

Obama and ‘Learning’ in Foreign Policy: Military Intervention in Libya and Syria

Written by Rupert Schulenburg

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Obama and ‘Learning’ in Foreign Policy: Military Intervention in Libya and Syria

<https://www.e-ir.info/2019/09/05/obama-and-learning-in-foreign-policy-military-intervention-in-libya-and-syria/>

RUPERT SCHULENBURG, SEP 5 2019

This independent study project in International Relations addresses the following question: how does President Obama’s decision-making on military intervention towards the Gaddafi regime in Libya and the Assad regime in Syria demonstrate ‘learning’ from past military interventions by the United States (US)?

On 17 March, in response to the “escalation of violence” and “heavy civilian casualties” inflicted by the Gaddafi regime toward anti-government demonstrations, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) passed resolution 1973, which authorized United Nations (UN) members to “take all necessary measures [...] to protect civilians” in Libya (UNSC 2011b: 1). On 18 March, Obama announced that the US and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) would implement UNSCR-1973 (Norton 2016: 147), stating that “left unchecked” Gaddafi would “commit atrocities” (POTUS 2012), and on 19 March 2011, NATO forces began airstrikes (Michaels 2014: 22).

In Syria, in August 2011, Assad-security forces began large-scale military operations in towns across the country identified as protest-hubs (HRW 2011: 8). In response, in April 2011, Obama called for Assad to resign (POTUS 2011c). Later in August 2012, Obama warned that “a red line [...] is if we start seeing [...] chemical weapons [...] being utilized” (POTUS 2012). In April 2013, the Obama administration confirmed that the Assad regime had conducted a chemical and biological weapon (CBW) attack (Gearan and Whitlock 2013). Despite this, Obama decided not to strike Assad’s CBW stores. In September 2013, Obama referred the decision to use military force to Congress; however, the bill did not receive a vote (CBO 2013: 1). Obama subsequently pursued diplomacy with Russia, and that same September, the US and Russia concluded an agreement to eliminate Assad’s CBW arsenal (Heller 2017).

In scholarly debates surrounding the reasoning behind Obama’s decision-making in response to these two civil uprisings, ‘learning’ has been a prevalent theme, specifically, whether Obama’s policy was guided by what Obama had ‘learned’ from past cases of US military intervention, including during his own Presidency.

Scholarly Relevance and Importance

Respecting Obama’s decision-making towards the Gaddafi regime, scholars have suggested, for instance, that Obama’s decision to pursue a ‘light-footprint’ intervention through precision air-power was informed by the long-term and costly military engagements pursued by President George W. Bush, specifically the invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 as part of the ‘War on Terror’ (Brands 2016). In regard to Obama’s decision-making towards the Assad regime, some scholars have similarly suggested that Obama had been deterred from directly engaging the Assad regime given the aftermath of his own intervention in Libya (Kaplan 2015) which, despite acting through a coalition and under a UNSC mandate, nevertheless, as stated by Obama, devolved into “a mess” (Goldberg 2016).

The question of how Obama’s decision-making over intervention towards the Gaddafi regime and the Assad regime demonstrates ‘learning’ is important for two reasons. First, studying this topic can support the development of an understanding of the following three issues: *if*, and if so, *when* policy-makers ‘learn’ certain lessons in foreign policy; and *what* events policy-makers ‘learn’ from. A better understanding of a causal link between ‘learning’ and foreign policy would support scholarship in the field of foreign policy analysis, particularly attempts to understand policy-

Obama and 'Learning' in Foreign Policy: Military Intervention in Libya and Syria

Written by Rupert Schulenburg

makers' decision-making in foreign affairs, given their interpretation of events. Second, although the literature on Obama's decision-making towards Libya and Syria suggests that 'learning' from past instances of US intervention was a key determinant in Obama's decision-making (Gerges 2013; Michael Clarke and Ricketts 2017; Brands 2016; Moran 2017), it largely fails to explore the concept of 'learning' in-depth or use 'learning' as an analytical framework.

The question of 'learning' and Obama's decision-making is situated within several scholarly debates. First, whether international events significantly affect a policy-maker's decision-making. Second, whether Obama's use of US military force was largely a response to what he perceived as the overreach of US power exercised by Bush. Third, whether Obama's restraint towards using force against the Assad regime in 2013 was largely influenced by the aftermath of intervention against Gaddafi in Libya. The reason this project focuses on Obama's decision-making toward the Gaddafi regime and the Assad regime is that Obama's responses to these civil uprisings contrasted significantly. In regard to Libya, Obama decided to directly engage the Gaddafi regime multilaterally with military force on humanitarian grounds with a UNSC mandate. In regard to Syria, Obama decided against directly engaging the Assad regime, despite the more severe humanitarian crisis.

Outline

In this project I argue that Obama learned several core lessons from Bush's interventionism, which had resulted in extensive costs to the US in terms of finance, lives, and public opinion: 1) intervention can result in significant costs (in terms of finance, lives, and public opinion); 2) the US should not attempt to police states militarily for humanitarian reasons; 3) the US should not act unilaterally, and 4) the US should act multilaterally with regional support. Broadly, Obama 'learned' from the costs of those interventions that intervening on such a scale was a crucial 'mistake'. In regard to Obama's decision-making in Libya, Obama was initially hesitant to pursue intervention, and even when he did so in March 2011, he justified the action in terms of case-specific circumstances and made it clear that the US would not be committing to any long-term involvement in Libya. Obama also made sure to act with regional support and UNSC authorization. In the case of Syria, Obama's posture towards intervention in Syria in 2011 was initially limited in scope, threatening the use of force only in the event that CBW are used. While Obama set a 'red line' on CBW in 2012, when Assad crossed this line in 2013, Obama announced a U-turn on intervention by requesting authorization from Congress and later pursuing diplomacy with Russia to remove Assad's CBW.

Obama, however, also demonstrated a 'failure' to learn from Bush's experience with regime change, in particular, the need to engage in a reconstruction effort post-intervention. Obama came to state that failing to "plan for the day after" in Libya was the worst 'mistake' of his presidency (Tierney 2016). Obama also 'learned' from his own experience with intervention of the limits of US military power in trying to improve humanitarian crises. Obama questioned whether the US could even "make a difference" (Foer and Hughes 2013), given that in Libya the US acted as a coalition, acted with a UNSC mandate, avoided deploying US ground forces, and was able to keep costs low, yet Libya still devolved into "a mess" (Obama quoted in Goldberg 2016).

This project is structured as follows. In section two, I discuss the literature concerning Bush's interventionism, Obama's approach to foreign policy, and Obama's decision-making over intervention towards Libya and Syria. In section three, I discuss the concept of 'learning' in foreign policy and outline a 'two-stage learning model' and how I apply the analytical framework to Obama's decision-making; at the same time, my focus on the decision-making of policy-makers is grounded in a Neoclassical realist approach to foreign policy analysis (FPA). In section four, I discuss how Obama's decision-making over intervention towards the Gaddafi regime and the Assad regime demonstrate 'learning'. Lastly, in section five, I conclude this project by recapitulating its findings and suggest what additional research is required to more effectively understand how 'learning' occurs and how it impacts foreign policy.

Literature Review

Bush's Interventionism

In the literature concerning George W. Bush's interventionism, specifically on the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq as

Obama and 'Learning' in Foreign Policy: Military Intervention in Libya and Syria

Written by Rupert Schulenburg

part of the 'War on Terror', it has been widely argued that the guiding logic behind his interventionism was liberalism. Post-9/11, the Bush administration pursued 'liberal hegemony', a doctrine of liberal idealism aimed at drastically reordering the Middle East (Dodge 2009: Freedman 2005; Jervis 2003). As outlined in the Bush administration's 2002 National Security Strategy (NSS), the US aimed to bring democracy and free markets to "every corner of the world" (White House 2002: III). This policy materialized in the US's 2001 invasion of Afghanistan to dismantle Al-Qaeda, which was under the protection of the Taliban, and the invasion of Iraq in 2003 to oust its President, Saddam Hussein, to ensure that he did not have WMD; these two events were central to Bush's 'War on Terror' (Dodge 2009: 263). In the aftermath of both invasions, the US attempted to establish democratic systems in these two states (Schmidt and Williams 2008: 200). This strategy was premised on a cause and effect rationale that posited that in the "unipolar moment" (Krauthammer 1990: 26), in which the US lacked external restraints (Kristol and Kagan 1996), the US could establish democratic systems in the Middle East unilaterally through military force (Brown 2015: 609–656), reforming Middle Eastern states and thereby undermining terrorism at the source (Monten 2005: 112). It was, in other words, a strategically-offensive liberal doctrine aimed at spreading the democratic peace to the Middle East (Miller 2010: 41).

It is also widely noted by scholars that while the interventionism of Bush held liberal objectives, the pursuit of these objectives was "inconsistent" with liberal values (Desch 2008: 7). Most notably, as Brian Schmidt and Michael Williams note, the Bush administration violated international law by invading Iraq without a UNSCR authorizing the use of force (2008: 198), which was the "major manifestation" in a shift to a unilateral approach in US 'Grand Strategy' (2010: 46). Bush's unilateralism shared much the same premises as a neoconservative approach to foreign policy, in particular, doubt in the ability of international law and institutions to bring about international peace (Khong 2016: 320–321). These ideas became embedded in Bush's foreign policy with the appointment of numerous neoconservatives to prominent positions in his administration (Dech 2008: 9; Schmidt and Williams 2008: 198). Regardless of whether Bush identified as a neoconservative, the core tenets of neoconservative thought were evident in Bush's foreign policy (Khong 2016: 320–321). Bush's shift to unilateralism was led by his "faith in the power of the American military", which neoconservatives argued could "reorder the international system to suit America's own national interests" (Schmidt and Williams 2008: 199).

There is, however, a general consensus among scholars that the 'War on Terror' induced significant financial and human costs upon the US (Dodge 2009: 255). From the fiscal year 2001 to 2008, the US's spending on the 'War on Terror' totaled US\$428.1 billion (USDOD 2018: 22–23) and resulted in a total of 4,852 US service members killed in Afghanistan and Iraq (Crawford 2018: 4–5). Internationally, Bush's interventionism in Afghanistan and Iraq greatly damaged the US's prestige not only in the Middle East, but internationally (Dodge 2009: 271). In sum, the core tenets of Bush's approach to military intervention entailed: liberalism, unilateralism, neoconservatism, and extensive military commitments and expenditure.

Obama's Approach to Foreign Policy

In much of the literature concerning Obama's general approach to foreign policy, a prevalent theme is that his foreign policy was heavily informed by 'learning', in particular, from Bush's interventionism. Hal Brands argues that Obama's 'Grand Strategy' could be defined as "preserving US leadership of an eminently favorable international order, but doing so at reduced costs, via more supple and energetic diplomacy, and in ways that better reflected the shifting landscape of global power" (2016: 102). This 'Grand Strategy' was informed by what Obama perceived as the need to correct, in Brand's words, the "mistakes of more recent US statecraft", particularly the "overinvesting in the Middle East" through the invasion of both Afghanistan and Iraq, and the 'nation-building' that followed (ibid. 105). Similar to Brands, Andrew Moran argues that Obama made it clear from the start of his first term, that he believed that the US had "overextended itself" in Iraq and Afghanistan and, hence, that the US needed to "reduce its overseas commitments" in light of the "open-ended interventions of the Bush-era" (2017: 267). Colin Dueck argues similarly that Obama's 'Grand Strategy' entailed "overarching American retrenchment and accommodation" (2015: 2).

Fawaz Gerges, for instance, adopts a more ideology-based explanation of Obama's decision-making, but nonetheless links his explanation to 'learning' from the foreign policy of Bush. Gerges argues that Obama "accepts the basic realist premises" while "shifting his approach significantly from Bush's ideology of proselytizing about

Obama and 'Learning' in Foreign Policy: Military Intervention in Libya and Syria

Written by Rupert Schulenburg

democracy and the liberal deployment of force in world politics" (2013: 299). Hence, Gerges argues that from the beginning of his presidency, Obama had been "reluctant to use force except when US national security is directly affected" (ibid. 308).

Not all explanations directly invoke 'learning' as a driver for Obama's decision making. Andreas Krieg, for instance, merely argues that Obama's decision-making was "shaped" by the "legacy of the Bush-era" which produced "public war fatigue, austerity measures, and military downsizing after long and costly military engagements" in the Middle East (2016: 93). Adam Quinn, similarly, merely writes of Obama's "adoption" of a strategy which resulted in a foreign policy of "caution, self-restraint, and consciousness of limits" (2011: 814-15).

Obama's Interventionism: Libya and Syria

Since Obama's decision to directly engage the Gaddafi regime with military force in 2011 while declining to directly engage the Assad regime in 2013, scholars have sought to explain the reasons behind Obama's decision-making. As in the literature concerning Obama's general approach to foreign policy, a prevalent theme is the claim that Obama's decision-making was largely informed by 'learning', in particular from Bush's interventionism.

The policy implications of Obama's desire to limit the US's role militarily resulted in Obama taking "discriminating approaches to the use of force" or "light-footprint interventions" (Brands 2016: 106, 111). For instance, Brands notes, respecting the Gaddafi regime, that Obama let US allies take greater initiative and decided against deploying US ground forces, whereas respecting the Assad regime, Obama refused to conduct a military strike despite his own 'red line' on CBW (ibid. 108). Gerges suggests that the most persuasive explanation for Obama's "reluctance to take an active role in the Syrian crisis" was the "lessons that he learned from Iraq" (2013: 311), specifically, that the US should not "entangle itself militarily [...] unless its strategic interests are at stake" and unless there is a "consensus in the international arena" that can be translated into a UNSCR (ibid.).

Michael Clarke and Anthony Ricketts, like Gerges, share the view that Obama understood that there were "clear limits on what the use of American military power could achieve, especially in the Middle East" (2017: 313). Brands even questions whether Obama had "overlearned the painful lessons of the Bush years" (ibid. 120). Similarly, as Moran notes in regard to Libya, this meant that while Obama was willing to support forces from the United Kingdom (UK) and France to oust Gaddafi, he was "not willing to involve [the US] beyond that" (ibid. 274). In respect of Syria, Obama refused to enforce his 'red line' on CBW in August 2013, following the failure of the UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, to win consent from Parliament to join US airstrikes (ibid. 274). Moran argues that a key measure by which Obama aimed to reduce 'overextension' and the risk of "being drawn into a new military conflict" was through increased 'burden sharing' and cooperation with allies (2017: 267).

Instead of a 'learning' argument, Quinn, for instance, argues that Obama was guided more by the "movement of events on the ground than by any overarching plan"; Obama made the decision to intervene "only after it became clear that anti-Gaddafi rebels were in imminent danger of total defeat" (2011: 821). It is worth noting that Quinn nevertheless acknowledges that Obama specifically cited the Iraq War to differentiate his attitude towards intervention *vis-à-vis* Libya. Quinn notes that in Obama's speech on his policy towards Libya, he ruled out deploying US ground-forces to Libya on the grounds that "we went down that road in Iraq [; ...] that is not something we can afford to repeat in Libya" (Obama quoted in Quinn 2011: 821).

Krieg moreover argues that Obama perceived the "multiple crises in the Middle East [...] as not urgent enough in terms of vital US national interests and humanitarian considerations to merit intervention" (2016: 107-108). Obama consequently preferred to externalize the "operational burden of war" (ibid. 92) to surrogates, such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) (ibid. 107). Krieg notes that in Libya, for instance, the US "provided key capabilities to its allies in the air" and deployed UAVs to "eliminate targets with impunity" (ibid. 107). Respecting Syria, Obama condemned the humanitarian crises, but these evidently did not mobilize "sufficient public pressure at home" to justify deploying US ground forces (ibid. 108). Krieg concludes that Obama was concerned with both the financial costs of deploying ground forces and, most importantly, the "potential political costs" of US forces being killed in action (ibid.). In sum, the core tenets of Obama's approach to military intervention entailed a limited

Obama and 'Learning' in Foreign Policy: Military Intervention in Libya and Syria

Written by Rupert Schulenburg

role, a 'light-footprint', multilateralism, and UNSC-mandated action.

It is important to note that despite the prevalence in the above literature of the argument that 'learning' helped shape Obama's decision-making towards the civil uprisings in Libya and Syria (Brands 2016; Moran 2017; Gerges 2016), that literature largely fails to undertake an in-depth inquiry into 'learning' as a concept in foreign policy, let alone in regard to Obama's decision-making. Furthermore, 'learning' is not used as the central analytical framework to analyze Obama's decision-making.

Analytical Framework

'Learning' and the 'Two-Stage Learning Model'

Learning can be defined as the formation of *new beliefs* informed through observation and interpretation of *events* (Levy 1994: 283). At the most basic level, 'learning' in foreign policy entails policy-makers making "propositions from the past" and then "apply these propositions in an appropriate way to the future" so that they can weigh the "likely consequences of the options they face" (Stein 2016: 132). It is crucial to note that what policy-makers 'learn' from history helps determine their "interpretation of incoming information" which informs their policy (Jervis 1976: 217); a policy-maker's decision-making is *not* simply based on what they perceive in the present, but also on past experiences. The process in which 'learning' occurs is outlined in the following 'two-stage learning model' in international relations, based on the work of in Robert Jervis (1976: 222) and Jack Levy (1994: 291).

The 'Two-Stage Learning Model'

1. The individual's observation and interpretation of events lead to a change in their beliefs.
2. The change in the individual's beliefs subsequently influences their future decision-making.

It is crucial to establish a *causal* relationship between these two stages. In other words, one has to establish whether 'learning' has an impact on behaviour. This is for two reasons. First, a change in policy does not necessarily mean the change was the result of 'learning'. As Levy notes, "learning is not definitionally equivalent to policy change" (1994: 289). For instance, a change in foreign policy may occur due to changes in the international environment, a change in political leadership, a bureaucratic realignment, or a change in individual beliefs over policy objectives (ibid. 289-90). Evidence that 'learning' has occurred is necessary, but not sufficient, to validate 'learning' in foreign policy (ibid. 291).

Second, the occurrence of 'learning' does not require a change in policy. Policy-makers may well 'learn' from events; however, due to political, economic, or bureaucratic constraints, policy-makers may be thwarted from enacting preferred policies based on what they have 'learned'(ibid.). This project's understanding of 'learning' consequently does not include a 'policy change criterion' (ibid. 283). By contrast, William Jarosz and Joseph Nye Jr. (1993: 130), for example, employ a 'policy change criterion' in their definition of 'learning' (ibid.). They define 'learning' as the "acquisition of new [...] information that leads to a change in behavior"(ibid.). Using such a 'policy change' criterion, however, prevents identifying instances when 'learning' occurred, but did *not* get translated into policy due to political and/or institutional constraints (Levy 1994: 290).

Events from which Policy-Makers 'Learn'

Observing different events leads policy-maker's to hold different beliefs (Jervis 1976: 255). As Jervis argues, key events that policy-makers 'learn' from in foreign policy are a state's 'last war', its policy 'successes', and its policy 'failures'/'mistakes' (ibid.). In discussing events from which 'people 'learn' the most', Jervis emphasizes the importance of a state's 'last war' in shaping both a policy-maker's decision-making, as well as the public's attitudes towards policy-makers' foreign policy. Jervis notes that the "dramatic and pervasive nature of a war and its consequences" in addition to the "experiences associated with it [...] will deeply influence the perceptual predispositions of most citizens" (ibid. 266). Jervis adds that it is "usually the last major war [which] has the most impact because major wars rarely come more than once a generation and most people have firsthand memories of

Obama and 'Learning' in Foreign Policy: Military Intervention in Libya and Syria

Written by Rupert Schulenburg

only the most recent one" (ibid. 69). In addition to the impact a state's 'last war' has on its citizenry, policy-makers draw "specific lessons" to aid decision-making from the 'last war' (ibid. 268), but only if the next war is seen as likely to "resemble the last (ibid. 269).

Policy-makers are prone to avoid policies that were a *failure* in the immediate past; while a policy-maker's high and medium-level objectives may remain, alternative strategies may be pursued (ibid. 275). This is because when an outcome fails to reflect a policy-maker's expectations and fails to achieve their goals, incentives are generated to change policy (Levy 1994: 304). Additionally, as Jervis notes, an important consequence of 'learning' from failure is that decision-makers have an "increased readiness to perceive a wide range of situations as resembling the ones that have previously caused the [...] most trouble" (ibid. 276). For instance, Shadi Hamid argues that Obama's decision not to intervene militarily in Syria was based on his observation of the aftermath in Iraq, which distorted his decision-making. Hamid states that "being right on Iraq made you more likely to be wrong about subsequent interventions" and is "likely to distort your perception of everything that followed" (2016b). Conversely, when a particular policy has been *successful*, policy-makers are likely to apply the policy to a range of later situations. Seeing these cases as resembling the past case, the policy-maker will believe that they are "amenable to the policy that worked previously" (Jervis 1976: 278).

Limitation of the 'Two-Stage Learning Model'

The ability of this 'two-stage learning model' to explain a policy-maker's foreign policy has a core limitation: the causal link between a policy-maker's interpretation of events and future decision-making is inherently probabilistic. This is because one cannot determine exactly how a policy-maker observed and interpreted events (Jervis 1976: 275). Instead, in order to identify 'learning' one is forced to draw deductions from sources such as a policy-maker's speeches, interviews, transcripts, and policy documents (ibid. 224). As George Breslauer and Philip Tetlock note, assessing 'learning' in foreign policy would ideally take place in "learner-friendly environments" (1991: 35-36), in which there are "well-defined evidential standards" that facilitate controlled experiments that can verify whether a causal relationship exists between 'learning' and a policy-maker's foreign policy (Levy 1994: 292).

Analytical Approach

I will apply Levy and Jervis' 'two-stage learning model' to Obama's decision-making over Libya and Syria as follows. In order to identify whether a causal relationship exists between a change in Obama's 'beliefs' and his decision-making, I will attempt to identify what Obama perceived to be 'mistakes' by Bush in regard to intervention. This is because Bush's 'mistakes' (i.e. the past events) formed the 'lessons' that subsequently shaped Obama's decision-making. Hence, in my empirical analysis, I am looking to identify *intentional difference* by Obama in his decision-making towards intervention from that of Bush and his own past intervention, as well as instances of Obama explaining his reasoning behind his decision-making based on what he perceived to be 'mistakes'.

To that end, this project draws on the following sources: Obama's interviews on foreign policy with journalists; Obama's press conferences on his administration's foreign policy; speeches made by Obama on foreign policy, both prior to and during his Presidency; official foreign policy documents published by the Obama administration; and scholarly literature that concerns Obama's foreign policy more broadly, as well as his decision-making towards the Gaddafi regime and the Assad regime in particular. These sources provide insight into Obama's own foreign policy objectives, reasoning, and decision-making, from which I will identify what Obama perceived to be 'mistakes' by Bush, which formed the 'lessons' Obama 'learned', and which subsequently came to inform his decision-making respecting intervention towards Libya and Syria.

This focus on the decision-making of a particular policy-maker is grounded in Neoclassical realist approach to FPA (Stuart 2008: 586). Neoclassical realism posits that "unit-level variables", such as individual policy-makers, constrain and facilitate the ability of states to "respond to systemic imperatives" (Lobell et al. 2009: 4). In other words, Neoclassical realism posits that governmental actors' perceptions of pressures from the international system and domestic politics "alter [...] foreign policy choice" (Wohlforth 2016: 39). While the distribution of power within the international system may bind a state's 'Grand Strategy', the implementation of this strategy is made by individual

Obama and 'Learning' in Foreign Policy: Military Intervention in Libya and Syria

Written by Rupert Schulenburg

foreign policy executives who conduct threat assessments and mobilize domestic resources (Hudson 2016: 32). As Gideon Rose notes, the foreign policy of states is "made by actual political leaders", hence, it is their perceptions of power, rather than simply the "relative quantities of physical resources or forces in being", that form foreign policy (1998: 146). Leaders define the states' orientation, formulation, and implementation of its foreign policy (Hermann and Hagan 1998: 123). This approach to FPA, therefore, places particular emphasis on 'human decisional behaviour', given this assumption that policy-makers play a key role in the process of making foreign policy decisions for the state (Carlsnaes 2016: 116).

Analysis

Bush's interventionism resulted in extensive costs to the US in terms of finance, lives, and public opinion. By the end of 2008, before Obama came into office, the US's spending on the 'War on Terror' had reached a total of US\$428.1 billion (USDOD 2018: 22–23), and a total of 4,852 US service members had been killed in Afghanistan and Iraq (Crawford 2018: 4–5). Bush left office in January 2009 with an overall approval rating of 22% and his decision to invade Iraq had fallen to a mere 25% approval (CBS 2009). The US public also demonstrated fatigue with global engagement, with 76% of Americans in 2009 agreeing that the US should concentrate more on its "own national problems" (Drake 2014).

As the following subsections show, what Obama 'learned' from these costs was that interventionism on this scale was a crucial 'mistake'. The core 'lessons' that Obama 'learned' from Bush's interventionism in the Middle East were: 1) intervention can result in significant costs (in terms of finance, lives, and public opinion); 2) the US should not attempt to police states militarily for humanitarian reasons; 3) the US military is limited in its power to improve humanitarian crises; 4) the US should not act unilaterally; and 5) the US should act multilaterally with regional support. Obama's decision-making was also informed by 'learning' from his own experience with intervention in Libya, from which Obama 'learned' about the limits of US military power to try and improve humanitarian crises. Notably, however, Obama also demonstrated a failure to 'learn' from Bush, namely regarding the need to engage in a reconstruction effort post-intervention.

Libya

Hesitancy and Limits

While Obama did eventually approve intervention, he was extremely hesitant until he gave such consent. Obama's decision to pursue intervention in Libya only came after European partners and Arab regional organizations voiced support for intervention, making it clear that the US would not have to act unilaterally and with regional legitimacy. Following the passing of UNSCR-1970 on 26 February 2011, which condemned the use of force by the Gaddafi regime against protesters and imposed a series of international sanctions on Libya (UNSC 2011a: 1–2), the UK and France "stepped up their calls for a tougher international response" (Bellamy and Williams 2011: 840). Days later, the UK and France also introduced a resolution for establishing a no-fly zone (NFZ), but the debate was largely suspended as long as the US was "publicly signaling its ambivalence" (Jones 2011: 53). Obama's decision to intervene in Libya was only made on 15 March 2011, following a meeting of Obama's National Security Council (NSC), which was described by two administration officials as "extremely contentious" (Rogin 2016). Obama was reported to have been "frustrated" with the only option presented to him by his NSC: a NFZ (Chivvis 2015: 18–19). When Obama sided with those on his NSC in favor of intervention, he instructed his ambassador to the UN, Susan Rice, to introduce a UNSCR that would authorize such a NFZ (Rogin 2016). The draft UNSCR, which later became adopted as UNSCR-1973, called for a NFZ and "all necessary measures" to protect civilians in Libya, while ruling out a "foreign occupation force" (Chivvis 2015: 19).

Given Obama's initial reluctance to intervene, he made sure to publicly justify the intervention in terms of case-specific circumstances, as he wanted to make it clear that the US would not be returning to the 'mistake' of the extensive interventionism of the Bush-era. In his first speech on the intervention in Libya, made on 18 March 2011, Obama cited Libya's uniqueness for justifying the use of force and frequently employed conditional language, such as "in this particular country" and "at this particular moment" (Mohamed 2012: 320). As Quinn notes, Obama was

Obama and 'Learning' in Foreign Policy: Military Intervention in Libya and Syria

Written by Rupert Schulenburg

guided "by the movement of events on the ground [...] after it became clear that anti-[Gaddafi] rebels were in imminent danger of total defeat", rather than by any overarching humanitarian doctrine (2011: 821). This demonstrates that Obama's decision for intervening in Libya was "driven far more by singular national interests than by any sense of responsibility" (Mohamed 2012: 320), that is, rather than by a broader support of and adherence to the humanitarian interventionism or a doctrine such as the Responsibility to Protect (RtoP) (Morris 2013: 1274). Obama had long shown ambivalence towards humanitarian intervention following the Iraq War. At a campaign event in New Hampshire in 2007, then-candidate Obama argued against leaving US forces in Iraq to stop genocide, stating that "if that's the criteria by which we are making decisions on the deployment of US forces [...] you would have 300,000 troops in the Congo [...] where millions have been slaughtered" (Lizza 2011). In December 2009, Obama refused the request by Samantha Power, then-Senior Director for Human Rights on the NSC, to endorse the RtoP in his Nobel Peace Prize speech (Goldberg 2016).

Quite simply, Obama 'learned' from the political costs of Bush's wars. Obama consequently made it clear that the US would not be committing to any long-term involvement in Libya. On 28 March 2011, in his speech outlining US policy in Libya, Obama stated that "America's role would be limited" and that the US was "not going to deploy ground troops into Libya"; he also ruled out deploying US ground forces in Libya, with reference to the Iraq War, stating that the "dangers faced by our men and women in uniform would be far greater [...] we went down that road in Iraq [...] that is not something we can afford to repeat in Libya" (POTUS 2011a). As Krieg notes, while Obama condemned the humanitarian crises in Libya, he did not think that it had "mobilized sufficient public pressure at home to justify the deployment of US ground troops" (2016: 108). Krieg argues that given the "US public's hostility to major combat operations in the Middle Eastern theatre", Obama was conscious of the fact that "any direct military intervention in these theatres would generate substantial political costs for the administration at home" (ibid.), in particular, the "potential political costs" from the return of dead service-members (2016: 108). Obama consequently employed a strategy of air-power as part of a NATO coalition to strike Gaddafi regime targets and support allies to circumvent the need for coalition ground forces (Owen 2015: 69). US objectives were to sustain the NFZ and conduct airstrikes against regime forces that threaten populated areas (Kidwell 2015: 128). By the end of the operation on 31 October 2011, the US had carried out an estimated 9,100 sorties (only 35% of NATO's total for the operation) (Nygren 2014: 103) and provided around 70% of intelligence and refueling assets to NATO forces (Guiora 2012: 268). An unnamed advisor described Obama's 'light footprint' strategy as "leading from behind" (Lizza 2011).

Multilateralism

Obama's observation of the fall in the US's international standing in the Middle East following Bush's wars, in particular following the unilateral invasion of Iraq without UNSC authorization, led Obama to 'learn' that the US would have to use military force in the region with multilateral support. As Gerges notes, when Obama entered office he had to "contend with the damage the Bush administration had inflicted on the [US's] relationship with Muslims globally" (2013: 306). Obama recognized that one of the core 'mistakes' of Bush's presidency was how it "had debilitated America's standing" in the Middle East (Gerges 2013: 306.). In Obama's first year in office, he made a rhetorical effort to "reset with the Middle East" (ibid. 302). The most notable case was Obama's 'New Beginning' speech in Cairo in June 2009, which was an attempt to "reset US relations with the world's Muslims" (Goldberg 2016). A key part of Obama's attempt at a 'reset' was to disavow the US's previous imposition of its system of government upon others. As Brown notes, in his speech Obama made a point to "admit that US foreign policy might at times have appeared [...] as if America were globally omnipotent but also omniscient in telling people everywhere how they should organize their [...] political systems" (2015: 665). Obama did so with reference to the Iraq War, stating "there has been controversy about the promotion of democracy in recent years, and much of this controversy is connected to the war in Iraq [...] no system of government can or should be imposed upon one nation by any other" (POTUS 2009).

Given Bush's legacy in the region, Obama 'learned' to be hesitant regarding intervention without regional support in the Middle East. This is demonstrated by Obama's decision to support intervention in Libya only following the support by Arab regional organizations, on top of support from European allies such as the UK and France. Obama has often noted that the US had to be aware of suspicion towards US interventions. For instance, Obama stated that "we have history [...] so we have to be mindful of our history when we start talking about intervening, and understand the

Obama and 'Learning' in Foreign Policy: Military Intervention in Libya and Syria

Written by Rupert Schulenburg

source of other people's suspicions" (Goldberg 2016). The US is not alien to military intervention, having done so 111 times from 1950–1999 (CRS 2018; Toft 2017). As Brands notes, Obama wanted to define his strategy "in opposition to the [...] mistakes of Bush"; in this case, Bush's unilateralism, which was seen as illegitimate by much of the international community (2017: 111). The African Union, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the Organization of the Islamic Council (OIC), and the League of Arab States (LAS) all condemned the actions of Gaddafi's regime, and the GCC, the OIC and, most importantly, the LAS explicitly called for the UNSC to impose a NFZ over Libya (Morris 2013: 1272). This decision by the LAS on 12 March 2011 was unprecedented, as LAS members had "long defended sovereignty against any form of intervention" (Barnett 2012: 255).

As Bellamy and Williams note, it is likely that the support of regional Arab organizations was the tipping point that led to Obama accepting the case for intervention, as it gave the intervention regional legitimacy (2011: 840). In particular, as Morris notes, the LAS's support was the "vital palliative to intra-administration division" over intervention (2013: 1272). In the 36 hours before Obama's approval for intervention, Obama, along with several members of his NSC, was concerned "about the political fallout" in the region from intervening in a predominantly Muslim state once again (Jones 2011: 53). On 18 March 2011, in his first speech following the imposition of the NFZ in Libya, Obama made a point to cite the LAS's support for intervention and their role in leading the enforcement of UNSCR-1973 on multiple occasions (POTUS 2011b). Quite simply, Obama wanted to define his interventionism away from that of Bush's unilateralism by intervening multilaterally and with legitimacy.

Failing to 'Learn'

At the same time, however, it is also evident that Obama *failed* to 'learn' from Bush's experience with regime change, particularly with respect to the issue of post-intervention reconstruction. While Obama's stated objective was to "protect civilians" (POTUS 2011a), the intervention soon evolved into pursuing regime change (Murray 2013: 153). On 14 April 2011, in a joint statement with the UK Prime Minister and the French President, Obama declared that NATO's duty is to "protect civilians [; ...] it is not to remove Gaddafi by force. But it is impossible to imagine a future for Libya with Gaddafi in power" (Holst and Fink 2014: 80). Earlier in March, Obama had stated that "broadening our military mission to include regime change would be a mistake" (POTUS 2011a). In the aftermath of the intervention, Obama "refused to take any ownership of the ensuing situation" and decided not to embark upon helping Libya rebuild (Haas 2017: 162). Dennis Ross, Obama's special adviser on the Middle East, conceded that Libya was "farmed out to the working level" (Shane and Becker 2016). Libya slowly devolved into a fractured failed state with a refugee crisis and a declining economy (Kuperman 2015: 67–69). Only in October 2013, NATO agreed to provide a team of ten security advisors, which, according to Libyan analysts, had "no real impact" on improving Libya's "capacity to deal with its security challenges" (Sharqieh 2013: 38).

As Obama was reluctant to pursue intervention, given what he had 'learned' from Bush's 'mistake' of costly post-intervention 'nation building' in the first place, he had little interest in committing the US to a post-regime change reconstruction effort. Obama later stated that he had 'learned' from not "plan[ing] for the day after", calling it the worst 'mistake' of his presidency (Tierney 2016). In August 2014, Obama stated:

I'll give you an example of a lesson I had to learn [; ...] I think we [and] our European partners underestimated the need to come in full force [...] the day after Gaddafi is gone [...] There has to be a much more aggressive effort to rebuild societies [; ...] that's a lesson that I now apply every time I ask the question, 'should we intervene, militarily?'—'do we have an answer [for] the day after?' (Friedman 2014).

In August 2015, Obama was asked: "what lessons [...] had he learned in his crises?" Obama replied, "I do think that I have a better sense of how military action can result in unintended consequences" (Kaplan 2015: 63). That is, from his initial failure to 'learn', Obama did in time come to 'learn' that there were clear limits to the ability of US military power to improve humanitarian crises.

Syria

Limited Objective and Refusing to Intervene

Obama and 'Learning' in Foreign Policy: Military Intervention in Libya and Syria

Written by Rupert Schulenburg

As in Libya, Obama 'learned' from the cost of Bush's wars in the Middle East that the US should avoid the 'mistake' of entangling itself militarily in the Middle East. When Obama called for Assad to step down on 18 August 2011, Obama made it clear that the US would not look to remove Assad through intervention (POTUS 2011c). Obama stated that the "US cannot and will not impose this transition upon Syria [; ...] we have heard their strong desire that there not be foreign intervention in their movement" (ibid.). In 2012 Obama narrowed the criteria by which he would even consider intervention, when he adopted an interventionist posture on 20 August 2012, stating a 'red line'. This came in response to US intelligence reports which claimed that Assad was preparing to escalate attacks against the FSA and civilians by using his CBW, which were assessed to be the largest stockpile in the region (Tabler 2018). Obama stated, "we have been very clear to the Assad regime [...] that a red line for us is we start seeing [...] chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus [...] there would be enormous consequences" (POTUS 2012). It is crucial to note that Obama displayed no intention of using military force against the Assad regime with a broader mission to protect civilians; instead, he was only willing to authorize a limited strike against Assad's CBW stores (Barnett 2012: 256). Obama's policy towards the Assad regime effectively implied that Assad could massacre his own population, as long as it was without CBW. By then, the end of 2012, the number of deaths in Syria was already estimated to have reached 57,000 (Gladstone and Ghannam 2015).

Yet Obama avoided intervention even when Assad crossed Obama's 'red line'. Obama's need to decide whether or not the US would use force against the Assad regime was brought to a head in 2013 (Brown 2015: 751). On 30 August 2013, the Obama administration announced that it had assessed with "high confidence" that the Assad regime had conducted a CBW attack in Damascus on 21 August 2013, leaving 1,429 dead (Warrick 2013). That same day, Obama described the possibility of a "limited, narrow act" against the Assad regime, but stated that he was "not considering any open-ended commitment" or "boots on the ground" (Ohlheiser 2013). However, on 31 August 2013, Obama gave a statement in which he effectively announced a U-turn on intervention, announcing that he would "seek authorization for the use of force from [...] Congress" (ibid.). As Brown notes, this was likely a political maneuver by Obama to avoid intervention (2015: 752). Obama was aware that most Republicans, as Kaplan notes, "did not want to do any favors for Obama, and many Democrats were weary of military action" (2015: 54). The Bill to authorize Obama to use military force, S.J. Res. 21, did not receive a floor vote in either the House or the Senate (CBO 2013: 1).

As Krieg notes, Obama had noted that the humanitarian crises in Syria did not mobilize sufficient public pressure at home to justify intervention (2016: 108). The day before Obama's U-turn on intervention, Obama noted the "war-weary" attitude of the public and himself, stating: "there is a certain weariness, given Afghanistan. There is a certain suspicion of any military action post-Iraq. And I very much appreciate that" (Ohlheiser 2013). Indeed, the US public had maintained opposition to intervention in Syria. In September 2013, by which point an estimated 130,000 Syrians had been killed in total (Gladstone and Ghannam 2015), 60% of Americans opposed airstrikes in Syria, only 5% down from 2012 (Landler and Thee-Brenan 2013). Hence, taking into account the US public's hostility to major combat operations in the Middle Eastern post-Bush, Obama believed that intervention would "generate substantial political costs for the administration at home" (Krieg 2016: 108). As pluralist accounts maintain, while public opinion may not direct foreign policy, it can act as a "constraint on foreign policy formation", whereby policy-makers "device policy with an awareness of what the public will and will not accept" (Robinson 2016: 186). It is important to note that Obama solely threatened to intervene in regard to Assad's use of CBW, rather than intervene with a broader mission to protect civilians. Obama had stated that the strike would be intended to "hold Assad regime accountable for their use of [CBW], [and] deter this kind of behavior" (POTUS 2013a).

In addition to Obama's broader 'learning' from the cost of Bush's wars, two events transpired in early August 2013 that significantly reinforced the lesson of the Bush-era. First, as Goldberg notes, Obama had been "unsettled" that August by a report from James Clapper, Obama's Director for National Intelligence (DNI) at the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), in which Clapper stated that the intelligence on Assad's use of sarin gas was not a "slam dunk" (Goldberg 2016). Obama became deeply concerned about the potential fallout of acting without secure intelligence. As Goldberg notes, Clapper's use of this term was likely intentional (ibid.). The then DNI of the CIA, George Tenet, infamously guaranteed Bush a "slam dunk" in Iraq (Kamen 2015). Obama, along with the intelligence community, had 'learned' from Bush; given the intelligence community's legacy of failure in the run-up to the Iraq War, Clapper was "not going to over promise" (Goldberg 2016). Second, Obama failed to obtain the support of the UK. On 29

Obama and 'Learning' in Foreign Policy: Military Intervention in Libya and Syria

Written by Rupert Schulenburg

August 2013, the UK Parliament rejected a motion in support of military action against the Assad regime, ruling out UK participation in US-led airstrikes (Strong 2015: 1123). Obama has openly voiced his support for multilateralism as a 'check' on the US, stating that "one of the reasons I am so focused on taking action multilaterally where our direct interests are not at stake is that multilateralism regulates hubris" (Goldberg 2016). Quite simply, Obama "fear[ed] that involvement in Syria would prove as slippery a slope as Iraq" (Moran 2017: 274).

Avoiding Intervening

Obama's 'learning' was again demonstrated in his desire to avoid *having* to strike Syria. On 10 September, while Obama largely reiterated the same message he gave on 31 August 2013, he announced on this occasion that he would be pursuing diplomacy with Russia to push Assad into giving up his CBW; he hence asked Congress to postpone a vote to authorize the use of force (POTUS 2013b), which allowed the US to drop "their threat to use force against [Assad's] regime" (Brown 2015: 752). On 9 September, Secretary of State John Kerry remarked that for Assad to avoid an attack, he could "turn over" his CBW to the international community (Lund 2017: 5). Kerry was soon contacted by Sergei Lavrov, the Russian Foreign Minister, to reach an agreement (ibid. 6). Obama and Russia's President Putin had discussed such an arrangement months earlier, when Obama stated that he told Putin that if Assad eliminated his CBW, it "would eliminate the need" for a military strike (Goldberg 2016).

Hence, on 10 September 2013, in order to pursue diplomacy, Obama asked Congress to postpone a vote to authorize the use of force (POTUS 2013b). On 14 September 2013, a deal was signed between Russia and the US which required the "destruction" of Syria's CBW and which was subsequently enshrined in UNSCR-2118 on 27 September 2013 (UNSC 2013: 1). Destruction began on 6 October 2013, overseen by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), and was completed on 31 October 2013 (Lund 2017: 5).

'Learning' from Libya

In addition to the broader lesson from the Bush-era of the potential costs of intervention to the US in terms of finance, lives, and public opinion (both in the US and the Middle East), Obama's decision-making in regard to Syria was also informed by Obama's own experience with intervention; principally, the lesson being that there were clear limits to the ability of US military power to improve humanitarian crises. In Syria, Obama would have needed to conduct a more extensive intervention, act unilaterally, and act without a UNSC mandate. As Clarke and Ricketts note, there is a contradiction in Obama's decision making: he intervened in Libya, admitting that US national interests were not at stake, but at the same time refused to intervene in Syria "on the basis of the same litmus test" (2017: 315). This contradiction seems to have been the clear result of the lessons 'learned' by Obama from Libya. First, as Brown notes, the US would have required extraordinary use of force to push Assad out of power. For instance, the Assad regime's army, backed by Iran and Russia, consisted of 330,000 troops and possessed surface-to-air missiles located in populated areas (Brown 2015: 750). In addition to the difficulty the US would have faced in trying to oust Assad, the FSA was "not organized" and "poorly armed", making it unlikely that they could have ousted Assad (Guiora 2012: 269). For instance, Obama stated in 2016 that:

When you have a professional army [...] that is well armed and sponsored by [Iran and Russia] who have huge stakes in this, and they are fighting against a farmer, a carpenter [...] who started out as protesters and suddenly now see themselves in the midst of a civil conflict [...] the notion that we could have—in a clean way that didn't commit US military forces—changed the equation on the ground there was never true (Goldberg 2016).

Obama argued that the notion that arming Syrian-rebels would have made a difference had "always been a fantasy" (Friedman 2014). In an NSC meeting in 2013, Obama argued that the FSA had no chance of forming a government, while the Libyan rebels had at least had "a chance" (Kaplan 2015: 50); yet, the attempt to form a unitary Libyan government failed (Kuperman 2015: 67–69). None of the various authorities in Libya "effectively controls its own territory" and power was "widely fragmented" to the extent that there is a minimal prospect of a consolidated authority by 2020 (Norton 2016: 148). Quite simply, Obama 'learned' to adopt a more realistic stance towards intervention, rather than adopting the idealistic faith in US military power of the neoconservatives.

Obama and 'Learning' in Foreign Policy: Military Intervention in Libya and Syria

Written by Rupert Schulenburg

Second, the US would have had to act unilaterally in Syria, following Prime Minister Cameron's failure to win support from the UK Parliament to join airstrikes. Therefore, acting unilaterally would place the entire burden on the US and remove what Obama believed to be a 'check' on potential "hubris" (Obama quoted in Goldberg 2016). Third, Obama would have been unable to secure a UN mandate for intervention; it was made clear since April 2011 that Russia and China would veto any coercive UNSCR towards Syria (Morris 2013: 1274). It was also clear to Obama that there was no consensus in the international community that could be translated into a UNSCR (Gerges 2013: 311). As Obama noted when discussing Syria, in Libya "we got a UN mandate, we built a coalition, it cost us \$1 billion [...]. We averted large-scale civilian casualties [...]. And despite all that, Libya is a mess" (Goldberg 2016). In other words, in addition to the lesson of potential costs from the Bush-era, Obama also 'learned' from the aftermath in Libya, which Obama had thought to be a promising case, that the prospect of intervention was limited; Obama increasingly began to voice his doubt in the ability of US military power to improve humanitarian crises. For instance, in January 2013 Obama stated that "in a situation like Syria, I have to ask [...] would a military intervention have an impact?" (Foer and Hughes 2013). What little support Obama had for intervention for humanitarian purposes seemed to have been eradicated by Syria.

From Libya, Obama had 'learned' to resist calls to intervene. Later in Obama's presidency, he stated that he was "very proud" of his refusal to strike Assad (Goldberg 2016). Obama also stated that he himself is considered "controversial" when it comes to the use of the military (ibid.). Obama castigated the doctrine of the 'Washington Playbook', a term he uses to refer to the preferred policy responses of the 'foreign-policy establishment' (Goldberg 2016), which tends to favor US leadership and military responses to humanitarian crises (Walt 2018: 112-123). Obama argued that the 'Washington Playbook' can be a "trap that can lead to bad decisions" (Goldberg 2016). As Stephen Walt notes, there was little opposition to the Iraq War by the 'foreign-policy establishment' (2018: 110-111). Prominent think tanks, such as the Council on Foreign Relations and the Brookings Institution, were "among the loudest and most persistent voices in backing the war" (2018: 110-111). Such institutions also firmly advocated for intervention in Libya and Syria (ibid. 113). In April 2014, Obama made his opposition to views commonly held by those in 'foreign policy establishment' clear, stating: "why is [...] everybody is so eager to use military force after we've just gone through a decade of war at enormous costs?" (Eilperin 2014). In an interview in August 2015, Obama noted himself that he had 'learned' to avoid such traps. Obama was asked "what lessons [...] had he learned in his crises? What decisions might he have made differently, had he known then what he knows now?" (Kaplan 2015: 63). Obama replied, likely in reference to Syria, that "I am that much more confident in the assessments I make and can probably see around the corners faster than [...] when I first came into office", and, likely in reference to Libya, that he had a "better sense" of how military action can have "unintended consequences" (ibid.). As Jervis notes, following a policy failure, decision-makers have an increased readiness to perceive other situations as resembling the past case (1976: 276). The Obama administration's 2015 NSS firmly stated Obama's lessons: the "threshold for military action is higher when our interests are not directly threatened [...] the decision to use force must reflect a clear mandate and feasible objectives, and we must ensure our actions are effective, just, and consistent with the rule of law" (White House 2015: 8).

Conclusion

This project sought to demonstrate how Obama's decision-making over military intervention towards the Gaddafi regime and the Assad regime demonstrates 'learning' from past cases of US intervention. The project's focus on the decision-making of policy-makers is grounded in Neoclassical realist approach to FPA, which posits that "unit-level variables", such as individual policy-makers, define a state's orientation, formulation, and implementation of its foreign policy (Hermann and Hagan 1998). The project's analysis is informed by a 'two-stage learning model', based on the work of Jervis (1976) and Levy (1994), so as to identify what Obama perceived to be 'mistakes' by Bush in regard to intervention, given that Bush's 'mistakes' (i.e. the model's past events) formed the 'lessons' (i.e. the change in beliefs) that subsequently shaped Obama's decision-making. In regard to Obama's decision-making in Libya, Obama 'learned' from Bush's costly wars in Afghanistan and in Iraq (in terms of finance, lives, and public opinion), that interventionism on this scale was a crucial 'mistake'. Although, as Levy cautions, 'learning' is not definitionally equivalent to adopting different policies (ibid. 289), it is clear from my discussion that 'learning' had a significant impact on Obama's 'behaviour' and that Obama's policy choices were indeed the result of that 'learning'.

Obama and 'Learning' in Foreign Policy: Military Intervention in Libya and Syria

Written by Rupert Schulenburg

The core 'lessons' that Obama 'learned' from Bush's interventionism in the Middle East are as follows: 1) intervention can result in significant costs (in terms of finance, lives, and public opinion); 2) the US should not attempt to police states militarily for humanitarian reasons; 3) the US military is limited in its power to improve humanitarian crises; 4) the US should not act unilaterally; and 5) the US should act multilaterally with regional support. This was demonstrated in Obama's decision-making over military intervention respecting the Gaddafi regime and the Assad regime in several ways. In the case of Libya, Obama was initially hesitant to pursue intervention; Obama justified the action in terms of case-specific circumstances; Obama made it clear that the US would not be committing to any long-term involvement in Libya; and Obama made sure to act with regional support. At the same time, Obama demonstrated a failure to 'learn' from Bush by disregarding the need to engage in a reconstruction effort post-intervention in Libya. In the case of Syria, Obama's posture towards intervention in Syria had been limited in scope since 2011; Obama threatened the use of force only in the event that CBW are used; Obama decided not to enforce his own 'red line'; and, by pursuing diplomacy, Obama later managed to walk back his threat to strike militarily. Obama's decision-making in Syria was informed not only by 'learning' from Bush, but also by 'learning' from his own experience with intervention in Libya, from which Obama 'learned' about the limit of US military power to try and improve humanitarian crises.

A key issue in need of further inquiry that emerges from this project's discussion is the question of whether Obama 'learned' the *right* 'lessons' from both Bush and his own intervention. In the case of Libya, interventionists argue that while Obama had 'learned' the *right* lesson from Bush, namely that the US should intervene multilaterally and with a 'light footprint', he *incorrectly* 'learned' from Bush that US involvement should be limited to the extent that the US should not commit to post-regime change reconstruction (Hamid 2016a). Anti-interventionists, in the case of Libya, hold that Obama *incorrectly* 'learned' that intervention was acceptable as long as it had a 'light footprint', rather than being outright unacceptable, given the challenges that a state faces post-regime change (Greenwald 2015). In the case of Syria, interventionists argue that Obama had 'learned' the *incorrect* 'lesson' from his own intervention, namely that US military power either would not improve the humanitarian crises or would even make the situation worse (Kagan 2017). Anti-interventionists, though, hold that Obama 'learned' the *right* 'lesson' from his own intervention, namely that US military power could not play a positive role in the crises and that Congress should authorize military action (Greenwald 2017).

To better understand how 'learning' occurs and impacts foreign policy, more large-N studies need to be undertaken into direct sources of 'learning', such as: the type of events from which policy-makers learn, under what conditions learning is more likely to occur, the process by which policy-makers learn, how well policy-makers learn, and how quickly policy-makers learn. Increased understanding of these sources of 'learning' should be incorporated into more general theories of foreign policy analysis to explain how policy-makers' individual 'beliefs' inform how policy-makers define a state's orientation, formulation, and implementation of its foreign policy.

Bibliography

Barnett, Michael. 2016. "Duties Beyond Borders". In *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, and Cases*, edited by Tim Dunne, Amelia Hadfield, and Steve Smith, 242–262. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bellamy, Alex, and Paul Williams. 2011. "The New Politics of Protection? Côte d'Ivoire, Libya and the Responsibility to Protect". *International Affairs*, 87(40): 825–850.

Brands, Hal. 2016. "Barack Obama and the Dilemmas of American Grand Strategy". *Washington Quarterly*, 39(4): 118–125.

Breslauer, George, and Philip Tetlock. 1991. "Perspectives on Learning: Introduction". In *Learning in US and Soviet Foreign Policy*, edited by George Breslauer and Philip Tetlock. 1–73. Boulder: Westview Press.

Brown, Seymour. 2015. *The Faces of Power: United States Foreign Policy from Truman to Obama*, Third Edition. New York: Columbia University Press.

Obama and 'Learning' in Foreign Policy: Military Intervention in Libya and Syria

Written by Rupert Schulenburg

Carlsnaes, Walter. "Actors, Structures, and Foreign Policy Analysis". In *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases*, edited by Tim Dunne, Amelia Hadfield, and Steve Smith, 113–129. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

CBO [Congressional Budget Office]. 2013. *S. J. Res. 21: A Joint Resolution for the Authorization for the Use of Military Force Against the Government of Syria to Respond to Use of Chemical Weapons*. Washington, DC: Congressional Budget Office.

CBS [Columbia Broadcasting System]. 2009. "Bush's Final Approval Rating: 22 Percent". CBS, January 2009. Accessed 1 April 2019. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/bushs-final-approval-rating-22-percent>.

Chivvis, Christopher. 2015. "Strategic and Political Overview of the Intervention". In *Precision and Purpose: Airpower in the Libyan Civil War*, edited by Karl Mueller. 11–42. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation.

Clarke, Michael, and Anthony Ricketts. 2017. "Did Obama Have a Grand Strategy?". *Strategic Studies*, 40(1): 295–324.

Crawford, Neta. 2018. *United States Budgetary Costs of the Post-9/11 Wars Through FY 2019: \$5.9 Trillion Spent and Obligated*. Rhode Island: Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs.

CRS [Congressional Research Service]. 2018. *Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad, 1798–2018*. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service.

Desch, Daniel. 2008. "America's Liberal Illiberalism: The Ideological Origins of Overreaction in US Foreign Policy". *International Security*, 32(3): 7–43.

Dodge, Daniel. 2009. "Coming Face to Face with Bloody Reality: Liberal Common Sense and the Ideological Failure of the Bush Doctrine in Iraq". *International Politics*, 46: 253–275.

Drake, Bruce. 2014. "Obama Charts a New Foreign Policy Course for a Public That Wants the Focus to Be at Home". Pew Research, 28 May 2014. Accessed 7 April 2019. [https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/05/28/obama-charts-a-new-foreign-policy-course-](https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/05/28/obama-charts-a-new-foreign-policy-course-for-a-public-that-wants-the-focus-to-be-at-home)

[for-a-public-that-wants-the-focus-to-be-at-home.](https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/05/28/obama-charts-a-new-foreign-policy-course-for-a-public-that-wants-the-focus-to-be-at-home)

Dueck, Colin. 2015. *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Egnell, Robert. 2014. "Conclusion: Lessons and Consequences of Operation Unified Protector". In *The NATO Intervention in Libya: Lessons Learned from the Campaign*, edited by Kjell Engelbrekt, Marcus Mohlin, Charlotte Wagnsson, 221–235. New York: Routledge.

Engelbrekt, Kjell. 2014. "Why Libya: Security Council Resolution 1973 and the Politics of Justification". In *The NATO Intervention in Libya: Lessons Learned from the Campaign*, edited by Kjell Engelbrekt, Marcus Mohlin, Charlotte Wagnsson, 41–62. New York: Routledge.

Eilperin, Juliet. 2014. "Obama Lays Out His Foreign Policy Doctrine". *The Washington Post*, 28 April 2014. Accessed 29 March 2019. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/obama-lays-out-his-foreign-policy-doctrine-](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/obama-lays-out-his-foreign-policy-doctrine-singles-doubles-and-the-occasional-home-run)

[doubles-and-the-occasional-home-run.](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/obama-lays-out-his-foreign-policy-doctrine-singles-doubles-and-the-occasional-home-run)

Foer, Franklin, and Chris Hughes. 2013. "Barack Obama Is Not Pleased". *The New Republic*, 27 January 2013. Accessed 28 March 2019. <https://newrepublic.com/article/112190/obama-interview-2013-sit-down-president>.

Obama and 'Learning' in Foreign Policy: Military Intervention in Libya and Syria

Written by Rupert Schulenburg

Freedman, Lawrence. 2005. "The Age of Liberal Wars". *Review of International Studies*, 31: 93–107

Friedman, Thomas. 2014. "Obama on the World". *The New York Times*, 8 August 2014. Accessed 9 January 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/09/opinion/president-obama-thomas-l-friedman-iraq-and->

world-affairs.

Gerges, Fawaz. 2013. "The Obama Approach to the Middle East: the End of America's Moment?". *International Affairs*, 89(2): 299–323.

Gladstone, Rock, and Mohammad Ghannam. 2015. "Syria Deaths Hit New High in 2014, Observer Group Says". *The New York Times*, 1 January 2015. Accessed 29 March 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/02/world/middleeast/syrian-civil-war-2014-deadliest-so-far>.

Goldberg, Jeffrey. 2016. "The Obama Doctrine". *The Atlantic*, April 2016. Accessed 2 January 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine>.

Greenwald, Glenn. 2015. "Hailed as a Model for Successful Intervention, Libya Proves to be the Exact Opposite". *The Intercept*, 16 February 2015. Accessed 10 April 2019. <https://theintercept.com/2015/02/16/hailed-model-successful-intervention-libya-proves-exact->

opposite.

Greenwald, Glenn. 2017. "The Spoils of War: Trump Lavished With Media and Bipartisan Praise For Bombing Syria". *The Intercept*, 7 April 2017. Accessed 10 April 2019. <https://theintercept.com/2017/04/07/the-spoils-of-war-trump-lavished-with-media-and->

bipartisan-praise-for-bombing-syria.

Guiora, Amos. 2012. "Intervention in Libya, Yes, Intervention in Syria, No: Deciphering the Obama Administration", *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law*, 44(1): 251–276.

Hamid, Shadi. 2016a. "Everyone Says the Libya Intervention Was a Failure. They're Wrong". The Brookings Institution, 12 April 2016. Accessed 28 March 2019. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/04/12/everyone-says-the-libya-intervention-was->

a-failure-theyre-wrong.

Hamid, Shadi. 2016b. "How Iraq Warped Obama's Worldview". *The Atlantic*, 11 March 2016. Accessed 22 January 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/03/obama-doctrine-iraq-islam>.

Haas, Richard. 2017. *A World in Disarray: American Foreign Policy and the Crisis of the Old Order*. New York: Penguin Books.

Heller, Sam. 2017. "Syria Policy After the Chemical Attacks". *Foreign Affairs*, 6 April 2017. Accessed 11 February 2019. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-04-06/syria-policy-after-chemical-attacks>.

Hermann, Margaret, and Joe Hagan. 1998. "International Decision Making: Leadership Matters". *Foreign Policy*, 110(1): 124–137.

Holst, Fredrik, and Martin Fink. 2014. "A Legal View on NATO's Campaign in Libya". In *The NATO Intervention in Libya: Lessons Learned from the Campaign*, edited by Kjell Engelbrekt, Marcus Mohlin, Charlotte Wagnsson, 63–99. New York: Routledge.

Obama and 'Learning' in Foreign Policy: Military Intervention in Libya and Syria

Written by Rupert Schulenburg

HRW [Human Rights Watch]. 2011. *'We've Never Seen Such Horror': Crimes Against Humanity by Syrian Security Forces*. New York: Human Rights Watch.

Jarosz, William, and Joseph Nye Jr. 1993. "The Shadow of the Past: Learning from History in National Security Decision Making". In *Behavior, Society, and International Conflict, Volume III*, edited by Philip Tetlock et al., 130–180. New York: Oxford University Press.

Jervis, Robert. 1976. *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Jervis, Robert. 2003. "Understanding the Bush Doctrine". *Political Science Quarterly*, 118(3): 365–388.

Jones, Bruce. 2011. "Libya and the Responsibilities of Power". *Survival*, 53(3): 51–60.

Kagan, Robert. "It'll Take More Than a Missile Strike to Clean Up Obama's Mess in Syria". *The Washington Post*, 7 April 2017. Accessed 10 April 2019. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/itll-take-more-than-a-missile-strike-to-clean-up-](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/itll-take-more-than-a-missile-strike-to-clean-up-obamas-mess-in-syria)

[obamas-mess-in-syria](#).

Kamen, Al. 2015. "Here's Why ex-CIA Director Tenet said Iraq Would be a 'Slam Dunk'". *The Washington Post*, 5 May 2015. Accessed 29 March 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/in-the-loop/wp/2015/05/05/heres-why-ex-cia-director-tenet-said-iraq-would-be-a-slam-dunk>.

Kaplan, Fred. 2015. "Obama's Way: The President in Practice". *Foreign Affairs*, 95(1): 46–63.

Khong, Yuen. 2016. "Neoconservatism and the Domestic Sources of American Foreign Policy: The Role of Ideas in Operation Iraqi Freedom". In *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, and Cases*, edited by Tim Dunne, Amelia Hadfield, and Steve Smith, 315–333. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kidwell, Deborah. 2015. "The US Experience: Operational". In *Precision and Purpose: Airpower in the Libyan Civil War*, edited by Karl Mueller. 107–151. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation.

Krauthammer, Charles. 1990. "The Unipolar Moment". *Foreign Affairs*, 70(1): 23–33.

Krieg, Andreas. 2016. "Externalizing the Burden of War: The Obama Doctrine and US Foreign Policy in the Middle East". *International Affairs*, 92(2): 97–113.

Kristol, William, and Robert Kagan. 1996. "Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy". *Foreign Affairs*, 75(4): 19–32.

Kuperman, Alan. 2015. "Obama's Libya Debacle: How a Well-Meaning Intervention Ended in Failure". *Foreign Affairs*, 94(2): 66–77.

Landler, Mark, and Megan Thee-Brenan. 2013. "Survey Reveals Scant Backing for Syria Strike". *The New York Times*, 9 September, 2013. Accessed 18 January, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/10/world/middleeast/poll-majority-of-americans-oppose-military-strike>.

Levy, Jack. 1994. "Learning and Foreign Policy: Sweeping a Conceptual Minefield". *International Organization* 48(2): 279–312.

Lindsay, James. 2011. "George W. Bush, Barack Obama and the Future of US Global Leadership". *International Affairs*, 87(4): 765–779.

Obama and 'Learning' in Foreign Policy: Military Intervention in Libya and Syria

Written by Rupert Schulenburg

- Lizza, Ryan. 2011. "The Consequentialist". *The New Yorker*, 2 May 2011. Accessed 8 January 2019. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/05/02/the-consequentialist>.
- Lobbel, Steven et al. 2009. "Introduction: Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy". In *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy*, edited by Steven Lobell, Norrin Ripsman, and Jeffrey Taliaferro, 1–41. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Lund, Aron. 2017. *Red Line Redux: How Putin Tore Up Obama's 2013 Syria Deal*. Washington, DC: The Century Foundation.
- Michaels, Jeffrey. 2014. "Able But Not Willing: A Critical Assessment of NATO's Libya Intervention". In *The NATO Intervention in Libya: Lessons Learned from the Campaign*, edited by Kjell Engelbrekt, Marcus Mohlin, Charlotte Wagnsson, 17–40. New York: Routledge.
- Miller, Benjamin. 2010. "Explaining Changes in US Grand Strategy: 9/11, the Rise of Offensive Liberalism, and the War in Iraq". *Security Studies*, 19: 26–65.
- Mohamed, Saira. 2012. "Taking Stock of the Responsibility to Protect". *Stanford Journal of International Law*, 48(2): 319–339.
- Moran, Andrew. 2017. "Barack Obama and the Return of 'Declinism': Rebalancing American Foreign Policy in an Era of Multipolarity". In *The Obama Presidency and the Politics of Change*, edited by Edward Ashbee and John Dumbrell, 265–288. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Morris, Justin. 2013. "Libya and Syria: RtoP and the Spectre of the Swinging Pendulum". *International Affairs*, 89(5): 1265–1283.
- Monten, Jonathan. 2005. "The Roots of the Bush Doctrine Power, Nationalism, and Democracy Promotion in US Strategy". *International Security*, 29(4): 112–156.
- Mueller, Karl. 2015. "Examining the Air Campaign in Libya". In *Precision and Purpose: Airpower in the Libyan Civil War*, edited by Karl Mueller. 1–10. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation.
- Norton, Augustus. 2016. "The Puzzle of Political Reform in the Middle East". In *International Relations of the Middle East*, edited by Louise Fawcett, 131–154. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nygren, Andrews. 2014. "Executing Strategy from the Air". In *The NATO Intervention in Libya: Lessons Learned from the Campaign*, edited by Kjell Engelbrekt, Marcus Mohlin, Charlotte Wagnsson, 103–127. New York: Routledge.
- Ohlheiser, Abby. 2013. "Obama Considers a 'Limited, Narrow Act' Against Syria". *The Atlantic*, 30 August 2013. Accessed 11 February 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/obama-considers-limited-narrow-act-against-syria>.
- Owen, Robert. 2015. "The US Experience: National Strategy and Campaign Support". In *Precision and Purpose: Airpower in the Libyan Civil War*, edited by Karl Mueller. 69–105. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation.
- POTUS [President of the United States]. 2009. "Remarks by the President at Cairo University". White House, 4 June 2009. Accessed 27 March 2019. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university>.
- POTUS [President of the United States]. 2011a. "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Libya". White House, 28 March 2011. Accessed 23 January 2019. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press->

Obama and 'Learning' in Foreign Policy: Military Intervention in Libya and Syria

Written by Rupert Schulenburg

office/2011/03/28/remarks-president-address-

nation-libya.

POTUS [President of the United States]. 2011b. "Remarks by the President on the Situation in Libya". White House, 18 March 2011. Accessed 23 January 2019. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/18/remarks-president-situation->

libya.

POTUS [President of the United States]. 2011c. "Statement by President Obama on the Situation in Syria". White House, 18 August 2011. Accessed 11 January 2019. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/realitycheck/the-press-office/2011/08/18/statement->

president-obama-situation-syria.

POTUS [President of the United States]. 2012. "Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps". White House, 20 August 2012. Accessed 11 January 2019. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/08/20/remarks-president-white->

house-press-corps.

POTUS [President of the United States]. 2013a. "Statement by the President on Syria". White House, 31 August 2013. Accessed 11 January 2019. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/31/statement-president-syria>.

POTUS [President of the United States]. 2013b. "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Syria". White House, 10 September 2013. Accessed 29 March 2019. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/10/remarks-president-address->

nation-syria.

Quinn, Adam. 2011. "The Art of Declining Politely: Obama's Prudent Presidency and the Waning of American Power". *International Affairs*, 87(4): 803–824.

Robinson, Piers. 2016. "The Role of Media and Public Opinion". In *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases*, edited by Tim Dunne, Amelia Hadfield, and Steve Smith, 186–205. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rogin, Josh. 2011. "How Obama Turned on a Dime Toward War". *Foreign Policy*, 18 March 2011. Accessed 27 March 2019. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/03/18/how-obama-turned-on-a-dime-toward-war>.

Rose, Gideon. "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy". *World Politics*, 51(1): 144–172.

Schmidt, Brian, and Michael Williams. 2008. "The Bush Doctrine and the Iraq War: Neoconservatives Versus Realists". *Security Studies*, 17: 191–220.

Shane, Scott, and Jo Becker. 2016. "A New Libya, With Very Little Time Left". *The New York Times*, 27 February 2016. Accessed 28 March 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/us/politics/libya-isis-hillary-clinton>.

Sharqieh, Ibrahim. 2013. *Reconstructing Libya: Stability Through National Reconciliation*. Doha: Brookings Doha Center.

Stein, Janice. 2016. "Foreign Policy Decision Making". In *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases*, edited by Tim

Obama and 'Learning' in Foreign Policy: Military Intervention in Libya and Syria

Written by Rupert Schulenburg

Dunne, Amelia Hadfield, and Steve Smith, 130–146. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Stuart, Douglas. 2008. "Foreign-Policy Decision-Making". In *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations*, edited by Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal, 576–594. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Strong, James. 2015. "Interpreting the Syria Vote: Parliament and British Foreign Policy". *International Affairs*, 91(5): 1123–1139.

Tabler, Andrew. 2018. "How Syria Came to This". *The Atlantic*, 15 April 2018. Accessed 11 February 2019. <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/syria-chemical-weapons>.

Tierney, Dominic. 2016. "How Not to Plan for 'The Day After' in Libya". *The Atlantic*, 9 August 2016. Accessed 11 February 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/08/-libya-isis-obama-doctrine-nato>.

Toft, Monica. 2017. "Why is America Addicted to Foreign Interventions?". *The National Interest*,

10 December 2017. Accessed 31 March 2019. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-america-addicted-foreign-interventions>.

UNSC [United Nations Security Council]. 2011a. Security Council Resolution 1970, *Libya*, S/RES/1970 (26 February 2011).

UNSC [United Nations Security Council]. 2011b. Security Council Resolution 1973, *Libya*, S/RES/1973 (17 March 2011).

UNSC [United Nations Security Council]. 2013. Security Council Resolution 2118, *Syria*,

S/RES/2118 (27 September 2013).

USDOD [US Department of Defence]. 2018. *National Defense Budget Estimates for FY 2019*. Under Secretary of Defense, April 2018. Washington, DC: US Department of Defence.

Walt, Stephen. 2018. *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of US Primacy*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

Warrick, Joby. 2013. "More Than 1,400 Killed in Syrian Chemical Weapons Attack, US Says".

The Washington Post, 30 August 2013. Accessed 15 January 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/nearly-1500-killed-in-syrian-chemical->

[weapons-attack-us-says](#).

White House. 2002. *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. Washington, DC: President of the United States.

White House. 2015. *National Security Strategy*. Washington, DC: President of the United States.

Wohlforth, William. 2016. "Realism and Foreign Policy". In *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases*, edited by Tim Dunne, Amelia Hadfield, and Steve Smith, 35–53. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Written by: Rupert Schulenburg

Written at: School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London

Written for: Dr Felix Berenskötter

Obama and 'Learning' in Foreign Policy: Military Intervention in Libya and Syria
Written by Rupert Schulenburg

Date written: April 2019