The Battle over America’s Foreign Policy Doctrine

Amir Stepak and Rachel Whitlark

One balmy Washington evening in June 2011, President Barack Obama was set to deliver a highly anticipated address declaring the drawdown of US forces in Afghanistan. What he delivered, however, was much more. In his speech, Obama laid out a clear foreign-policy doctrine, touching on the role the United States should play in world affairs, the values it holds dear, and the principles guiding its use of force and diplomatic efforts. Rejecting the divergent paths of isolationism and expansionism, Obama called for ‘a more centered course’:

Like generations before, we must embrace America’s singular role in the course of human events. But we must be as pragmatic as we are passionate; as strategic as we are resolute. When threatened, we must respond with force – but when that force can be targeted, we need not deploy large armies overseas. When innocents are being slaughtered and global security endangered, we don’t have to choose between standing idly by or acting on our own. Instead, we must rally international action, which we’re doing in Libya.¹

Perhaps most striking was a solitary paragraph toward the end of the speech. ‘Over the last decade’, Obama stated, ‘we have spent a trillion dollars on

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war, at a time of rising debt and hard economic times. Now, we must invest in America’s greatest resource – our people ... America, it is time to focus on nation building here at home. The relationship between domestic priorities and foreign policy, clearly articulated here, has been a theme of nearly all Obama’s major foreign-policy speeches.

The president’s lofty words have been increasingly reflected in action. In August 2011, Obama struck a budget compromise with congressional Republicans that could lead to nearly half a trillion dollars in defence-spending cuts over the next decade to allow for increased education and infrastructure investments. These cuts would eliminate procurement programmes deemed obsolete, close military bases, and reduce military personnel by approximately 100,000 by 2017. In January 2012, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta announced the withdrawal of two of four combat brigades from Europe. True to his commitment to multilateralism, when the question of intervention in Syria’s civil war arose, Obama responded by working through the United Nations Security Council, trying to persuade Russia and China to permit another Arab League-backed multilateral intervention. When the initiative failed, he continued to work with regional and European powers to end the fighting and, when the Syrian regime’s crackdown intensified, to assist the Syrian rebels.

These policies have been accompanied by a shift in the military’s strategic orientation from Europe to the Asia-Pacific. In November 2011, Obama and Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard announced the deployment of thousands of US Marines to an Australian Army base in Darwin. Shortly thereafter, the Pentagon’s January 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance document noted the ‘necessity’ of shifting US defence priorities from Europe to Asia, and to that end the United States is reportedly seeking new bases in the Philippines. In March, speaking at the Blue House in the Republic of Korea, Obama described the Asia-Pacific as ‘a region that will affect American security and prosperity in the twenty-first century like no other’.

Major defence cuts and troop reductions have, to be sure, followed every major American conflict since the Second World War. Forward deployment in the Pacific was initiated in 2000 under President Bill Clinton, and was reiterated as a defence priority during President George W. Bush’s later years.
in office. Nor is a military doctrine of limited aerial intervention unique to Obama. Clinton followed a similar doctrine in Bosnia, Serbia, Iraq, Sudan and Afghanistan. It is therefore unsurprising that many policy experts and scholars have concluded that there is no ‘Obama doctrine’. As a candidate for the presidency in 2008, Obama himself dismissed the idea. ‘I think that I am the anti-doctrinaire candidate. I don’t believe in abstractions when it comes to foreign policy.’

But Obama’s military policies and rhetoric as president not only do amount to a doctrine, they are a major departure from that which has prevailed in the United States for generations. For the first time in at least 70 years, the underlying pattern of America’s foreign-policy doctrine is not the expansion of the US role. For the first time since America’s founding, Europe is no longer the key region shaping the country’s grand strategy. And for the first time since the Reagan administration, the meaning of global leadership is shifting away from military primacy to economic competitiveness and diplomatic influence.

These changes, moreover, are happening against the backdrop of powerful domestic counter-forces bent on extending strategic primacy and rolling back some of Obama’s policies following the November 2012 elections. At the centre of this debate stands not the desirability of US leadership (Obama and the Republican nominee, Mitt Romney, stand firmly by it) but two conflicting visions of what global leadership will look like in the twenty-first century. As a result, although foreign policy is unlikely to be the defining issue in an election year dominated by economic concerns, the 2012 presidential election may be a pivotal juncture for US foreign policy.

**Enduring patterns**
The significance of Obama’s strategic changes can be best appreciated in the context of three enduring patterns in US foreign policy: eurocentrism, role expansion and, more recently, the quest for primacy.

Since the late 1890s, the United States has pursued a foreign-policy doctrine defined by the progressive, if intermittent, expansion of its role in the world. When the debate over foreign territorial expansion first emerged in the 1890s, it centred on whether and how the United States should play
a role in the western hemisphere and the nearer Pacific islands. For some, including Navy Secretary and future President Theodore Roosevelt, the prevailing 1823 Monroe Doctrine never amounted to a clear policy and was growing increasingly outdated. ‘I wish we had a perfectly consistent foreign policy’, he lamented, ‘and that this policy was that ultimately every European power should be driven out of America, and every foot of American soil, including the nearest islands in both the Pacific and the Atlantic, should be in the hands of independent American states, and so far as possible in the possession of the United States or under its protection.’ Others contended that expansionism violated the spirit in which the United States was founded. President Grover Cleveland, for example, argued forcefully against expansion to Hawaii, Cuba and the Philippines. The proposed annexation of Hawaii, he argued, was ‘not only opposed to our national policy, but … a perversion of our national mission. The mission of our nation is to build up and make a greater country out of what we have, instead of annexing islands.’ Ultimately, Teddy Roosevelt won, though the debate was decided less by argumentation than by facts on the ground following the sinking of the USS Maine in February 1898 and mounting public agitation for war.

In his 1904 State of the Union address, Roosevelt made this expanded role part of official US policy: ‘Chronic wrongdoing, or an impotence which results in a general loosening of the ties of civilized society … may force the United States, however reluctantly, in flagrant cases of such wrongdoing or impotence, to the exercise of an international police power.’ Subsequently, US troops were sent – often repeatedly and for sustained periods – to Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua and Panama.

After the First World War, in a period widely (and misleadingly) characterised as ‘isolationist’, the desirability of military and political expansion was not itself in question, particularly with respect to the western hemisphere and the Pacific. Doubts about extending American involvement further into Europe were driven less by principled opposition to expansion than by Republicans’ fears of entanglement in what they viewed as the inevitable outbreak of another major European war. Isolationism thus meant nothing more than a continuation of the pre-war commitment to
neutrality in European affairs – the central pillar of US foreign policy since the country’s founding. Even then, many leading isolationists who had argued vigorously against ratification of the Versailles Treaty soon found themselves pushing just as forcefully for American political leadership in stabilising Europe.14

By the time the United States became directly involved in the Second World War, however, few still believed that entanglement in European affairs was avoidable. Accordingly, both Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman worked to establish a new world order in which the United States would play a central role. Shortly thereafter, when it became clear that the Soviet Union was bound to become the United States’ chief antagonist and was making headway in fragile countries such as Greece, Truman proclaimed it ‘the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures’. ‘The free peoples of the world look to us for support in maintaining their freedoms’, he concluded. ‘If we falter in our leadership, we may endanger the peace of the world – and we shall surely endanger the welfare of this nation.’15

During the Cold War and in its aftermath, successive presidents from both parties repeatedly increased the scope and intensity of the country’s commitments abroad. Indeed, the Soviet threat and nuclear competition made role expansion nearly unavoidable. Support for anti-communist regimes (democratic as well as authoritarian) became the bedrock of US foreign-policy doctrine for the remainder of the period. For all their differences, doctrinal statements by Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter and Reagan merely elaborated on the Truman Doctrine by specifying (and typically expanding) the conditions under which the United States would consider military and economic intervention abroad.16

The extent to which this modus operandi was embedded in American grand-strategic thinking became all too clear with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Facing for the first time a world without a peer competitor, the George H.W. Bush administration did not seriously rethink US national interests.
Instead, in his grand strategy, Bush embraced continuity, responding to specific, ongoing challenges as they emerged, and very cautiously exploring and experimenting with the new realities presented by unipolarity, as he did in Iraq and Somalia. As diplomatic historian John Lewis Gaddis has commented, the administration of George H.W. Bush, facing the most favorable prospects ever for the use of American power in the international arena, spoke grandly of building a ‘new world order’ but then did little to bring it about, as if the coining of a phrase alone would construct the reality. The Clinton administration spoke of ‘enlargement’ and ‘engagement’, without specifying what was to be ‘enlarged’ or who was to be ‘engaged.’\(^{17}\)

Only later, under Clinton, did humanitarian interventions, democracy promotion and conflict termination become more formal components of US foreign-policy doctrine, particularly following the collapse of the mission to Somalia and US failure to intervene and stop the Rwandan genocide in 1994.

As a presidential candidate, George W. Bush was deeply critical of Clinton’s expansionist foreign-policy agenda, repeatedly assailing Clinton for endangering troops to promote nation building. ‘I just don’t think it’s the role of the United States to walk into a country and say, we do it this way, so should you’, he argued. ‘I think the United States must be humble and must be proud and confident of our values, but humble in how we treat nations that are figuring out how to chart their own course.’\(^{18}\) After the 9/11 attacks, however, this position underwent a radical change, with the promotion of democracy in Iraq and elsewhere, and the ‘global war on terror’, occupying much of Bush’s tenure.\(^{19}\)

A second pattern, dating even further back to President George Washington’s famous farewell address and to the Monroe Doctrine, concerns the centrality of Europe in American grand-strategic thinking. Since the country’s founding, Europe has been central to the United States’ two core strategic interests: security and commerce. Until the early 1940s, Western and Central European powers represented the chief source of security threats to the United States, as well as the chief source of foreign
trade. As a result, American foreign policy during this period was guided by two principles. The first, articulated by George Washington in his farewell address, sought the avoidance of permanent military commitments with European nations both as a way of protecting the nascent country from attack and of serving its commercial interests in times of European wars. ‘Why’, Washington wondered, ‘by interweaving our destiny with that of any part of Europe, entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, rivalship, interest, humor, or caprice?’ The second principle was reducing Europe’s footprint in the Americas, as articulated by Monroe and reaffirmed by Teddy Roosevelt. This long process began almost immediately after Independence with the purchase of Louisiana in 1803 and the conflict with Spain over Florida (1816–19) and resumed in full force in the late 1880s and 1890s, as the United States fought to thwart perceived European encroachment in Samoa and Venezuela, culminating in the 1898 Spanish–American War and Roosevelt’s Corollary.

After the Second World War, the primary source of security threats shifted eastward, to the Soviet Union and China, so Western Europe became a region to be defended. Although the Asia-Pacific has commanded increasing attention from US policymakers since the early 1990s, much of the Cold War’s eurocentric force posture remained in place and has dominated America’s global force deployments.

The quest for global military primacy as a central component of American grand strategy forms the third and most recent historical pattern. Ronald Reagan’s inauguration marked the end of traditional containment – a mostly reactive grand strategy crafted to stop the advance of Soviet-supported communists around the world – and the beginning of a more forward-looking grand strategy geared toward securing American primacy.21 A grand strategy of primacy seeks to establish and maintain military superiority, often through strong military alliances, military build-ups, and actions that roll back existing adversary bases of support. From the so-called Star Wars missile-defence initiative, to covert assistance to the Afghan mujahadeen and anti-communist guerrillas in Latin America, US foreign policy under Reagan placed intense pressure on an increasingly vulnerable USSR. After the Soviet collapse, both Clinton and George W. Bush continued to
favour a grand strategy of primacy (although it assumed different names, such as ‘enlargement’ under Clinton) set on maintaining US superiority.

The emerging Obama Doctrine

Since Obama took office in January 2009, policy experts and pundits have struggled to identify a clear and coherent ‘Obama Doctrine’. While some, such as Washington Post columnist Jackson Diehl, have argued that the Obama administration ‘is notable for its lack of grand strategy’, others have asserted that it possesses not one but multiple grand strategies. Fareed Zakaria has asserted that the search for an Obama Doctrine is itself ‘mis-guided’: ‘The doctrinal approach to foreign policy doesn’t make much sense anymore … In today’s multipolar, multilayered world, there is no central hinge upon which all American foreign policy rests.’

But a coherent Obama Doctrine can, in fact, be identified: the basic contours were plain when Senator Obama ran for president in 2008 and the specific content has become increasingly clear in 2011–12. It favours political and economic leadership over militarised dominance; a reduction and redistribution of America’s global military responsibilities over continued expansion; a sinocentric force posture over eurocentrism; and a grand strategy that combines elements of containment and offshore balancing instead of primacy.

In contrast to the confrontational approach of a grand strategy of primacy, through offshore balancing the United States can attempt to maintain military superiority while being less threatening to potential adversaries. Yet, as critics maintain, it may also be perceived by rising powers as signalling a lack of resolve. It relies on a reduced military presence overseas, greater reliance on regional allies, and increased selectivity in the deployment and use of force. Obama’s policies in Australia and the Philippines may preview such offshore balancing, augmenting existing forces in Korea and Japan already positioned to contain China’s rise.

Individually, each of the above shifts represent changes in degree rather than kind, as Obama’s foreign-policy doctrine displays important continuities with the past. For example, Obama has repeatedly pledged to ‘keep America’s armed forces the strongest fighting force the world has ever
seen’. He has likewise vowed that the United States will continue to serve as an ‘anchor of global security and as an advocate for human freedom’. To that end, he has continued to promote democracy around the world through a variety of diplomatic means and has lead international efforts to strengthen sanctions on the Iranian regime. The United States continues to maintain sizeable forces in Europe, and its reorientation to Asia is, to some policy experts, simply a long overdue adjustment to changing strategic realities.

It is only when taken as a whole and in the context of Obama’s past and present rhetoric that these seemingly moderate shifts reveal their more fundamental nature. Obama’s foreign-policy doctrine appears to be rooted in the belief, which recurs throughout his speeches, that the world is undergoing fundamental changes and that, to keep up, the United States must adjust its understanding of the world and its role within it. Speaking before the UK Parliament in May 2011, Obama noted that the

> days are gone when Roosevelt and Churchill could sit in a room and solve the world’s problems over a glass of brandy … In this century, our joint leadership will require building new partnerships, adapting to new circumstances, and remaking ourselves to meet the demands of a new era.

That begins with our economic leadership.

Although careful to emphasise that military and terrorist threats persist, a view reflected in his sinocentric force restructuring and active approach to counter-terrorism in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia, Obama has argued that technological and geopolitical shifts are changing the currency of power in the international system. These shifts may be gradual and uneven, but they are real. In an age of nuclear weapons, drones and cyber warfare, large-scale ground warfare may soon become a thing of the past. Economic strength, technological advancement and normative appeal now occupy the roles traditionally held by territorial conquest and military-backed ideological expansion. In a world in which competition from China, India and Brazil occurs increasingly in the economic rather than the military arena, the United States stands to lose ground unless it adjusts. ‘The tide of war is
receding’, Obama proclaimed in January 2012. ‘We have the opportunity – and the responsibility – to look ahead to the force that we are going to need in the future. At the same time, we have to renew our economic strength here at home, which is the foundation of our strength around the world.’

In his commencement address to graduates of the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, CO in May 2012, Obama went still further:

I see an American Century because no other nation seeks the role that we play in global affairs, and no other nation can play the role that we play in global affairs. That includes shaping the global institutions of the 20th century to meet the challenges of the 21st. As President, I’ve made it clear the United States does not fear the rise of peaceful, responsible emerging powers – we welcome them. Because when more nations step up and contribute to peace and security, that doesn’t undermine American power, it enhances it.

In Obama’s words, technological advancements present not only opportunities for promoting US interests but also new challenges that require multilateral action. Nuclear proliferation, terrorism, cyber warfare, economic crises, pandemics and climate change – all dangers heightened by technological progress – cannot be contained within the borders of any one state, nor can they be solved through traditional means of power. ‘As we enter this new chapter in our shared history’, he told Parliament,

profound challenges stretch before us. In a world where the prosperity of all nations is now inextricably linked, a new era of cooperation is required to ensure the growth and stability of the global economy. As new threats spread across borders and oceans, we must dismantle terrorist networks and stop the spread of nuclear weapons, confront climate change and combat famine and disease.

Accordingly, the Obama administration has placed a premium on renewing and deepening existing relationships, building new ones, and engaging even unlikely members of the international community. For Obama, norms
and perceptions of the appropriateness of US actions are important. ‘Make no mistake,’ he told the Air Force Academy graduates, ‘how we’re viewed in the world has consequences – for our national security and for your lives.’

To this end, the administration has worked with the permanent members of the UN Security Council to offer negotiations to Iran while, in Russia, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced a ‘reset’ of bilateral relations. The administration has treated engagement in the United Nations and other international institutions both as a legitimising device and a forum for substantive consensus-building and decision-making, even when they hinder short-term US priorities. This has been most plainly visible in the administration’s approach to Libya, to a possible intervention in Syria, and to undertaking harsher international measures against Iran. With respect to these and other issue areas, Obama has articulated a view in which international norms are upheld, where treaties are binding, and rules are enforced and violators punished.

Combined, these transformations suggest a vision of global leadership for the twenty-first century that looks substantially different from its historical precursors. Certainly, the value of military dominance remains high. Yet Obama’s words suggest that it is starting to erode. While the United States has continued to operate over the past two decades as if global competitiveness is still defined primarily by the size of one’s military force and nuclear arsenal, some emerging countries have proven more agile in adjusting to the new realities of global competition. By virtue of their sheer scale, China’s global economic activities could greatly increase its political clout and ability to monopolise new markets, pushing out American competition and diminishing America’s sway. Other major developing economies are not far behind.

Hence, for Obama, maintaining American leadership requires a combination of traditional tools of military power and renewed emphasis on domestic economic priorities that can ensure continued US competitiveness in the global marketplace. These priorities include investments in education, technology and infrastructure. America must also cultivate political leadership in the management of global commons and in addressing issues of human rights and individual freedoms.
The 2012 election

Obama’s significant changes are not uncontroversial. They are taking shape in a domestic political environment that is itself every bit as volatile and uncertain as the international environment in which the United States operates. Former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, the Republican candidate, has advocated a very different strategic vision from Obama’s. He has promised a return to a more active and confrontational international strategy. His foreign-policy vision departs from Obama’s world view in at least three fundamental ways: whether and how the world is changing; how best to confront emerging challenges; and the type of leadership role the United States should seek in world affairs. Although both Obama and Romney’s rhetoric may be driven partly by electoral considerations, Romney’s harsh repudiation of specific elements of Obama’s foreign policy and his consistency of vision suggest real and potentially consequential differences.

Romney has advocated a very different strategic vision

Whereas Obama often describes a world in which inter-state competition is increasingly economic in nature, for Romney power politics are a constant and the pursuit of regional and global dominance is inherent to international politics. Romney has consistently highlighted the threats posed by a rising China and Russia. ‘When I look around the world, I see a handful of major forces that vie with America and free nations, to shape the world in an image of their choosing’, he proclaimed at the Citadel Military College in October 2011. ‘These forces include rising nations with hidden and emerging aspirations, like China, determined to be a world superpower, and a resurgent Russia, led by a man who believes the Soviet Union was great, not evil.’ In March 2012 he proclaimed Russia to be ‘without question our number one geopolitical foe’. Romney’s official campaign website states that ‘Russia is a destabilizing force on the world stage. It needs to be tempered.’ In light of these perceived threats Romney has vowed to take a more confrontational approach. With respect to Russia, he has suggested that he would re-evaluate the recently negotiated New START treaty for the bilateral reduction of nuclear arms, work to strengthen Russian civil-society
groups, and increase security cooperation with Central Asian states. As for China, Romney recently announced that ‘unless China changes its ways, on day one of my presidency I will designate it a currency manipulator and take appropriate counteraction’.36

What has changed, from Romney’s perspective, is that the security threats facing the United States are now more numerous and severe than they have ever been. With more than a hint of nostalgia for the relative simplicity of the Cold War, Romney has argued that ‘our world is far more chaotic. We still face grave threats, but they come not from one country, or one group, or one ideology. The world is unfortunately not so defined.’37 While terrorism ranks high on the president’s list of global threats, for Romney, this issue is without equal. He has described violent jihad as ‘this century’s nightmare’.38

Rhetorically, Obama and Romney both insist that the United States must remain vigilant against global threats. There are sharp disagreements between them, however, over how this should be achieved, offering interesting points of contrast with respect to the roles of force and cooperation.

For Obama, military superiority is but one component of a multifaceted approach that includes economic, political and diplomatic elements. For Romney, it plays a far more central role in his strategic vision. Romney has argued that Obama’s defence policies and budget cuts are detrimental to the strength of the US military and to global perceptions of American resolve, reiterating his 2008 presidential campaign pledge to increase the military’s budget and its size by 100,000 troops.39

Obama’s actions and rhetoric display a belief in the dual role of diplomacy and cooperation: they are at once tools for the promotion of narrow, near-term interests and important means for strengthening collective institutions and norms. Multilateral engagement, whether carried out informally or formally, serves as a force multiplier and provides a forum for upholding critical values of peace, justice and security.

By contrast, at least rhetorically, Romney has advocated a much more aggressive diplomatic approach. While recognising the value of alliances and diplomacy, he has been more clearly instrumental when discussing cooperation and more sceptical about the procedural value of international institutions. Whereas Obama has called for ‘a new era of cooperation’40 and a
'return to the wisdom of those who created [the United Nations]', Romney has described 'the failures of the UN' as 'simply astonishing' and called for the construction of new institutions, including a 'Summit of Nations' designed to 'defeat radical Jihad'.

The shift in emphasis from dominance to political leadership constitutes one of Obama’s most consequential and visible foreign-policy changes and is the source of his many disagreements with Mitt Romney. Romney has homed in on this shift, criticising the president for his 'feckless policies' and 'appeasement strategy', for bowing down before dictators, and for lacking the courage to lead.43 ‘God did not create this country to be a nation of followers’, he declared at the Citadel:

America is not destined to be one of several equally balanced global powers. America must lead the world, or someone else will. Without American leadership, without clarity of American purpose and resolve, the world becomes a far more dangerous place, and liberty and prosperity would surely be among the first casualties ... As President of the United States, I will devote myself to an American Century. And I will never, ever apologize for America.

Recalling Reagan’s goal of ‘peace through strength’, Romney has equated leadership with deterring challengers and with the ability to promote the interests of the United States and its allies.

Taken together, the views of the leading presidential candidates on the appropriate US foreign-policy doctrine demonstrate just how remarkable the 2012 presidential election is. On one side stands Obama, who is moving forward with significant changes to the country’s military posture and leadership role in the world. On the Republican side are two antithetical foreign-policy visions. The dominant vision, advocated by Romney and echoed by much of the Republican establishment, seeks to return the United States to its active and interventionist foreign-policy traditions. Still, even among Republicans Romney stands out as starkly different from Obama on foreign-policy matters. At the same time, there is a sizeable and growing constituency within the Republican Party that supports a radically differ-
ent foreign policy, one that favours isolationism, non-intervention and an almost total withdrawal from world affairs, with the exception of free trade. Congressman Ron Paul and his supporters represent an important viewpoint within the Republican Party and American politics that could continue to gain support.

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Absent a major security event before the November election, the economy is likely to dominate voter priorities. In fact, in May 2012 only 3% of Americans cited foreign-policy issues as the most important issue for them in the upcoming elections, compared to 54% who cited economic concerns. Still, as election day approaches the real and consequential differences between Obama and Romney on foreign policy are bound to emerge. For the first time in a very long time, voters will face a choice between two leaders who differ not only on tactical issues (more or less multilateralism, more or fewer troops on the ground, more or less engagement with Iran) but over the fundamental role of the United States in the world. Should the United States continue to prioritise traditional security threats from major powers and rogue states, or should it turn more of its attention to collective and economic threats? Should it lead the world primarily through its superior military power or through its economic and institutional strength and moral example?

Consider just how different this debate is from those of the recent past. In 1976, President Gerald Ford and Governor Jimmy Carter agreed that the best approach for dealing with the Soviet Union was one of engagement; in fact, it was Ford who rejected a ‘move to a Cold War relationship’, while Carter attacked him for undermining American strength. Carter and Reagan, who were certainly more sharply divided on foreign policy, nevertheless agreed on the importance of restraining the Soviet Union. In 1996, Republican Senator Robert Dole challenged Clinton not for seeking military dominance but for intervening too often, advocating instead a grand strategy of selective engagement (much as George W. Bush did four years later in his debate with Al Gore). And in 2004, Democratic Senator John Kerry railed
against Bush’s unilateralism and judgement (particularly with respect to the invasion of Iraq), not against his basic foreign-policy orientation.

To be sure, differences in electoral rhetoric do not always translate to actual policy differences. Notwithstanding the vast disparities in their perceptions of threats and visions, there are noticeable similarities between Romney and Obama on how best to handle some specific threats, such as Iran’s nuclear weapons and terrorism. While criticising Obama for not doing enough to stop these threats, Romney has not offered a clear alternative course, other than a promise to be ‘tougher’.

 Nonetheless, the sinocentric reorientation which under Obama is part of a deterrence strategy could well become part of a more confrontational grand strategy under a Romney administration. The choice of interventions and the manner in which they are carried out are also likely to be visibly different depending on who occupies the Oval Office on 20 January 2013. The same is true of the American approach to international institutions and the degree to which the United States works to strengthen or weaken them. Most importantly, the election is likely to determine the relative emphasis on long-term investments in military, economic and diplomatic resources, which could shape US foreign policy for some time to come.

Meanwhile, bruised by two difficult wars and a severe economic crisis, Americans (including a sizeable number of Republicans) appear ready to embrace a significantly smaller military footprint. In recent years, Americans have grown visibly more isolationist in their attitudes, more willing to cut defence spending, and more wary of military involvement abroad. For example, 2009 was the first year since 1964 (when the annual survey in question began) in which a majority of Americans agreed with the statement ‘the United States should mind its own business internationally’. Americans now favour reducing US military commitments overseas by a two-to-one ratio.

This suggests that Obama’s policies and rhetoric with respect to defence spending and foreign interventions may find more resonance with the American public than the campaign pledges of his Republican rival. The administration’s Asian reorientation is likewise echoed by Americans’ perceptions of the changing nature of threats. January 2011 marked the first time
in a series of repeated public-opinion polls that most Americans pointed to Asia as the region of greatest importance to the United States, and by the wide margin of 47% to 37% who chose Europe. But popular support for some of Obama’s key diplomatic priorities – strengthening alliances, combating global warming and promoting democracy and human rights – has been dwindling even faster. Thus both Obama and his Republican rival still must work to convince the American people to support their competing visions for American leadership in the twenty-first century.

Notes


2 Ibid.

3 This figure represents savings from the projected level of 2021 defence spending, not from current spending levels. Actual base discretionary spending is set to increase by about 20%, or $109 billion, over the next decade. See http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/budget/fy2013/assets/defense.pdf.


8 Whereas prior to the Second World War Europe was the chief source of threats and so avoiding permanent alliances, deterring and, where possible, rolling back European involvement in the Americas was central to US grand strategy, following the war its centrality originated mainly from its strategic value in stopping Soviet military and ideological expansion. This is not to say that American military policy was singularly focused on Europe. Indeed, throughout the nineteenth century, the United States was embroiled in a variety of conflicts and crises both at home and in the Western Hemisphere.

9 Some trace the pursuit of a greater international role even further back, to the nation’s founding. See, for example, Robert Kagan, Dangerous Nation (New York: Knopf, 2006).


The Roosevelt Corollary was issued largely in response to the 1902–03 Venezuela crisis, which involved both the UK and Germany over Venezuela’s refusal to repay its debts. By asserting responsibility for crises such as these in the western hemisphere, Roosevelt hoped to prevent similar European interventions. Nevertheless, it constituted a major policy expansion, one that conformed to Roosevelt’s world view. Theodore Roosevelt, ‘Fourth Annual Message’, 6 December 1904, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?id=29545#axzz1nc84dXSS.

For an in-depth analysis and a similar argument, see Bear F. Braumoeller, ‘The Myth of American Isolationism’, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, vol. 6, no. 4, October 2010, pp. 349–71.

In 1922, for example, Republican Senator and isolationist leader William Borah introduced an amendment to the Naval Appropriations Bill calling for an international conference, in which the United States was supposed to play a major role, to solve Europe’s severe economic hardships.


Thus, for example, Eisenhower offered military and economic aid to countries facing Communist threats; Kennedy took a more proactive approach to undoing Communist expansion in Latin America and Indochina; the Carter doctrine saw threats to US allies in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf as ‘an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America’; and Reagan expanded US support to rebels fighting Soviet-backed regimes around the world. Only under Nixon and Ford was there a temporary and fairly marginal attempt to roll back some of the expansionary commitments of previous administrations.
Thus John Lewis Gaddis notes that ‘the administration of George H.W. Bush, facing the most favorable prospects ever for the use of American power in the international arena, spoke grandly of building a “new world order” but then did little to bring it about, as if the coining of a phrase alone would construct the reality. The Clinton administration spoke of “enlargement” and “engagement”, without specifying what was to be “enlarged” or who was to be “engaged”’. Gaddis, ‘What Is Grand Strategy’, Karl Von Der Heyden Distinguished Lecture, Duke University, 26 February 2009, pp. 1–2. See also James M. Goldgeier and Derek H. Chollet, America between the Wars: From 11/9 to 9/11 (New York: BBS PublicAffairs, 2008) and Jeremi Suri, ‘American Grand Strategy from the Cold War’s End to 9/11’, Orbis, vol. 53, no. 4, Fall 2009, pp. 611–27.


Zakaria, ‘Stop Searching for an Obama Doctrine’.


Remarks by the President on the Defense Strategic Review’, The


30 ‘Remarks by the President to Parliament in London, United Kingdom’.

31 ‘Remarks by the President at the Air Force Academy Commencement’.


‘Text of Mitt Romney’s Speech on Foreign Policy at The Citadel’.


40 ‘Remarks by the President to Parliament in London, United Kingdom’.


See ‘Text of Mitt Romney’s Speech on Foreign Policy at The Citadel’; ‘Mitt Romney Delivers Remarks to the Republican Jewish Coalition’.

43 ‘Text of Mitt Romney’s Speech on Foreign Policy at The Citadel’.

Ibid.


For example, the number of respondents who believe that protecting the environment should be a top US priority was at an all-time low in January 2012 at 43%, down from 57% in 2007. Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, ‘January 2012 Political Survey: Final Topline’, 11–16 January 2012, http://www.people-press.org/files/legacy-questionnaires/Priorities topline for release.pdf. Asked about long-term US foreign-policy priorities, the number of respondents citing democracy promotion abroad as a top priority plummeted from 24% in late 2005 to 13% in May 2011; support for defending human rights abroad as a top US priority dropped a full 13 percentage points over the same period, from 37% to 24%. See http://www.people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/06-10-11 Foreign Policy Release.pdf.