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## *Hard Power in a Soft Package: The 'True' Conservatism of Obama Leadership in Foreign Policy*

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Analyzing President Obama's foreign policy and its global impact is no easy task. The early presidency of Obama has been marked by vicious attacks from the right, deep disappointment from the left, and something like indifference from the international community. This is understandable when the main argument is entertained: the expectations of Obama's global positions have not met reality mainly because they are more closely aligned with a cautious and considered 'true' conservatism, something no side (left, right, international) anticipated. The consequences of this becomes more than just about election results but has significant potential influence on the fundamental debates between soft and hard power.

**Key words:** Obama, Foreign Policy, Conservatism, Electoral Politics, International Co-operation

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# Hard Power in a Soft Package: The 'True' Conservatism of Obama Leadership in Foreign Policy

Barack Obama...will restore America's standing in the world by providing a new American leadership to meet the challenges of a new century...Barack Obama...will reverse this perception of American arrogance and obstructionism.<sup>1</sup>

Analyzing President Obama's foreign policy, or rather, analyzing the intellectual and positional evolution of his global positions is no easy task. It would not be hyperbole to say Obama came into office with the hopes and dreams of millions of Democrats and perhaps even the muted optimism of many moderate Republicans. In other words, hitting everything right on the mark was likely impossible. This only makes the present analysis more interesting, for the early presidency of Obama has been marked by vicious attacks from the right, deep disappointment from the left and relative indifference from the international community. This negativity is more understandable when the main argument here is entertained: expectations have not been met in terms of foreign policy because Obama's positions have more closely aligned with what some might call 'true' conservatism, something no side foresaw in 2008.

This apparent foreign policy surprise is partially the result of an interconnected process of push-and-pull: conservatives look to regain a dominant position for the future and democrats look to truly feel as if the President is one of them. This study is not so much how successfully he achieves peace between these two divergent camps, but rather how frustrating he seems to be to both for his failure to meet the stereotypical expectations of either side. One thing seems to be certain when looking at Obama foreign policy: external criticism of his positions seems to lead to a pragmatic overreaction that is more aligned with a moderate conservatism and makes him notoriously difficult to label with a broad left-leaning or right-leaning brush.

First the somber news: President Obama's first term makes clear that there is no dawning of a new age in foreign policy development, benevolently bent on finding a 'new means' for dealing with 21<sup>st</sup> century conflict. Perhaps it was unfair to expect such a result, but then again it was Obama himself who seemed eager to rise to such a challenge. These 'new means' were meant to incorporate all of the tools and capabilities at the disposal of American might.<sup>2</sup> It was Obama who boldly declared his administration would go beyond mere rhetoric and focus instead on achieving concrete results with these 'new means.'<sup>3</sup>

Bold promises and high expectations are usually the first balloons popped in the aftermath of inauguration. But excitement was not contained solely to the Obama tent: plenty of distin-

1. Barack Obama, 'Strengthening Our Common Security by Investing in Our Common Humanity,' *Foreign Affairs*, Jul/Aug 2007.
2. Barack Obama, 'Strengthening Our Common Security by Investing in Our Common Humanity,' *Foreign Affairs*, Jul/Aug 2007.
3. Barack Obama, 'Strengthening Our Common Security by Investing in Our Common Humanity,' *Foreign Affairs*, Jul/Aug 2007.



gushed scholars eagerly looked forward to what a president could do with a perceived new respect for intellectual scholarship. As Joseph Nye discussed upon the confirmation hearings of Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State, when she triumphantly said 'smart power' would be brought into the global arena:

'Smart power is the combination of hard and soft power. Soft power is the ability to obtain preferred outcomes through attraction rather than coercion. Style also matters, even when public goods are the substance of policy. The Obama administration will have to generate soft power and relate it to hard power in smart strategies.'<sup>4</sup>

Is it too soon into the new administration to ask what happened? No: the President has had at this early stage numerous foreign policy incidents that at least begin to allow speculation on his ultimate trending direction and give reason to question the 'new means' hope machine.

### **The Empirical Facts: Not Innovative, Not Even That Left**

In Iraq, President Obama has mostly made good on his campaign promise to draw down from this conflict and gradually remove troops. He has not, however, gone nearly as far or as fast as many left-leaning circles would like.<sup>5</sup> Obama clearly has no interest or intent in leaving the Iraq arena entirely and even slowed down his own timetable for troop withdrawal at least twice since coming into office. This was meant to be testimony to the President's patience, diligence, and pragmatism, unwilling to risk national security gains or troop lives in order to quickly fulfill a campaign promise. This did not draw too much heavy fire from his core constituency, but his unwillingness to permanently close the door on what he himself characterized as the 'wrong war' was the first indication he was not going to simply follow a liberal template.<sup>6</sup>

This leads into Afghanistan and the President's Af-Pak strategy. This strategy ostensibly turned Afghanistan into Obama's war. What is most relevant here is the manner in which he is incorporating his ownership: Af-Pak is basically a mimic of the Iraqi surge, whether it was the influx of 30,000 new U.S. troops into the region, the temporary shifting of General Petraeus from Iraq and CENTCOM to Afghanistan, to the discussions about trying to reincarnate the Anbar Uprising into an Afghani version. In short, the President's strategy was not marked by a new means for global affairs but rather copying the approach used by his predecessor, whom he openly criticized on the campaign trail.<sup>7</sup>

Obama initially attempted to carve out a unique spot for himself within the Arab-Israeli peace process. This attempt at new statesmanship, however, has been frustrated and ultimately stalled: there have been no new gains in the peace process and both sides have largely remained stubbornly steadfast to old positions.<sup>8</sup> While some have focused on the recalcitrance of the two sides, it is just as likely that the lack of any new methods, proposals, and initiatives

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4. Joseph S. Nye, 'Obama's Smart Power,' *New Perspectives Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 2, Spring 2009.
  5. Angela M. Codevilla, 'Obama's Foreign Policy: Our Problems Personified,' *American Spectator*, Vol. 42, Issue 9, Nov 2009.
  6. G.C. Jacobson, 'A Tale of Two Wars: Public Opinion on the U.S. Military Interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq,' *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 2010.
  7. A. Celso, 'Phase IV Operations in the War on Terror: Comparing Iraq and Afghanistan,' *Orbis*, Vol. 54, Issue 2, 2010.
  8. Jonathan Rynhold, 'President Obama and the Middle East Challenge,' *BESA Center Perspectives Papers*, No. 50, 2008.



from Obama and his diplomatic team is equally impactful as explanation. When you set yourself up as the one to bring in new ideas and then do not, it is not illogical to assume a negative impact on the process overall. Quite simply, since there really has not been any major ideological, intellectual, or diplomatic innovation in the Arab-Israeli peace process since Obama entered the White House, the process has remained stuck. There is no shift from Bush to Obama on this count, especially given the most recent Palestinian statehood proposal before the UN General Assembly where Obama tried diligently to suppress the proposal from even being brought forward with the threat of a Security Council veto.

Perhaps there was no brighter lightning rod during the campaign than the Guantanamo Detention Center in Cuba. Obama successfully capitalized on it as a symbol that America had slipped from its principles. Aside from withdrawing troops from Iraq, the closing down of Guantanamo was the supposed next foreign policy no-brainer for the Obama team.<sup>9</sup> However, as of this writing, Guantanamo still exists and is likely to continue to exist into the foreseeable future. Again this is cited as President Obama leaning on his famous pragmatism. While this pragmatism is not an object of criticism here, it is relevant to note that Obama pragmatism always seems to shift policy position right.

If the President feels the most practical route guarantees the continued safety of U.S. citizens, then he is right in thinking political ideology should play no role in his decision-making. In this case, however, it infuriates the left because Gitmo was the poster-child of the perceived arrogance and illegality of the Bush administration. And yet Gitmo also irritates the right because while he has maintained the detention center, Obama does not give public credence to their position. In either case, the conservative status quo remains and new means are absent.

Another area that drew praise from intellectual circles during the campaign was the Obama position that the United States did itself a national security disservice by being stubbornly unwilling to engage any and all actors who were willing to seriously sit down at the negotiations table.<sup>10</sup> These were direct broadsides against the Bush administration and considered at the time potential openings for talks with so-called roguish nations like Iran and Venezuela. If carried through, it would have indeed been the introduction of a new means in foreign policy: a willingness to come to the table without preconditions and attempt to create new stabilities at worst and new alliances at best. Ironically, the voice which has best described and explained this position is the conservative lion Henry Kissinger:

The administration's approach seems to be pointing toward a sort of concert diplomacy...In that view, American leadership results from the willingness to listen and to provide inspirational affirmations. Common action grows out of shared convictions. Power emerges from a sense of community and is exercised by an allocation of responsibilities related to a country's resources...In the process it must navigate between two kinds of public pressures toward diplomacy endemic in American attitudes. The first reflects an aversion to negotiating with societies that do not share our values and general outlook...It treats compromise as appeasement and seeks the conversion or overthrow of the adversary. Critics of this approach, who represent the second sort of pressure, emphasize psychology. They consider the opening of negotiations an inherent transformation. For them, symbolism and gestures represent substance.<sup>11</sup>

9. Derek Chollet and Tod Lindberg, 'A Moral Core for U.S. Foreign Policy,' *Policy Review*, Issue 146, Dec 2007/ Jan 2008.
10. S. Akbarzadeh, 'Obama and the U.S. Policy Change on Iran,' *Global Change, Peace, and Security*, Vol. 21, Issue 3, 2009.
11. Henry Kissinger, 'Obama's Foreign Policy Challenge,' *Washington Post*, April 22, 2009.

Obama's desire to apply this second sort of 'pressure' was novel and intriguing, but this potential has gone undeveloped and some would say abandoned. The incident with Hugo Chavez, where the Venezuelan dictator basically crashed a seating arrangement with Obama and forced him to awkwardly shake his hand in front of television cameras quickly showed that innovative ideas for diplomacy are good only if you can control the environment.

Less comic and more relevant to global affairs has been the ongoing dispute with Iran over nuclear energy production. It seemed to be the perfect venue in which to prove one way or the other that Obama's new means of engaging these regimes could yield positive results.<sup>12</sup> In short, the first initial overtures were empty and unsuccessful, which quickly led to the Obama administration tacking back towards more traditional realist-type diplomacy. Obama so far has not proven himself to be truly committed where innovative means for engagement are possible. And when he abandons those opportunities his fall-back position is more right than left.

Kissinger was accurate in terms of what Obama may have felt was truly available to him before he took office, riding a wave of international popularity and optimism. But reality and realism are often bitter wake up calls. When it became clear the Irans and Venezuelas of the world were not going to be swept up in Obama-fever and change overnight, it became essential for Obama to shore up his realist chops. This always results in a more conservative position.

The additional problem has been that what Kissinger mentioned is not real: symbolism and gestures do not in fact represent new foreign policy substance. Obama often sounds grand on the world stage but this verbiage has not shifted real positions from other global actors. Realizing this, Obama has moved back toward his more natural pragmatism. What has been largely ignored is how that natural pragmatism is more naturally conservative.

Obama's speech in Cairo, where he basically promised a new era of understanding between Americans and Muslims in the Arab Middle East, gained great notoriety partly because he did not hesitate on Egyptian soil to offer gentle but still poignant criticism of social trends within Muslim society which can hold back native democracy.<sup>13</sup> This speech could have gone down in history as truly monumental given the recent uprisings and protests now called the Arab Spring. It was Obama who promised to give support to home-grown democratic movements. If ever there was an opportunity pleading for new means it is hard to consider a better moment than the Arab Spring. The official voice from Washington, however, has remained uninspiring.

One true distinction between Democrats and Republicans comes in democratization methods: Bush made his mark with the neoconservative belief to preemptively force democratization. Democrats have preferred democratization from the ground up, though also admitting external support is needed. Obama's Cairo speech seemed to be indicating this latter direction is where he would go. Perhaps he simply did not anticipate having so many chances so quickly in so many important countries. Regardless, the end result is the same: events continue to play out

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12. Henrietta Holsman Fore, 'Aligning "Soft" with "Hard" Power,' *Parameters*, US Army War College, Vol. 38, Issue 2, Summer 2008.  
13. David Price, 'Global Democracy Promotion: Seven Lessons for the New Administration,' *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 32, Issue 1, Winter 2008/2009.



without an Obama administration truly backing these home-grown movements in any new way. Instead, once again, there is a safer, more pragmatic, status quo-like feel to American decision-making.<sup>14</sup> The Libya position, rather than being a departure from the status quo, only highlights this lack of foreign policy innovation.

At first glance it would appear establishing the no-fly zone through UN resolution in Libya is testimony to Obama's liberal foreign policy credentials. Not so. Looking for a limited international backing for a tightly defined mission is more reminiscent of Bush the elder and the build-up to Desert Storm. Selectively engaging potential humanitarian disasters is also a highlight of conservative foreign policy behavior, not liberal. Bahrain repression and Syrian violence has been relatively ignored, while a hated historical enemy of the United States is openly opposed. Does this not sound typical to the intervention positions of most traditional conservatives? This approach defines Operation Iraqi Freedom. Even the quick imposition of turning the no-fly zone over to NATO jurisdiction should not necessarily be seen as quintessentially liberal: conservatives today, in their effort to distance themselves from Bush-era neo-conservatism, prefer involvements that have explicit exit strategies.

The final event to highlight in this ever growing list of Obama true conservatism is perhaps the loudest achievement of all: the operation that successfully killed Osama bin Laden. The elimination of OBL has long been arguably the one foreign policy objective both Democrats and Republicans could agree upon. In the end, Obama accomplished the feat utilizing a Navy Seal team that violated the territorial sovereignty of Pakistan, performing an operation that purposefully left a supposed War on Terror ally completely in the dark. Every detail of this operation was in line with conservative foreign policy thinking. For those on the left who felt OBL was a 'unique' target that demanded 'unique' means this is simply not true: Obama has repeatedly said in the face of some international criticism about the *manner* in which OBL was eliminated that he would not hesitate to employ the same means for another high-value target.<sup>15</sup> In other words, the sanctity of terms like multi-national cooperation and territorial sovereignty are relative. Ronald Reagan could not be prouder.

### **Ideology, Partisanship, and Persistent Pragmatism**

There is no mistaking the glorious speech-making that Obama has brought back into the Oval Office. But speechifying makes little impact without substance:

He envisions a world in which the United States helps conquer poverty and disease, and he recognizes that restoring dignity and hope to people in troubled parts of the world will make America safer and more secure. At the same time, some of his more idealistic rhetorical flights echo the sentiments of many neoconservatives and neoliberals, including their tendency to see the world in Manichaeian terms.<sup>16</sup>

The issue has never been with whether Obama knows how to talk the Democratic talk. But does he actually walk the talk when the chips are truly on the global table? That is in serious

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14. Larissa MacFarquhar, 'The Conciliator: Where is Barack Obama Coming From?,' *The New Yorker*, May 7, 2007.
  15. I. Kfir, 'U.S. Policy Toward Pakistan and Afghanistan Under the Obama Administration,' *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 13, Issue 4, 2009.
  16. Robert Dreyfuss, 'Obama's Evolving Foreign Policy,' *Nation*, Vol. 287, Issue 3, 2008.
  17. Robert Dreyfuss, 'Obama's Evolving Foreign Policy,' *Nation*, Vol. 287, Issue 3, 2008.



question. Some have noticed the gap between his inspirational speeches and the actual policies he supports.<sup>17</sup> Some have lamented what they see as bold promise in the potential to enact change only to ultimately be disappointed in specifics that are not nearly as transformational.<sup>18</sup> Yet still others have talked of a shift not in substance but in tone, of foreign policy changes that are more cosmetic than real. These observations represent a small but important perception that questions how much of a departure there has been in foreign policy from the Bush-era. What many hoped would be a radical divergence something like foreign policy continuity has emerged instead.<sup>19</sup> Those who still hope for change offer rationalizations that come off more like wishful thinking:

The main reason there is no observable evidence of a national abandonment of the past is that President Obama does not have a free hand in crafting new strategies. He did not enter office with a clean slate, but rather against the backdrop of a number of strategic commitments that bound his set of choices...Yet even this emphasis on cooperative rhetoric and multilateral diplomacy represents continuity with the latter half of the Bush administration...It was [a] shift in public opinion, and the hard facts underneath that shift, that forced a change in Bush's grand strategy...The Obama administration has done no more than the second term of the Bush administration to change U.S. grand strategy to reflect the new reality.<sup>20</sup>

Pragmatism is rarely a source for policy innovation. In crisis the instinctive reaction is to fall back to what is already learned. The safe method is the fallback. In foreign policy, whether Republican or Democrat, the fallback position for at least the last forty years has been realism, status quo, and national self-interest. Obama's lofty rhetoric and grand speeches hide what is ultimately an inner realist masquerading as a pragmatist.<sup>21</sup> It is not a failure to imagine or an unwillingness to accept bold challenges in the 21<sup>st</sup> century global arena. If Obama's foreign policy positions to date have been uninspiring, it is because *that is exactly who he is as an international statesman*. For some it is a tough pill to swallow, but it is clearly the only medicine being offered out of the White House, despite some who continue to hope for promised change:

It will not be easy for the United States to undertake such a strategic shift, nor will it be risk free. Traditional allies, feeling jilted, might lose confidence or rebel; newfound partners, getting a whiff of U.S. weakness, could prove unreliable. Still, hanging on to an outmoded policy paradigm does not offer much hope...Obama began his presidency with the unmistakable ambition of turning a page. To succeed in the Middle East, he will have to go further and close the book on the failed policies of the past.<sup>22</sup>

The book on the so-called failed policies of the past has not yet been closed. In fact, it has been often referred to when formulating Obama foreign policy.

Why would one of the best political talkers in a generation be so bland when it comes to real decision-making on the global stage? Some of this is undoubtedly tied in with what President Obama is most personally comfortable with. Another explanatory variable has affected not just

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18. Robert Dreyfuss, 'Obama's Evolving Foreign Policy,' *Nation*, Vol. 287, Issue 3, 2008.
  19. S. Kreps, 'American Grand Strategy After Iraq,' *Orbis*, Vol. 53, Issue 4, 2009.
  20. S. Kreps, 'American Grand Strategy After Iraq,' *Orbis*, Vol. 53, Issue 4, 2009.
  21. Michael C. Desch, 'America's Liberal Illiberalism: The Ideological Origins of Overreaction in U.S. Foreign Policy,' *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 3, Winter 2007/2008.
  22. Robert Malley and Peter Harling, 'Beyond Moderates and Militants,' *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 89, Issue 5, Sep/Oct 2010.



Obama the politician but Democrats as an entire party – defending against the accusation of being foreign policy weaklings. This Democrat-as-global-appeaser accusation has existed for quite some time, but it was surely exacerbated by 9/11 and the new emphasis on national security. It was a major part of the lead-up to the 2004 election, when some analysts warned, 'if Democrats are to have any hope of returning to power in 2004, or even of running competitively and keeping the U.S. two-party system healthy and balanced in the coming decade, they will have to convince the American people that they are as capable as Republicans of protecting the United States from terrorism and other security threats.'<sup>23</sup> While it was assumed that it would be quite some time before Democrats could actually win national elections based on their national security and foreign policy stances, the big hope was to have the party advance far enough so that they would stop *losing* national elections solely because of these two factors.<sup>24</sup>

This was arguably the biggest lesson learned from the Democratic failure of 2004, when Vietnam war veteran, Purple Heart winner, and long-time Foreign Affairs Senate stalwart John Kerry lost to Bush. A Democrat could always criticize a Republican for being too quick and eager to go right to the stick before considering the carrot. What needed to be ensured was that Americans could see Democrats as being not too reliant on the carrots and, quite frankly, looking too goofy when trying to handle the stick (undoubtedly a legacy that was made eternal when Massachusetts Governor Dukakis stuck his head out of the tank in 1988). It seems clear that Democrats are always quick to overreact to such accusations and criticisms.<sup>25</sup> They are even quicker to line up to show the chevrons symbolically tattooed on their arms, signifying their willingness and capability of defending America as stalwart and aggressively as any Republican.

In a race for national office any Democrat could expect to fend off and have to answer such common Republican charges. Ridiculous or not, unfounded or not, it is clear that Obama has felt the sting of the birther movement, which questioned his actual American citizenship, and has reacted to other groups that manipulated the Kenyan ancestry of his father to question his true allegiance to the United States. While his campaign rhetoric reflected where he could help take America in terms of global possibilities, his campaign reality was putting out foreign policy brush fires and national security gossip-mongering by proving he would not take the country anywhere too new, too fast.

So there is a dual-track - one personal, one political - that basically guaranteed from the beginning a let-down for all those who wanted to see the lofty Obama rhetoric truly transform into real-time foreign policy change. To ask President Obama to go against his natural personal inclination is possible. To ask him to go against it while also having him fight off the structural constraints hindering his party in terms of foreign policy is unrealistic. The Obama record seems to indicate this. When Barack Obama took office it really did not seem too far-fetched to anticipate changes that had heretofore not yet been explored or attempted in Presidential history. Perhaps the most poignant symbol of this was his acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize.

23. Dana H. Allin and Philip H. Gordon and Michael E. O'Hanlon, 'The Democratic Party and Foreign Policy,' *World Policy Journal*, Vol. 20, Issue 1, Spring 2003.
24. Dana H. Allin and Philip H. Gordon and Michael E. O'Hanlon, 'The Democratic Party and Foreign Policy,' *World Policy Journal*, Vol. 20, Issue 1, Spring 2003.
25. Brian C. Rathbun, 'Does One Right Make a Realist? Conservatism, Neoconservatism, and Isolationism in the Foreign Policy Ideology of American Elites,' *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 123, Issue 2, Summer 2008.



Make no mistake,' he declared, 'evil does exist in the world.' Obama even backtracked on some of his views about American exceptionalism: '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.' These were unadorned Reagan-and-Bush-like words spoken to an audience not inclined to appreciate them.<sup>26</sup>

Just two years previous the exact same speech would have been given silence at best and hisses at worst. But here, on that day, with that man, the audience listened with respect. There were many sentiments made by President Bush that testified to the goodness of America, to the love of freedom and sincere desire to see all peoples revel in liberty. All of these sentiments were usually received internationally with indifference and sometimes derision. Obama did not come to the Nobel ceremony with a radically different message. Rather, he came with a radically different *public perception*. But in the end, this perception was not premonition: very much like the Nobel Prize itself, Obama was recognized for what could be done rather than what was done. And that could be the ultimate disappointment about Obama foreign policy: he is only hard power in a soft package, producing nothing truly new or innovative.

### Conclusion: Calculation...Frustration...Indignation ~ The Real Obama

What has been discussed so far has been the strange interplay of forces when trying to analyze and understand President Obama's foreign policy stances. What all of the various groups have apparently missed or been unwilling to consider is just how 'conservative' the pragmatist Obama is when it concerns the world stage, impressive liberal rhetoric notwithstanding. Obama's foreign policy flexes through the prisms of calculation, frustration, and indignation, all of which have the effect of rendering his change potential rather limited.

Obama clearly values calculation. He is cautious and not overly prone to missteps and gaffes.<sup>27</sup> More importantly, given the criticism and nature of the attacks he endures from opponents, that strategic calculus only becomes more careful. He also suffers from frustration, caused by his own party and those on the far left, which felt they were voting for some sort of presidential messiah. Most efforts to please this extreme part of his constituency is likely considered by the pragmatist Obama as offering little reward in terms of future elections. He is no doubt a bit disappointed by his own failure to make a transformative mark on the global stage and enact change through the sheer force of his will. The international community still likes President Obama. But no states, in terms of their substantive foreign policy/national security interests, have radically altered their positions just because Obama said so.

How does this impact the foreign policy of Barack Obama? It has a centering effect that might even go beyond center and lean to the right. It is easy to forget that the George W. Bush era was not a tribute to classical conservative thought. On the contrary, the neoconservative ideology that underpinned many of his positions was decidedly aggressive in a wonderfully quixotic and somewhat liberal way. It was like taking Rousseau's 'forcing you to be free' and applying it to the might and capabilities of the United States military. An impressive show

26. Henry R. Nau, 'Obama's Foreign Policy,' *Policy Review*, Issue 160, Apr/May 2010.

27. Simon Serfaty, 'The Limits of Audacity,' *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 33, Issue 1, Winter 2009/2010.



indeed but not necessarily one lauded by true conservatives. So as many conservatives focus on the race to the White House in 2012, some are working on ensuring a 'true' conservatism is what marks a return to power. What does this 'true conservatism' look like?

- Consider every major American foreign policy decision in light of whether it safeguards or undermines U.S. primacy in world affairs.
- Distinguish the jihadist terrorist threat from other more distant dangers, name it, and treat it as the deadly threat that it is.
- Have modest expectations for what nonproliferation regimes can accomplish.
- Think of diplomacy as simply one tool in America's foreign policy toolkit.
- With regard to military intervention, the U.S. should be much more careful.
- Take demands for multilateralism with a grain of salt.
- Maintain and promote free trade wherever possible, not only in the immediate interest of American exporters and consumers, but in the broader interest of buttressing a world order that is astonishingly democratic.
- Be realistically modest about America's ability to fine-tune political reform in other countries.<sup>28</sup>

When looking over these principles of the new 'true' conservatism one question emerges: in what way do any of these principles go against President Obama's foreign policy positions? In reality, there is not a single principle listed above that runs in contradiction to current Obama foreign policy. This begs another question: is Obama's pragmatism really just masking an honest center-right perspective? For all of the various reasons and factors argued here, I believe it does.

Obama is not a global messiah. In terms of foreign policy he is not even a great liberal. He is also not the object of a super-secret conspiracy brought to power by invisible America-haters bent on destroying the United States from within. Sometimes it seems Obama is more often criticized from both sides for not being the caricature partisans would most like him to be.<sup>29</sup> But that ability to not cater to caricature is what will continue to make the distinction between policy rhetoric and policy reality a fascinating subject for Obama analysis. And if the Obama team learns how to capitalize on this it may be the formula needed to keep the ever-crucial independents in 2012.

Hard power in a soft package is not the route to produce new means in foreign policy-making and is likely not the route to excite the liberal Democratic base. Indeed, for those who now study and proclaim soft power as a truly new path to re-establish and maintain American hegemony so that it is both led by the United States but still infused with international cooperation (and in real terms, this has to be the ideal outcome for soft or smart power enthusiasts), they will be hard pressed to not express utter disappointment and dismay at the foreign policy tacks and maneuvers of President Obama.<sup>30</sup> In 1992 Bill Clinton effectively commandeered many conservative ideas to propel his candidacy forward. Most of those ideas, however, were coopted at the domestic level, covering mostly domestic issues. There is a

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28. Colin Dueck, 'Regaining a Realistic Foreign Policy,' *Policy Review*, Issue 162, Aug/Sep 2010.  
29. F. S. Larrabee, 'Obama's Foreign Policy: Opportunities and Challenges,' *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 11, Issue 1, 2009.  
30. James Stenberg, 'Real Leaders Do Soft Power: Learning the Lessons of Iraq,' *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 2, Spring 2008.



parallel here with Obama, only instead of domestic territory the focus for cooptation is the foreign policy realm. In this Obama could very well be the first Democrat to truly attempt such a maneuver not based on purely strategic election positioning. And while it may disturb the core Democratic base, I believe the evidence shows that this is who Obama truly is on foreign policy.

There is no doubt that Joseph Nye did not create soft power so that it could simply be used as a screen, a façade over which to cover what is ultimately nothing but a very traditional and relatively orthodox realist hard power core.<sup>31</sup> But this very tactic, soft power slip covers over the hard power furniture as it were, may end up being the very strategy that lets Obama earn a second term. If this proves to be the case, then the conceptual debate over and real-world impact of soft and smart power will have a very new and potentially problematic perspective to deal with.

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31. Joseph S. Nye Jr., 'Hard Decisions on Soft Power,' *Harvard International Review*, Vol. 31, Issue 2, Summer 2009.



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