costly mistakes came not from our restraint, but from our willingness to rush into military adventures without thinking through the consequences – without building international support and legitimacy for our action; without levelling with the American people about the sacrifices required. Tough talk often draws headlines, but war rarely conforms to slogans.

Under Obama, there has been no equivalent of the Bay of Pigs, the Vietnam War, Iran-Contra, withdrawal from Somalia, or the Iraq War. No major scandal has tied up his presidency, seriously impairing its effectiveness abroad, and he has not been impeached. There has been no Rwandan genocide. In spite of criticism regarding inexperience, he has avoided the self-inflicted fiascos the country endured under Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Reagan, Clinton, and George W. Bush. [3] And he has spared us the (often great) costs in terms of lives, prestige, and money. I think it is important to consider seriously just how difficult a job the presidency is, and how often those we choose actually make devastating or humiliating blunders.

It does seem that Obama's political and communication skills within and beyond the Washington DC "beltway" have gaps. While often eloquent and nuanced in speeches, press conferences, and even dealing with hecklers, he is not widely regarded as effective in twisting Congressional arms, schmoozing potential millionaire donors, or building coalitions among the DC elite. In these skills he does not compare to LBJ or Bill Clinton. But, his political skills are formidable, and the failings of these other presidents in foreign and domestic politics must be weighed against the incremental value of their acute political-animal instincts for their actual contributions in the presidency. Indeed, true political animals might be predisposed to poor decision-making processes and habits, as was the case for LBJ's groupthink-laden Vietnam choices and Clinton's chaotic White House. Obama's focus, discipline, and rationality are what is needed for weighty decisions taken under conditions of unavoidable uncertainty, including about fundamental dangers to U.S. security. Remnick notes that Obama "prides himself on... unshakable rationality." Obama brings an especially mature perspective to his decisionmaking. "The president always takes the long view," Remnick (2014a) quotes a key presidential advisor, Valerie Jarrett, as saying. He quotes Obama himself as drawing the lesson from U.S. history that apparently "insoluble" problems require decision makers who are "steady, clear-eyed, and persistent." He is willing to forego bold statements for balanced probabilities, and while this might cause his foreign policy to lose some of the popular appeal of Reagan's "Evil Empire" or Bush's "War on Terror," it is just as surely a cause of the absence of Iran-Contra scandals and huge disasters like the decision to invade Iraq in 2003. Disaster still could strike, of course, but it would not be due to a careless or heavily skewed decision process.

But avoiding costly mistakes is just a part of Obama's approach to foreign policy, and the least closely tied to his Liberal vision (Realists can be careful too). This is better reflected in his accomplishments, and he has actually accomplished a great deal, even given the acute political division in U.S. society that marks the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I have mentioned in general terms his measured but effective policies towards Russia and China, and in the Middle East. Drawing down both the Iraq and Afghan wars in responsible ways must be counted as important achievements. Obama's achievements also include the headway made with Iran. In this, he used toughened economic sanctions to great effect. The threat of force led to Syria's agreement to give up its chemical weapons (but Obama's press-conference stumbles over "red lines" were damaging). Although much criticized, Obama's choice not to provide greater aid to the insurgents or take direct military action against the Assad regime were obviously well considered, and defensible. Action on climate change, however limited, is another. Obama did not make Jimmy

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Carter's mistake of taking on too many politically challenging issues in his early legislative agenda, and suffering defeat across all major issues. Climate change legislation took a back seat to health care reform in Obama's first term, showing the ability to set priorities and pursue achievable goals. Unlike either Carter or Clinton, who both tried, Obama passed major health care reform. And Obama, in his September 2014 UN address, has now proven himself willing to use all his executive powers to put the U.S. in the lead on climate change (arguably the single most important challenge facing the world).

In his approach to international terror and extremist networks targeting or potentially targeting the United States, Obama has used the tools at his disposal well. These include cooperation with allies, coercive diplomacy, intelligence, and force. Tracking down and eliminating Osama bin Laden is certainly an achievement, using the latter two tools. Drone strikes, though heavily criticized, seem to have continuously degraded and frustrated such networks, and the costs in civilian lives and radicalization relative to these benefits are arguably (much) lower than the costs that would have been incurred using other tools, especially large-scale warfighting against states. This is Obama's claim regarding civilian casualties (Remnick 2014a) and it seems very plausible, if difficult to test. In 2009 Obama also signed an executive order to ban torture by the U.S., ending a disgraceful period in U.S. foreign policy, and one that did great damage to our global interests.

Taking the lead in a global economic rescue from the start of his presidency is surely another major, and under-appreciated achievement. The pivot to Asia and the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade negotiations (initiated by George W. Bush, but revitalized by Obama) are far-sighted and steer the U.S. in the right direction, given China's steady rise. A usually unnoticed aspect of Obama's foreign policy has been a focus on preventing genocide. This may be due in part to his childhood experience in Indonesia, in the late 1960s. Remnick (2014a) notes that the mass killing of communists there under the Suharto regime, which came to power in a U.S.-supported coup, "made a lasting impression on Obama." His nomination of Samantha Power, author of *"A Problem from Hell": America and the Age of Genocide*, as U.N. Ambassador, and earlier in his presidency the Presidential Study Directive on Mass Atrocities (PSD10), are evidence of this sustained focus which has built capacity for anticipating and preventing mass atrocities. Although "leading from behind" in the Libyan intervention with France, Britain, and many others including Muslim states, was criticized as weak by some, Gaddafi's declared genocidal intentions were not realized and major civil war was avoided, while the U.S. did not need to act alone.

Improving the U.S. image and revitalizing American "soft power" is certainly another achievement. While Obama is probably no Nixon or Kissinger when conducting closed-door diplomacy, he is one of the best public diplomats the U.S. has ever had. This is so even considering the inevitable decline in his international mass appeal once the varied impossible expectations around the world were revealed as such.

### **Right Ideas, Right Time**

Obama is a foreign policy Liberal, in the best, sophisticated sense of the term. Key to understanding that is understanding that foreign policy thinkers in the Liberal tradition have always recognized the logic of Realist international relations theory. But Liberal theory has a conditional approach to when such realpolitik thinking is necessary or useful. As early as 1977 this was stated by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye in their landmark work, *Power and Interdependence*. Foreign policy judgement must be exercised first and foremost with an understanding of the conditions under which raw power must be the driving consideration, and those under which cooperation generated by interdependence can lead to greater benefits, or avoid serious costs.

Obama has delivered a balanced foreign policy that protects U.S. interests while promoting U.S. values. All within the means of our huge but finite economic, political, and military resources. Obama has decidedly not over-reacted to the disastrous foreign policies of George W. Bush. For example, he is often criticised from within his own party for tough policies on issues such as intelligence, guarding government secrets, and frequently being willing to use force including drone strikes (including to kill U.S. citizens acting as enemies abroad).

Obama's foreign policy is not very similar to that of another left-of-center democrat who was criticized for "weakness," Jimmy Carter. Unlike Carter, Obama has maintained a hard-nosed small-"r" realism and understood the

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reality that security threats need to be deterred and force must be met with force. Rather, among Cold War "doctrines," Obama's foreign policy comes closest to that of Richard Nixon, who sought to rely on regional partners to contain and counter the Soviet threat. Where Nixon adjusted U.S. containment policy in a way that seemed to incorporate lessons of the (then ongoing) Vietnam War, Obama has reacted to the Iraq War as a misguided effort to deal with global terrorism, adjusting doctrine about the use of force, and the unilateral use of force. Each heavily emphasized the importance of burden sharing by key allies with mutual interests. But if Nixon fit well into the Realist mold, Obama's emphasis on working with others is definitively Liberal. Democracy, economic interdependence, and trust are valuable currencies for him, on par with and much preferred to military power and the credible threat of its use. Like Nixon, Obama is clear-eyed about the types of compromises that might be necessary in this strategy. Nixon found it necessary to engage with Suharto's Indonesia, Obama engages with Sisi's Egypt. But I think most Americans would trust Obama much more than they would Nixon or Kissinger to strike the right balance between values and realpolitik in such compromises. Nixon and Kissinger let the country down in this respect, but I do not believe Obama has done or will do this.

Making decisions that often occupy the grey zone of rationally balanced probabilities, and which are hard to explain in twenty-second sound bites, takes courage and demonstrates leadership. While Obama's silver tongue and incisive pen might have been tarnished as the presidency has battered him, his foreign policy principles and wisdom are easily seen in the West Point speech and in his actual actions across his entire presidency. The list of substantial achievements heavily weighs the scale on the positive side, when balanced against missteps or reasonably avoidable negative foreign policy outcomes. But more than this, and unlike Nixon or other Realists, his Liberal foreign policy has the potential, indeed the strong likelihood, to positively shape the global context in which the U.S. must operate. Because Liberal theory recognizes variance in the potential for cooperation or conflict, it recognizes the central role of changing goals and preferences of states in the international system (Moravcsik 1997). Obama understands that through cooperation with allies, building and "evolving" (Obama 2014) institutions, expanding economic interdependence and democracy, and cultivating trust in the U.S. among foreign publics, his policies can have longer-term fundamental impact on the global system, and the prospects for the U.S. enjoying peace and prosperity within it. In case this sounds like airy abstraction, consider the utility of shaping key relationships along these lines for what is most likely the major military challenge the U.S. will face for the next decades.

As China's power grows, and at some point probably surpasses that of the U.S., international opinion will be a major constraint on Chinese influence around the world. A world of market democracies will be much less amenable to PRC influence (assuming the Communist Party maintains power, which seems likely). Most importantly, if tensions rise as China's military power grows, perhaps over maritime and territorial claims against neighbors, close and reliable allies will be central to U.S.-led deterrence, or use of force. The Liberal approach that values allies and makes sure that security cooperation is based on mutual interests and trust, will substantially increase the odds that allies will pay the costs of resisting and confronting China, which will certainly be high. Key allies in this will most likely be Japan, but also Europe, which could feel huge economic pull from China and less immediacy to the security threat, and India, which might be tempted to collaborate with China in dividing up spheres of influence in Asia, rather than resisting expansion. Obama is laying the foundation for maintaining stability in Asia by credibly presenting China with both carrots and sticks that are consistent with U.S. values and interests. A broad Asia-Pacific strategy based on Realist principles alone would foreshadow a future much less palatable for the U.S., and the best social science evidence suggests would also be less likely to succeed.

### Notes

[1] I am grateful to Ryan Griffiths for helpful comments.

[2] I do not claim that Obama or his advisors explicitly rely on Liberal theory, or are even strongly aware of it, since I do not have knowledge of these things. Indeed, Obama's key foreign policy speech writer, Ben Rhodes, has been characterized as a "realist" in *The Washington Post* (Horowitz 2010). My claim is about the logic actually expressed.

[3] The taking of U.S. hostages in Iran and the subsequent failed rescue attempt under Carter might be added to this list, but the extent to which these can really be blamed on Carter is at best uncertain, in my view.

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