



Obama in his own words: On leadership, force, and rebuilding US primacy

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Rod Lyon

President Obama entered office facing an imposing agenda and endowed with a weaker set of power assets than any president in decades: with the country bogged down in two wars and an active counter-terrorism campaign, and the US economy reeling from the impact of the global financial crisis. In the place of hard-power instruments of wealth and coercion, Obama has been obliged to place more reliance on the soft-power assets of

persuasion and visibility. During the first year of his office, he travelled to twenty-one countries, more than any other US president. And he has placed on record a substantial number of major speeches—in Prague (on nuclear weapons), in Cairo (on reaching out to the Muslim world) and in Oslo (on the difficult choices of peace and war), for example—that provide a clearer sense of his Administration's priorities and strategic direction.



US President Obama greets cadets at the US Military Academy in West Point, New York, 1 December 2009. Obama had announced earlier he is sending 30,000 more US troops to Afghanistan by next summer to speed the battle against the Taliban and plans to start bringing some home in 18 months. © Jim Young/Reuters/Picture Media

This paper attempts to ‘unpack’ Obama’s strategic doctrine by delving more deeply into his speeches and remarks—not merely his formal, foreign-policy presentations, but his broader range of speeches and statements that touch much more frequently upon US domestic issues. It is necessarily lexicological in its methodology—and therefore built on an assumption that Obama’s public statements, readily available through the White House website, are an accurate reflection of his thinking. This is not an unreasonable assumption. Although speechwriters carry the burden of producing a text for the president on major occasions, the White House website contains many transcripts where the president is apparently speaking extemporaneously, and where the words are clearly Obama’s own. The high degree of consistency between the formal speeches and the informal remarks reinforces the assumption that the president’s speechwriters are not merely putting words in his mouth.

The validity of the approach is also underlined by the extent to which the Administration’s insiders talk about the importance of Obama’s speeches as distinct policy instruments. Ben Rhodes, Obama’s foreign policy speechwriter and also the deputy national security adviser, has observed that all the president’s speechwriters are acutely aware of the critical role the president’s speeches play:

‘We refer to them as high wires’ Rhodes said. ‘You get to the point where there is a lot riding on these speeches. We have used speeches to respond to deadlocks and to respond to awkward situations and to push the agenda.’¹

This assessment is not interested in ‘marking’ Obama’s first year in any academic sense; several commentators (and Obama himself) have already done so at the time of the one-year anniversary, for little gain. Hopefully the approach undertaken here, exploring the

conceptual shell of Obama’s thinking, might give the reader a deeper, richer sense of Obama’s strategic thinking. After the first year of his presidency, the contours of that thinking are clearer than previously. Obama entered office almost as a strategic unknown; but on several occasions since, his decisions—and his explanation of those decisions—help illuminate the ‘Obama doctrine’ that seems likely to unfold on his watch.

To summarise the findings quickly for busy readers:

- Obama is interested in a ‘humbler’, more ethical form of global leadership than President Bush espoused
 - but he is committed to the notion that America must lead, and to rebuilding American primacy
- Obama accepts that American power underwrites global security and that force is necessary to fight evil adversaries in the world
 - but he believes US domestic opinion is now so fractured on use-of-force issues that only ‘wars of necessity’ can be waged
- Obama believes unconventional threats trump the threat of inter-state conflict, and particularly of great-power conflict
 - but he acknowledges that those unconventional threats pose unique challenges, and require the US to use force more ‘nimble’
- Obama is uninterested in nation building in distant parts of the world, but is overwhelmingly committed to addressing the US’s domestic challenges
 - he believes the restoration of the American middle class is the key to ensuring that the 21st century is—like the 20th—an ‘American century’.

Overall, Obama comes across in his first year as a president with a strong domestic focus. The ‘Obama doctrine’—if such a thing can be said to exist—places a heavy emphasis on the regrowth of American strength as the vehicle for sustaining US global leadership into the future. At its core is a long-term strategy to repair and rebuild the wellsprings of American power: economic health, educational success, innovative capacity, and social stability.

On leadership and engagement

In his speech to the UN General Assembly last September, Obama spoke of a view of America that was widespread when he came to power:

I took office at a time when many around the world had come to view America with skepticism and distrust. Part of this was due to misperceptions and misinformation about my country. Part ... was due to opposition to specific policies, and a belief that on certain critical issues, America has acted unilaterally, without regard for the interests of others. And this has fed an almost reflexive anti-Americanism, which too often has served as an excuse for collective inaction.²

He believes that during his first year he has attempted to articulate a different, more consultative, vision of US global leadership. Asked at a press conference about how his approach differed from Bush’s, he replied:

I’ve tried ... to communicate the notion that America is a critical actor and leader on the world stage, and that we shouldn’t be embarrassed about that, but that we exercise our leadership best when we are listening; when we recognize that the world is a complicated place and that we are going to have to act in partnership with other countries; when we lead by example; when we show some element of humility and recognize that we may not always have the best answer, but we can always encourage the best answer and support the best answer.³

Obama offered a tangential endorsement of that humbler form of leadership in his answer to a question from a ninth-grader in Arlington last September:

Student: Hi. I’m Lilly. And if you could have dinner with anyone, dead or alive, who would it be?

The President: Dinner with anyone dead or alive? Well ... that’s a pretty big list ... I think that it might be Gandhi, who is a real hero of mine...He’s somebody who I find a lot of inspiration in. He inspired Dr. King, so if it hadn’t been for the non-violent movement in India, you might not have seen the same non-violent movement for civil rights here in the United States. He inspired César Chávez, and ... he ended up doing so much and changing the world just by the power of his ethics ... I’m always interested in people who are able to bring about change, not through violence, not through money, but through the force of their personality and their ethical and moral stances.⁴

Moreover, he talks of a form of US engagement that is broader than the old state-based modes of interaction:

Around the world, even as we pursue a new era of engagement with other nations, we’re embracing a broader engagement—new partnerships between societies and citizens, community organizations, business, faith-based groups. That’s why we’ve been speaking directly to people around the world ... In fact, this spirit of partnership is a defining feature of our foreign policy.⁵

And he has been at pains to argue that this new form of consultative engagement better suits US interests. As he observed after the G20 meeting in Pittsburgh:

On issue after issue, we see that the international community is beginning to move forward together. At the G20, we’ve achieved a level of tangible, global economic cooperation that we have never seen before ... At the United Nations Security Council, we passed a historic resolution to

secure loose nuclear materials, to stop the spread of nuclear weapons, and to seek the security of a world without them. And as we approach negotiations with Iran ... we have never been more united in standing with the United Kingdom, France, Russia, China and Germany in demanding that Iran live up to its responsibilities.⁶

On primacy

Some might conclude that an admirer of Gandhi with an interest in consultative engagement might be less committed to the principle of US global leadership than his predecessors. They would be wrong. Obama speaks of a US seeking to restore its global leadership credentials, not of a US facing decline. During his January 2009 inauguration speech, Obama spoke of an America ‘ready to lead once more’. And when honouring Bruce Springsteen, last December, for his contribution to the American arts, Obama spoke of a US whose own greatest ‘glory days’ were still to come.⁷

He was insistent on this point in a Town Hall speech in Henderson, Nevada, just this February:

I’ve traveled a lot over the last year, all over the world, and I’ve got to tell you, countries like China—they’re competing to win ... But I don’t know about you—I don’t intend to cede the 21st century to anybody else. America is not a nation that follows—America leads. That’s what I intend for us to do once again. America leads.⁸

On threats

Obama sees unconventional threats as especially worrying. Speaking at the opening of the US–China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, he noted:

The most pressing dangers we face no longer come from competition among great powers—they come from extremists who would murder innocents; from traffickers

and pirates who pursue their own profits at the expense of others; from diseases that know no borders; and from suffering and civil wars that breed instability and terror. These are the threats of the 21st century.⁹

By contrast, he specifically rejects the notion that great powers are doomed to rivalry and conflict. As he told a Russian audience in July:

Unfortunately, there is sometimes a sense that old assumptions must prevail, old ways of thinking; a conception of power ... rooted in the past rather than in the future. There is the 20th century view that the United States and Russia are destined to be antagonists, and that a strong Russia or a strong America can only assert themselves in opposition to one another. And there is a 19th century view that we are destined to vie for spheres of influence, and that great powers must forge competing blocs to balance one another. These assumptions are wrong. In 2009, a great power does not show strength by dominating ... other countries ... The pursuit of power is no longer a zero-sum game—progress must be shared.¹⁰

His determination to counter the threat from al Qaeda is often on display, perhaps never more firmly than in his memorial speech at the Pentagon on 11 September:

Let us renew our resolve against those who perpetrated this barbaric act and who plot against us still. In defense of our nation we will never waver; in pursuit of al Qaeda and its extremist allies, we will never falter.¹¹

In October, he rehearsed that point for the staff of the National Counterterrorism Center:

Because of you ... we’re making real progress in our core mission: to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda and other extremist networks around the world. We must never lose sight of that goal. That’s the principal threat to the American people ... We will target al Qaeda wherever they take root; we will not yield in our pursuit ...¹²

In the wake of the attack on the CIA post in Afghanistan in December and the incident aboard the Detroit-bound aircraft on Christmas Day, Obama reaffirmed that his country faced ‘a foe ... bent on our destruction’, that ‘we are at war against al Qaeda ... and we will do whatever it takes to defeat them.’¹³ Even today, Obama typically talks about a US strategy of ‘disrupting, dismantling and defeating al Qaeda and its extremist allies.’ He might have retired the ‘War on Terror’ phraseology of his predecessor, but he remains committed to a war on the more specific target set of al Qaeda and its allies.

On military power

Still, Obama sees that war as requiring a more complete set of policy instruments than just military force. In his YouTube interview on 1 February 2010, he argued that military power was only one of the instruments the US needed to deploy in that struggle:

It’s important to understand that we are at war against a very specific group—al Qaeda and its extremist allies ... And we have to fight them on all fronts. We have to fight them in very concrete ways in Afghanistan and along the border regions of Pakistan ... But we also have to battle them with ideas ... We have to project economically ... We want to use all of our national power to deal with the problem of these extremist organizations.¹⁴

Obama is not convinced that force can typically play a large role in shaping outcomes. As he told graduating Russian students in Moscow last July:

The future does not belong to those who gather armies on a field of battle or bury missiles in the ground; the future belongs to young people with an education and the imagination to create. That is the source of power in this century.¹⁵

In his speech at the National Medal of Science ceremony, he argued that other factors beside military prowess even determined the outcome of wars:

At the close of World War II ... the United States transported dozens of captured V-2 rockets from Germany to New Mexico. These were among the most sophisticated weapons in the world, a reminder that much of World War II was fought far from the battlefield—by Alan Turing in Bletchley Park, and Oppenheimer in Los Alamos, and by countless others who developed radar and aircraft and antibiotics.¹⁶

And just as military power cannot bear too much weight for achieving national outcomes, nor can the US military itself:

Military power alone cannot be the first or only answer to the threats facing our nation ... We are a nation of more than 300 million Americans. Less than one percent wears the uniform ... So the responsibility for our security must not be theirs alone. That is why I have made it a priority to enlist all elements of our national power in defense of our national security—our diplomacy and development, our economic might and our moral example ...¹⁷

On the use of force

Within the national security domain, though, questions about the use of force have been the hardest that Obama has encountered. And when Obama told the Nobel Prize Committee that he came to accept their award ‘filled with difficult questions about the relationship between war and peace, and our effort to replace one with the other’, he wasn’t just speaking about his feelings on that day, but more broadly about the decisions he had confronted during the first year of his presidency.

At various times during the year he has been at pains to emphasise that force is sometimes necessary. In his speech at the D-Day

sixty-fifth anniversary ceremony in June, Obama spoke of a battle made memorable not only by the sheer improbability of victory, but by ‘the clarity of purpose’ with which the Second World War had been waged. It was a clarity he thought rare in the current world:

We live in a world of competing beliefs and claims about what is true. It’s a world of varied religions and cultures and forms of government. In such a world, it’s all too rare for a struggle to emerge that speaks to something universal about humanity ... The Second World War did that ... All know that this war was essential. For what we faced in Nazi totalitarianism was not just a battle of competing interests ... Nazi ideology sought to subjugate and humiliate and exterminate ... It was evil.¹⁸

The notion that force is wielded legitimately—and necessarily—to counter

evil, is a theme Obama returned to in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech in Oslo:

I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people. For make no mistake: Evil does exist in the world. A non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler’s armies. Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda’s leaders to lay down their arms. To say that force might sometimes be necessary is not a call to cynicism—it is a recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason.¹⁹

Moreover, in his speech he did not shy away from pointing out the strategic virtues of American power, including US military power:

The world must remember that it was not simply international institutions—not just treaties and declarations—that brought stability to a post-World War II world.



US President Obama attends a D-Day commemoration at the US military cemetery in Colleville-sur-Mer 6 June 2009. Obama paid homage to the heroes of the assault on Normandy’s beaches 65 years ago. © Chris Helgren/Reuters/Picture Media

Whatever mistakes we have made, the plain fact is this: The United States of America has helped underwrite global security for more than six decades with the blood of our citizens and the strength of our arms ... So yes, the instruments of war do have a role to play in preserving the peace.²⁰

In accord with Obama's observation that 'force might sometimes be necessary', during his first year in power he has sought to distinguish between wars of necessity and wars of choice. In his Cairo speech he talked about the Iraq conflict as a war of choice—putting some distance between his Administration and Bush's over the centrality of the terrorist threat in the broader security landscape. On the other hand, in a speech to the Veterans Convention in August, he described the conflict in Afghanistan as 'a war of necessity ... If left unchecked, the Taliban insurgency will mean an even larger safe haven from which al Qaeda would plot to kill more Americans. So this is not only a war worth fighting. This is fundamental to the defense of our people.'²¹

He has also applied the concept of 'necessary war' in other frameworks. In a speech in October, awarding a presidential unit citation to an armoured cavalry troop for an incident dating back to the Vietnam War, Obama noted: 'If that day in the jungle, if that war long ago, teaches us anything, then surely it is this. If we send our men and women in uniform into harm's way, then it must be only when it is absolutely necessary.'²²

It was a message he also had for the US troops at Osan Air Base during his visit to South Korea in November: 'I will not hesitate to use force to protect the American people or our vital interests. But I will also not risk your lives unless it is absolutely necessary.'²³

On the need for 'nimble' force

Like all good just-war theorists, Obama has an interest not only in when military force is used, but in how it is used. He has argued for the US to be nimble and precise in its use of military power against violent extremists, for strategic and not merely tactical reasons:

Where force is necessary, we have a moral and strategic interest in binding ourselves to certain rules of conduct. And even as we confront a vicious adversary that abides by no rules, I believe the United States of America must remain a standard bearer in the conduct of war. That is what makes us different from those whom we fight.²⁴

He accepts that, after 9/11, terrorists—'enemies who did not abide by any law of war'—presented 'new challenges' to existing legal frameworks, and that the US needed a set of new tools that would allow it to prevent attacks rather than merely prosecuting those responsible after the event. His attempt to split the Guantanamo detainees into five distinct categories was part and parcel of that determination to renew the legal constraints surrounding contemporary warfare.²⁵

Holy war is, for Obama, especially worrying, precisely because it tempts its practitioners to set aside notions of restraint: 'No Holy War can ever be a just war. For if you truly believe that you are carrying out divine will, then there is no need for restraint—no need to spare the pregnant mother, or the medic, or the Red Cross worker, or even a person of one's own faith.'²⁶

The need for nimbleness in the application of military force set a standard for intelligence analysts as well as the armed services. In his remarks to CIA officers in early February 2010, Obama told them: 'We ... need you to be one step ahead of nimble adversaries. In this information age, we need you to sift through vast universes of data to find intelligence that can be acted upon swiftly.'²⁷

Underlying his belief in force applied nimbly in necessary wars is not merely a point of moral argument, but also a domestic political calculation. Obama believes the American electorate is—at the moment—relatively fragile on issues affecting national security. In his West Point speech in early December, he pointed to the corrosion in bipartisanship that had occurred since 9/11:

We have been at war now for eight years, at enormous costs in lives and resources. Years of debate over Iraq and terrorism have left our unity on national security issues in tatters, and created a highly polarized and partisan backdrop for this effort. And having just experienced the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, the American people are understandably focused on rebuilding our economy and putting people to work here at home.²⁸

In short, Obama has been saying that unless the use of force is necessary in specific situations, the costs—in lives, resources, partisan divisions and opportunity costs—aren't acceptable to the American electorate. In October, he rehearsed that theme for the servicemen and women at Jacksonville:

I will never rush the solemn decision of sending you into harm's way. I won't risk your lives unless it is absolutely necessary. And ... we are not going to have a situation in which you are not fully supported back here at home.²⁹

On nation building

Some might have expected the arrival of a Democratic president in the White House to herald a new, expansive 'nation-building' agenda in failed states. Not so. During his West Point speech, Obama made clear that the US needed to rebalance its national programs, restoring its own economy rather than engaging in an open-ended nation-building program in Afghanistan. Indeed, he bluntly rejected the argument that

the US needed to commit to a decade-long project of nation building in Afghanistan: 'It sets goals that are beyond what can be achieved at a reasonable cost, and what we need to achieve to secure our interests.' Pointing to costs that had already approached a trillion dollars for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, he observed: 'The nation that I'm most interested in building is our own.'³⁰

Obama is, in fact, overwhelmingly committed to a nation-building project within America's borders. His domestic focus was a strong theme of his first State of the Union address. The first three-quarters of that speech were all about the particular challenges that Americans were facing: unemployment, business closures, declining home values, the need for infrastructure renewal, the price of college tuition, health care reform, and debt. Issues of defence, security and foreign affairs made it briefly into the last quarter of the speech, but after a comparatively thin coverage Obama swung back to the issues of US national diversity, equal rights and social responsibility, promising 'to start anew, to carry the dream forward, and to strengthen our union once more.'

Nation building within the US is central to Obama's vision of America's future leadership role:

Other countries are not playing for second—they're playing for first ... If China is producing 40 high-speed rail lines and we're producing one, we're not going to have the infrastructure of the future. If India or South Korea are producing more scientists and engineers than we are, we will not succeed.³¹

It was during World War II that President Roosevelt requested ... a set of policies to maintain our scientific and technological leadership in the 20th century ... By 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. We used to be number one. We have fallen behind. We are going to regain our

position ... This nation has never feared the future. We've shaped the future ... Science has helped us lead the world.³²

On US primacy and the American middle class

In his speech to the GOP House Issues Conference in late January 2010, as his popularity was on the slide, Obama joked that, although it might seem heresy to say it, there were more important things in the world than a good set of poll numbers. 'A middle class that's back on its feet, an economy that lifts everybody up, an America that's ascendant in the world—that's more important than winning an election.'³³

When he talks about renewing US power, his vision is almost a sociological one:

We all know what that American Dream is ... It's the idea that if you work hard and live up to your responsibilities, you can get ahead—and enjoy some of the basic guarantees in life: a good job, ... health care, ... a secure retirement, ... an education that will give our kids a better life than we had. They're very simple ideas. But they're the ideas that are at the heart of our middle class—the middle class that made the 20th century the American Century. Unfortunately, the middle class has been under assault for a long time.³⁴

This is the true nexus between domestic and foreign policy for Obama. He believes that long-term US global leadership doesn't come from his touring the world making eloquent speeches. Indeed, Obama argues that national leaders are of decreasing importance in international relations:

There was a time when Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin could shape the world in one meeting. Those days are over. The world is more complex today. Billions of people have found their voice ...³⁵

Rather US leadership comes from regrowing the US middle class to ensure that the 21st century is also an American century.

The importance of the middle class was also a point he made to the Convention of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL–CIO convention) in mid-September 2009:

For over half a century, the success of America has been built on the success of our middle class. It was the creation of the middle class that lifted this nation up in the wake of a Great Depression. It was the expansion of the middle class that opened the doors of opportunity to millions more. It was a strong middle class that powered American industries and propelled America's economy and made the 20th century the American century. And the fundamental test of this century, of our time, is whether we will heed this lesson ...³⁶

Obama's defence of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, last August, touched on the same point. He argued that President Roosevelt's GI Bill of World War II had wrought a 'sea change' in America:

The GI Bill ...carried ... a simple promise to all who had served: You pick the school, we'll help pick up the bill. And what followed ... was a transformation for our country. By 1947, half of all Americans enrolled in college were veterans. Ultimately, this would lead to three Presidents, three Supreme Court justices, 14 Nobel Prize winners, and two dozen Pulitzer Prize winners. But more importantly, it produced ... the backbone of the largest middle class in history ... Nearly 8 million Americans were educated under the original GI Bill, including my grandfather. No number can sum up this sea change in our society ... The young post-9/11 veterans around the country ... can become the backbone of a growing American middle class.³⁷

On energy, education and innovation

If Obama has his way, a more competitive US is coming back to the global economy. Obama has made clear that the US ‘can’t afford to spin [its] wheels while the rest of the world speeds ahead.’³⁸ The ability of the US to regrow its capacities would be central to its future leadership role:

It was not an accident, not a gift, that America led the 20th century. It was the result of hard work and discipline and sacrifice, and ambition that served a common purpose. So it must be in the 21st century. Future success is no guarantee. As Americans we always have to remember that our leadership is not an inheritance; it is a responsibility.³⁹

On several occasions, Obama has spoken of the US capacity for reinvention in the energy sector, where he argues that ‘whoever builds a clean energy economy ... is going to own the 21st century global economy ... I’m not going to settle for a situation where the

United States comes in second place or third place or fourth place in what will be the most important economic engine in the future.’⁴⁰

It was this understanding of ‘leadership’ that Obama touted in his comments at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology last October:

The world is now engaged in a peaceful competition to determine the technologies that will power the 21st century. From China to India, from Japan to Germany, nations everywhere are racing to develop new ways to produc[e] and use energy. The nation that wins this competition will be the nation that leads the global economy. I am convinced of that. And I want America to be that nation. It’s that simple.⁴¹

He sees a similar struggle taking place in the field of education, where he has spoken specifically of the need to improve US education standards:

America will not succeed in the 21st century unless we do a far better job of educating our sons and daughters ... The best jobs will



US President Obama greets students at an elementary school in Silver Spring, Maryland on 19 October 2009. © James Reed/Reuters/Picture Media

go to the best educated—whether they live in the United States or India or China. In a world where countries that out-educate us today will out-compete us tomorrow, the future belongs to the nation that best educates its people. Period. We know this.⁴²

One assessment shows American 15-year-olds now ranked 21st in science and 25th in math when compared to their peers around the world...To continue to cede our leadership in education is to cede our position in the world. That's not acceptable to me ...⁴³

So if our kids are spending all their time playing video games, and somebody else's kids are getting the math and science skills to invent video games—we're not going to be number one. I mean, it's as simple as that.⁴⁴

Still, he's not pessimistic about the enduring strengths of the US:

We still have the best universities in the world. We've got some of the finest science and technology in the world, we've got the most entrepreneurial spirit in the world, and we've got some of the most productive workers in the world. And if we get serious, then the 21st century is going to be the American century, just like the 20th century was.⁴⁵

On a nuclear-free world

One of the most challenging areas of policy making has been nuclear weapons. The speech in Prague last April envisaged a world without nuclear weapons, but it was a world that Obama himself sensed would be a distant one: not a world that might be reached in his lifetime. Indeed, the speech contains a set of mixed messages, not least because it also contains an explicit confirmation that the US was extending nuclear deterrence to the new members of NATO as well as the old—Obama specifically reassured his Czech audience of this fact. In June, Obama found himself

similarly reassuring the South Koreans of the continuing commitment of the US nuclear umbrella to their defence needs.

In some ways, Obama's view of nuclear weapons was more succinctly laid out during his visit to Moscow in July:

In the last century, generations of Americans and Russians inherited the power to destroy nations, and the understanding that using that power would bring about our own destruction. In 2009, our inheritance is different. You and I don't have to ask whether American and Russian leaders will respect a balance of terror—we understand the horrific consequences of any war between our two countries. But we ... have to ask whether extremists who have killed innocent civilians in New York and in Moscow will show that same restraint. We have to ask whether 10 or 20 or 50 nuclear-armed nations will protect their arsenals and refrain from using them. This is the core of the nuclear challenge in the 21st century ... Without a fundamental change, do any of us truly believe that the next two decades will not bring about the further spread of these nuclear weapons?⁴⁶

Although it shows the same general concern about nuclear weapons, the Moscow speech offers a slightly different perspective on the nuclear issue, for it shows us a US president more typical of his predecessors than some might have thought. The Americans have long believed that they and the Russians were responsible custodians of nuclear weapons. Indeed, they believe that all P5 countries on the UN Security Council are responsible great powers. The problem is the spread of the weapons rather than the weapons themselves. Interestingly, this was exactly the same note—'we do not want a world of continued nuclear proliferation'—that the president struck in his remarks on 19 May after a discussion of nuclear issues with George Shultz, Henry Kissinger, William Perry and Sam Nunn. It was Shultz, speaking

after the president, who pointed to the phraseology on the White House website in favour of ‘a world free of nuclear weapons’.⁴⁷

In keeping with that emphasis, during his State of the Union address Obama took specific pains to place his nuclear thinking in the context of John F Kennedy’s and Ronald Reagan’s. Both earlier presidents, he said, had responded to proliferation threats during their administrations by pushing towards grand, global solutions. It is probably fair to conclude that within the nuclear issue, Obama’s greatest interest lies in stemming further nuclear proliferation, not in disarmament.

On alliances and partnerships

Obama has spoken on several occasions about the difficulties that he inherited, and lists a set of damaged alliances among those difficulties. Typically,

Election Day was a day of hope, it was a day of possibility, but it was also a sobering one ... We had record deficits, two wars, frayed alliances around the world.⁴⁸

It is not clear that he thinks this directly about the ANZUS alliance, but he certainly thinks it about NATO. Less clear is what Obama hopes the current alliance arrangements might become. On NATO, for example, he insists on making the alliance more relevant to changing threats:

NATO has been so successful that sometimes I think that we forget this was shaped and crafted for a 20th century landscape. We’re now well into the 21st century, and that means that we are going to have to constantly renew and revitalize NATO to meet current threats and not just past threats.⁴⁹

Similarly, after his meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Hatoyama in September, Obama observed: ‘I’m very confident that not only will the Prime Minister succeed in his efforts and his campaign commitments,

but that this will give us an opportunity to strengthen and renew a U.S.–Japan alliance that will be as strong in the 21st century as it was in the latter half of the 20th century.’⁵⁰ A similar renewal effort has been underway for some years in relation to the US – Republic of Korea alliance, intended to make US forces on the peninsula more available for regional contingencies.

Still, Obama understands the value of the existing structures. At Osan Air Base in Korea, he spoke of the role played in Asian security by the US alliances:

It is no exaggeration to say that the progress we’ve seen not just in Korea but in this part of the world would not have been possible without the security and stability provided by generations of American men and women in uniform. It has transformed the lives of millions of people.⁵¹

So he might make haste relatively slowly in redefining the existing structures. Indeed, a broad reading of his speeches suggests that Obama does not have the same passion for revitalising the US legacy alliances as he has for revitalising American power. In the hierarchy of Obama’s priorities, mending the frayed alliances seems less important than repairing the domestic wellsprings of American power.

Beyond those alliances, Obama has spoken more broadly of a new era of partnerships. In his Nobel Peace Prize speech, he observed that ‘in a world in which threats are more diffuse, and missions more complex, America cannot act alone.’ He voiced similar sentiments in a speech to the Clinton Global Initiative:

We stand at a transformational moment in world history ... The very technologies that empower us to create and build also empower those who would destroy and disrupt ... Reckless speculation in any financial sector of the world ... can contribute to a global recession ... Poverty in Somalia, the poppy fields of Afghanistan, the

northbound flow of drugs from Colombia and the southbound flow of American guns and cash into Mexico—all this fuels violence that endangers ... every one of us. A flu that starts in one country can become a pandemic ... Carbon emissions from cars in Boston and factories in Beijing are ... imperiling the planet ... These are the threats of the 21st century ... We need a new spirit of global partnership.⁵²

That picture of the changing nature of threats underpins Obama's appreciation of the limits of the legacy alliances. Just as the challenges are beyond one nation, they are also beyond one set of ageing alliances. So for Obama, a key strategic issue is to identify the effective partnerships of the future.

Although he is renowned as a president who favours multilateral solutions, his response to a question at a press conference in Italy last July shows he has a realistic sense of the limitations of multilateral forums. The questioner asked whether the G8 or the G20 was the most appropriate forum for international issues.

In terms of the issue of the Gs and what's the appropriate international structure and framework, I have to tell you in the discussions I listened more than I spoke ... There is no doubt that we have to update and refresh and renew the international institutions that were set up in a different time and place. Some—the United Nations—date back to post-World War II. Others, like the G8, are 30 years old ... Everybody wants the smallest possible group ... that includes them. So if they're the 21st-largest nation in the world, then they want the G21 ... The one thing I will be looking forward to is fewer summit meetings ... I've only been in office six months now and there have been a lot of these. And I think that there's a possibility of streamlining them and making them more effective.⁵³

Obama's personal chairing of the UN Security Council in September, his active engagement with G20, his meeting with the heads of the ASEAN 10, are all signs of a president trying to lead in a different way. They paint a picture of what we might call 'primacy enmeshed': the US attempting to lead but without forcing its judgments or interests on others. To some extent, the policy is a deliberate exaggeration—a form of 'over-engagement' designed to compensate for US unilateralism during the Bush years. It does not mean that Obama believes that multilateralism can substitute for US leadership.

On the US in Asia

The Obama Administration has been playing up its Asia-Pacific credentials. Obama's own life-history is frequently cited as testimony: he is the 'Pacific president', who grew up in Indonesia. For all the supposed greater interest in multilateralism, the Obama Administration's principal forms of engagement in Asia have been bilateral. China and India have been the two particular targets of US engagement efforts.

In his July 27 speech before the US-China strategic dialogue, Obama talked of a bilateral relationship that would shape the 21st century:

We can't predict with certainty what the future will bring, but we can be certain about the issues that will define our times. And we also know this: The relationship between the United States and China will shape the 21st century, which makes it as important as any bilateral relationship in the world.⁵⁴

He used the speech to outline an agenda for cooperation—on economic revival, clean energy, stopping the spread of nuclear weapons, and countering transnational threats. He also used it to reassure his listeners that the 21st century was not doomed to the great-power confrontations of

the 20th century. And he assured his Chinese listeners that although support for human rights and human dignity was ‘ingrained’ in America, ‘these are not things that we seek to impose—this is who we are’.

Obama has been almost as engaging with India, referring to India as ‘a rising and responsible great power’ and reaffirming that his Administration will fully implement the US–India Civil Nuclear Agreement.⁵⁵ But, much more, he has spoken of the relationship between the US and India in especially positive terms, listing the similarities between each country’s historical trajectory, their commitment to democracy, the vigour of their economies fuelled by hard work and innovation, and their common opposition to extremist terrorism. India, said Obama, was the ‘indispensable’ nation of the future.⁵⁶ The US–India bilateral relationship is, to Australians at least, less visible than the US–China relationship, but almost as significant. It might suggest that the US’s

relations with the Asian great powers are starting to move up alongside its relationships with traditional allies across the region.

Interestingly, few of Obama’s travels have generated as much domestic controversy as his ten-day visit to Asia in November. Media critics were generally unkind about the president’s low rate of return on invested time and effort. James Fallows, of *The Atlantic*, argued for seeing the trip as something designed to reap longer-term rewards, rather than instant gratification. Leslie Gelb, of the Council of Foreign Relations, in a cutting assessment, suggested the president had to re-form his foreign policy team and get beyond ‘amateur hour’ at the White House.

Back in Washington, after the trip, Obama produced an economic justification for his travels:

I just came back from a trip to Asia in which one of my highest priorities was discussing how we can increase exports



US President Obama greets Indian PM Singh at the White House in Washington, 24 November 2009. © Larry Downing/Reuters/Picture Media

into that region. If we could just increase our exports by 5 percent into that region, that would mean hundreds of thousands of well-paying jobs.⁵⁷

In a speech at the science and mentoring awards, the chief impressions he identified were ones that pointed to the urgency of rebuilding the sources of US domestic power. In both South Korea and Shanghai, for example, he was interested in educational issues. Again, the trip was a marker that says Obama is interested in the deeper national wellsprings of power rather than the more immediate issue of jostling interests.

On pigeonholing Obama

What does all this tell us about Obama? Walter Russell Mead has argued that Obama, with his economic and military options comparatively foreshortened, has been most at home in the 'Jeffersonian school' of US foreign policy: 'Like Carter in the 1970s, Obama comes from the old-fashioned Jeffersonian wing of the Democratic Party, and the strategic goal of his foreign policy is to reduce America's costs and risks overseas by limiting US commitments whenever possible'.⁵⁸ Jeffersonians typically see 'the preservation of American democracy in a dangerous world' as the US's principal strategic interest.⁵⁹ Mead argues:

Obama seeks a quiet world in order to focus his efforts on domestic reform—and to create conditions that would allow him to dismantle some of the national security state inherited from the Cold War and given new life and vigor after 9/11. Preferring disarmament agreements to military buildups and hoping to substitute regional balance-of-power arrangements for massive unilateral US force commitments all over the globe, the president wishes ultimately for an orderly world in which burdens are shared and the military power of the United States is a less prominent feature on the international scene.⁶⁰

But that doesn't quite capture the core of Obama's position. True, it's hard for any US leader to be a real Jeffersonian in the modern world. Obama's domestic focus is moderated by reality—the reality of the US's dominant global role and his own desire both to rebrand US influence in the world, and to rebuild it. Obama intends to retain US global leadership in the 21st century, not to cast it aside. He does not accept a lower—less significant—position for the US in the global pecking order. He sees a compelling need for the US to revisit the wellsprings of its international power, and he believes those lie essentially within its own national borders. In short, Obama accepts that repairing the US role in the world is a task that must begin at home. It is this underappreciated side of Obama's strategic vision that needs to be understood alongside his more well-known support for international cooperation and a more humble America.

Implications for Australia

What does the Obama doctrine mean for Australia? Australia can probably do little to help Obama with the central pillar of his strategic policy—rebuilding the American middle class. But revitalising US global leadership by revitalising the US itself can only be a long-term project. Great powers typically realise only late in the day that their power is waning: in the Soviet Union, for example, the movement for perestroika in the mid-1980s came only when the cause of the Soviet Union was all but lost. So successful completion of Obama's agenda might well take twenty years—and require the engagement of presidencies beyond his own.

During that twenty-year window, the US will probably be looking to its allies to carry a little more of the weight in international security. And it might be doing that especially in Asia—for the simple reason that European allies don't seem to sense the

same geopolitical transformation that Asian allies do. The Australian Defence White Paper of 2009 accepts that questions about US primacy are certain to accelerate over the period to 2030—essentially the twenty-year period that Obama’s plan might take to work. And it already envisages a need to enhance Australia’s strategic weight in Asia in coming decades. Along with other US allies in Asia, Australia should start thinking deeply about how it copes with the looming twenty-year period when other powers might be pressing their own opportunities in regional security.

For over sixty years, Australia has done well out of a US-led world. That world has underpinned our security interests both near and far, and allowed us to keep our own defence spending under a relatively tight rein. In the long term, Australia’s strategic interests will probably be better served by Obama’s succeeding—and rebuilding US primacy for the 21st century—than by our cutting ourselves adrift from our principal ally. More serious questions might well arise for us if Obama doesn’t succeed.

Endnotes

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- 6 President Obama (2009) Remarks by the president at G20 closing press conference, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 25 September.
- 7 President Obama (2009) Remarks by the president at reception for Kennedy Center honorees, White House, 6 December.
- 8 President Obama (2010) Remarks by the president at Town Hall meeting in Henderson, Nevada, 19 February.
- 9 President Obama (2009) Remarks by the president at the US–China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, Washington, DC, 27 July.
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- 29 President Obama (2009) Remarks by the president to servicemen and women, Naval Air Station Jacksonville, Florida, 26 October. A similar point was argued in the president's speech at Arlington on Memorial Day, 25 May.
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About the author

Rod Lyon is the Program Director, Strategy and International, with ASPI. Rod was previously a Senior Lecturer in International Relations at the University of Queensland where he taught courses on conflict, international security, and civil–military relations. His research interests focus on a range of problems associated with global security, nuclear strategy and Australian security. He has authored a number of ASPI publications including the STRATEGY reports *Alliance Unleashed: Australia and the US in a new strategic age*, *The eagle in a turbulent world: US and its global role* and *A delicate issue: Asia's nuclear future* and the SPECIAL REPORT *Australia's strategic fundamentals*.

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