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The Obama Administration's Foreign Policy: Balancing Isolationist Tendencies and Pressures for External Intervention

Osama Abu Arshid | July 2014

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Series: Policy Analysis

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Introduction

On May 28, 2014, US President Barack Obama delivered a speech at the West Point military academy in New York. In the speech, he attempted to redefine America's foreign policy after more than a decade of wars, all of which have taken their toll on the US, and laid out a comprehensive foreign policy vision for the remaining two and a half years of his second term in office.

The speech came amidst mounting criticism of US foreign policy under Obama's second administration. Domestic critics accuse the administration of pursuing a policy of withdrawal and isolationism and weakening the US's position on the world stage, thereby causing it to lose its leadership status.² At the same time, US allies have expressed growing anxiety over this foreign policy; their confidence in the United States has been shaken, and their reliance on its leadership has waned. From Syria to Ukraine, and from Nigeria to the South China Sea, Obama's administration is seemingly exhausted, unable to take decisive positions to reassure its nervous allies. Additionally, Obama's speech was delivered one day after his announcement of the plan to withdraw most US forces from Afghanistan at the end of this year, leaving in place a token force of 9,800 soldiers, who are to primarily play an advisory role in training Afghan troops and assist in the direction of operations to defeat al-Qaeda.³ Any US military presence post-2014 will depend on the Afghan government's signing a bilateral security agreement with the US. According to these plans, American troops will leave Afghanistan for good at the end of 2016, which marks the termination of Obama's presidency. This in itself has prompted sharp criticism from Obama's opponents, who accuse him of picking dates on an arbitrary basis for political rather than strategic

² Julie Pace and Jim Kuhnenn, "Obama seeks ground between intervention, isolation," the Big Story, the *Associated Press*, May 28, 2014, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/obama-seeks-recast-postwar-foreign-policy>.

³ "Obama announces plan to keep 9,800 US troops in Afghanistan after 2014," *FoxNews.com*, May 27, 2014,

<http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2014/05/27/obama-plans-to-keep-800-us-troops-in-afghanistan-after-2014-official-says/>; Steve Holland, "Obama plans to end US troop presence in Afghanistan by 2016," *Reuters*, May 27, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/05/27/us-usa-afghanistan-obama-idUSKBN0E71WQ20140527>.

considerations. This fosters an impression of weakness, and is one of the negative aspects of America's decline in power under his leadership.⁴

Obama's Dilemma

In essence, Obama's West Point speech was an attempt to defend his administration's foreign policy and its reduced reliance on military action compared to his predecessor George Bush (2001-2009). Obama also sought to strike a balance between those calling for isolationism, non-intervention internationally, and a focus on domestic affairs, and those gung-ho for intervention in international affairs and the use of America's unparalleled military might. Obama attempted to adopt a middle ground that would secure America's global leadership without entanglement. Whether he has succeeded in achieving this remains to be seen.

Obama's dilemma is that American public opinion, drained after more than 13 years of conflict in Afghanistan and Iraq and its government's war on terror, is opposed to any new military venture. Obama shares this view, and partly owes his presidential victory to the popular tide against these wars. Recent opinion polls, however, display that only 36 percent of the populace support Obama's foreign policy, compared with 49 percent who are against it.⁵ An additional contradiction in that part of Obama's stated rationale for reducing the reliance on unilateral American military force in foreign policy was that it had a negative impact on the US's image in world public opinion.⁶ In the months after his election, at the end of 2008, the American people initially shared this view and supported Obama's logic of working through frameworks of international alliances. In 2009, 60 percent of Americans considered that the United States' standing in the world improved after Obama's election, but today this proportion has fallen to 32 percent, compared with 43 percent who see that America's image around the world has

⁴ Fox News, "Obama announces plan...".

⁵ Sarah Dutton, Jennifer De Pinto, Anthony Salvanto and Fred Backus, "Americans disapprove of Obama's handling of Ukraine crisis," *CBS News*, March 25, 2014, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/americans-disapprove-of-obamas-handling-of-ukraine-crisis/>.

⁶ The White House, "Remarks by the President at the United States Military Academy Commencement Ceremony," Office of the Press Secretary, May 28, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/28/remarks-president-united-states-military-academy-commencement-ceremony>.

worsened under Obama.⁷ As a result, the American president is scrambling to explain his foreign policy. His problem now is not just with those opposed to and critical of his administration, but also with an American public that purportedly elected him as an anti-war candidate.

The defining features of US foreign policy as set out by Obama are not new, but they are framed within a comprehensive philosophical agenda and presented as a single package to the American public. In effect, the principles and formulae of that speech form the "Obama doctrine" which has been articulated in other speeches either in piecemeal fashion, or without philosophical packaging, witnessed most recently at the UN General Assembly in September 2013.

Obama: US Global Leadership is a Constant

In his West Point speech Obama stressed that the United States is the only power capable of displaying global leadership, but that this does not necessitate the unbridled use of military power, which is only justified in situations involving core US interests.⁸

Obama declared, "America has rarely been stronger relative to the rest of the world [and] those who argue otherwise—who suggest that America is in decline, or has seen its global leadership slip away—are either misreading history or engaged in partisan politics."⁹ In his view although US military might is unrivalled globally, this does not mean it should be used without a clear vision and with the burden falling upon the US alone. Military power is not the only determinant of international strength and leadership. Rather, other tools and elements define and consolidate the understanding of American leadership today. The odds of a direct threat against the US by any nation are minimal and do not by any means approximate the hazards faced during the Cold War. In addition, the global scene has changed since Obama assumed the presidency: US forces withdrew from Iraq at the end of 2011, al-Qaeda's leadership in the border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan has been decimated, and Osama bin Laden was eliminated in mid-2011.

⁷Dutton et. al., "Americans disapprove of Obama's...".

⁸ The White House, "Remarks by the President at the United States Military...", May 28, 2014.

⁹ Ibid.

With the changes in today's international environment, however, threats have also changed. Globalization and technology hold latent threats by placing power, once reserved for states, in the hands of individuals, thereby increasing the capacity of terrorists to do harm. The rise of Russia and China, and their provocative policies against their neighbors, poses challenges of another type to the US, its allies, and the entire international order. Additionally, emergent middle classes in a number of developing countries are exerting pressure on the American middle classes to seek a greater say regarding international issues. Simultaneously, advances in news and social media help cast light on global hotspots whose impact on international security and development are impossible to ignore.

Obama argues that with the changes to the sources and nature of global challenges and threats, and if America wishes to maintain its leadership position on the international level, it is essential to modify the sources of American power. This means not becoming embroiled in new wars with dubious, indeterminate features that would only lead to further erosion of American power, as happened with the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts. Hence, US military power is merely one of its sources of power. Obama's view is that the United States should invest further in rebuilding its economy, which "remains the most dynamic on Earth," and whose businesses remain the most innovative. Accordingly, the US is significantly increasing its energy independence. Today, America claims to be the hub of international alliances, and continues to attract immigrants seeking better opportunities. "The United States is and remains the one indispensable nation. That has been true for the century passed and it will be true for the century to come." Obama sums up the whole question here as being "not whether America will lead, but how we will lead—not just to secure our peace and prosperity, but also extend peace and prosperity around the globe."¹⁰

Starting with this redesigned international environment, in addition to America's weariness after more than a decade of wars, according to this vision, America is no longer willing to employ its military might without an urgent need for it. This would occur solely within the framework of direct US interests and required elements to forge closer alliances with its allies, isolate its enemies, and support free markets and democratic values. America wants international partnerships that accept its leadership, and are prepared to share the human and economic costs that involve a network of

¹⁰ Ibid.

alliances in Europe, Asia, and Africa. This network would work with international organizations, such as the UN, the IMF, and the World Bank, "isolating adversaries and strengthening the global order that has proved so beneficial to the United States and the world since 1945".¹¹ In this way, diplomacy, international coalition building, and economic sanctions have become the means to express American leadership under Obama's administration. To date, the Obama administration has restricted military force to the use of drones in its war against what Washington calls terrorism, as in Yemen and Pakistan.¹²

Critics of Obama's Approach: Hesitancy and Signs of Exhaustion Weaken American Leadership

This framing and formulation of the subject of American leadership in today's world has not comforted opponents of the administration or alleviated any worry among Washington's allies, who see what they consider signs of fatigue in terms of its international actions and leadership role.¹³ Critics have accepted that economic sanctions, diplomacy, international and regional alliances, and the hint of military force have succeeded in forcing Iran to negotiate over its nuclear program and al-Assad to hand over its arsenal of chemical weapons. However, they see the US's inability to prevent Russia's annexation of Crimea, China's encroachment on the South China Sea, and Syria's continued conflict as failures.¹⁴

¹¹ Fareed Zakaria, "Obama's leadership is right for today," *The Washington Post*, May 30, 2014,

http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/fareed-zakaria-obamas-disciplined-leadership-is-right-for-today/2014/05/29/7b4eb460-e76d-11e3-afc6-a1dd9407abcf_story.html.

¹² Peter Bergen and Megan Braun, "Drone is Obama's weapon of choice," *CNN.com*, September 19, 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/09/05/opinion/bergen-obama-drone/>.

¹³ Editorial Board, "At West Point, President Obama binds America's hands on foreign affairs," *The Washington Post*, May 28, 2014, http://www.wpost.com/opinions/president-obama-in-his-west-point-speech-binds-americas-hands-on-foreign-affairs/2014/05/28/f3db48fe-e66d-11e3-a86b-362fd5443d19_story.html.

¹⁴ Ibid.

According to critics, the challenge posed by these parties to America's global leadership is proof that US leadership around the globe has dissipated, and nervous allies have lost confidence in this hesitant leadership.¹⁵ They allege the Obama administration imparts the impression that the US is fatigued by war, thus emboldening the above-mentioned enemies to continue with their provocative policies without fearing a meaningful US response. Critics add that the Obama administration has failed to articulate American leadership even in its relations with its allies, as was seen when the nation failed to reach a trade agreement with Japan¹⁶ and the collapse of the recent Middle East peace talks this past April. The breakdown occurred in spite of US Secretary of State John Kerry's personal oversight. One must ask what alternative approach to foreign policy do critics of Obama propose? Are they contemplating a reflexive usage of military force without regard for its consequences?

Obama addressed those critical of his approach to foreign policy, saying: "Tough talk often draws headlines, but war rarely conforms to slogans,"¹⁷ adding, "Just because we have the best hammer [military] does not mean that every problem is a nail."¹⁸ His critics reject this, accusing him of distorting or oversimplifying their proposals. From their perspective, no one is expecting the use of military force for every problem—in Ukraine, for instance—but they are demanding tougher US positions and policies reflecting its global leadership role. For example, they have criticized the Obama administration's lack of response to the Ukrainian government's request for weapons to confront the Russian Army. They also point to the arbitrary setting of a date for withdrawal from Afghanistan and failure to arm the "moderate" Syrian revolutionaries, effectively weakening their struggle against the regime's forces and factions aligned with al-Qaeda.¹⁹

¹⁵Charles Krauthammer, "Obama's foreign policy of denial," *The Washington Post*, May 1, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/charles-krauthammer-obamas-foreign-policy-of-self-delusion/2014/05/01/3e17ad48-d16c-11e3-937f-d3026234b51c_story.html.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ The White House, "Remarks by the President at the United States Military...", May 28, 2014.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Editorial board, "At West Point, President Obama binds America..."

In his speech, Obama sought to position himself between two contradictory approaches to American foreign policy: isolationism and outright military interventionism. Obama's critics also reject this, accusing him of "posturing as the voice of reason between extremes."²⁰ This last point leads to an assessment of Obama's foreign policy for the remainder of his time in the White House.

Deconstructing the Obama Doctrine

Obama outlines four key elements that shape his foreign policy and that, in his view, guarantee American global leadership. In the first place, there exists a significantly reduced reliance on unilateral military action, unless core American interests are involved. In contrast, other instruments of American power are highlighted, such as the economy, alliances, and diplomacy. While this demonstrates a marked transition with the policies of his predecessor, the metamorphosis in this context ought not be viewed as an attempt by the US to abandon its crucial role as a hegemonic world power. Instead, it's a portrait of the manner in which this power is exercised, since Obama is more inclined to employ restraint and other instruments of power initially, before considering the usage of military force, whereas Bush was more inclined to use the military option as the first option. The four elements of the Obama foreign-policy doctrine as articulated in his recent West Point Academy speech are:

First, he noted that the US would use military force when the nation's core interests were at stake. Here, Obama adopts the similar principle he set down in his September 2013 speech before the UN General Assembly; however, he includes an array of factors in order to prevent any costly military adventures comparable to those undertaken by the preceding Bush administration.²¹ He stated, "In these circumstances, we still need to ask tough questions about whether our actions are proportional and effective and just. International opinion matters, but America should never ask permission to protect our people, our homeland, or our way of life."²²

²⁰Jake Miller, "Mission not accomplished? Obama speech fails to quiet critics," *CBS NEWS*, May 29, 2014, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/mission-not-accomplished-obama-speech-fails-to-quiet-critics/>.

²¹ The White House, "Remarks by President Obama in Address to the United Nations General Assembly," Office of the Press Secretary, September 24, 2013, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/24/remarks-president-obama-address-united-nations-general-assembly>.

²² The White House, "Remarks by the President at the United States Military...", May 28, 2014.

As noted in the determinants that he established in his UN speech last September, Obama distinguishes between military usage when linked to “core interests” and its employment when there are dangers on the international arena not directly threatening the United States. In such circumstances, according to Obama, “the threshold for military action must be higher.”²³ Obama straightforwardly signals here, as in his speech last year at the UN, that crimes against humanity, similar to those occurring in Syria today, are included in this context. Accordingly, Obama proposes an alternative to the use of force: “In such circumstances, we should not go it alone. Instead, we must mobilize allies and partners to take collective action. We have to broaden our tools to include diplomacy and development; sanctions and isolation; appeals to international law; and, if just, necessary and effective, multilateral military action. In such circumstances, we have to work with others because collective action in these circumstances is more likely to succeed, more likely to be sustained, less likely to lead to costly mistakes.”²⁴

In this last passage, Obama endeavors to create a balance between the preservation of core US interests, even if this demands military force, and restraint; in other words, avoiding any involvement in policies driven by heated and unbalanced discourse that are separate from the calculations and complexities of the real world. Obama wishes to distance himself, as much as possible, from ill-thought-through military adventures, such as those in Iraq, which cost the US an exorbitant amount in human and economic terms, when they are not directly linked with core American interests.²⁵

Secondly, for the foreseeable future, terrorism remains the most immediate and tangible threat to America at home and abroad, but Obama points out that it would be naïve and unsustainable to invade each country that harbors terrorist networks.²⁶ Today’s principal global threat no longer comes from a centralized al-Qaeda leadership; rather, it emerges from al-Qaeda affiliates and extremists, many with agendas focused in countries where they operate. Consequently, this lessens the possibility of large-scale

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Peter Bergen, “Obama says goodbye to American hubris,” *CNN.com*, May 28, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/05/28/opinion/bergen-obama-doctrine-smart-power/>.

²⁶ The White House, “Remarks by the President at the United States Military...,” May 28, 2014.

9/11-style attacks against the United States, but it increases the chances of US interests and citizens overseas being assaulted, as happened in Benghazi, Libya in September 2012. However, if military force were not necessarily employed in response to such threats, what would be the US reaction instead?

In his speech, Obama only presented one practical proposal that defines his foreign policy. In addition to relying on special forces operations, such as taking out Bin Laden in Pakistan and the drone attacks underway in Yemen and Pakistan, his administration would concentrate on offering advice and military and security forces training in the states of concern. This is occurring in Afghanistan, where the bulk of US forces are currently preparing to depart by the year's end, leaving behind a token force to offer guidance and training until the end of 2016. Obama proposes the formation of a network of international alliances from Asia to Africa to build partnerships that will fight terrorism. He announced a 5 billion USD proposal to create a partnership fund that will assist states fighting terrorism in their territory. The White House stated that Obama would work with Congress to arrange the necessary funding from the tight federal budget. The funds would serve to train and equip nations to confront "violent extremism and terrorist ideology."²⁷

In this context, it should be noted that Obama includes Syria's conflict in the category of countering terrorism. Yet, the American president has stated that he would not send troops to Syria to help stop the bloodshed, stating that the conflict in Syria, despite its enormous human toll, does not represent a core US interest meriting intervention. Accordingly, there is no justification for involving the American Army in a "civil war" because there is no military solution able to alleviate the terrible suffering in the short term.²⁸ What matters to Obama is supporting the "moderate" Syrian opposition, helping it confront al-Assad's forces, while simultaneously tackling the "terrorists," and preventing their influence from spreading to neighboring states that are hosting Syrian refugees—Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan.²⁹

²⁷ Steve Holland, "Obama fights foreign policy critics, pledges aid to Syria groups," Reuters, May 28, 2014, <http://ca.reuters.com/article/idCAKBN0E70NB20140528>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ The White House, "Remarks by the President at the United States Military...", May 28, 2014.

There is a blatant contradiction here in that Obama has not clarified what criterion determined the US's participation in air-borne military action and missile strikes against Muammar Gadhafi's regime in 2011 was indeed a core US interest. However, it apparently excludes the currently existing situation in Syria, where military intervention or support in favor of the opposition fighting, "a dictator who has killed his own people," is not demanded.

The Obama administration has sought to resolve the conflict in Syria by building international and regional coalitions. Additionally, recourse to the UN and sanctions, attempting to achieve a political solution through the two Geneva conferences that brought together the Syrian regime and the opposition (Geneva I in June 2012 and Geneva II in February 2014), and the threat of force after the government was accused of using chemical weapons against its own people in August 2012.³⁰ With the exception of al-Assad's surrender of chemical weapons to avert a military strike, all of these efforts have failed. To date, more than 160,000 Syrians have lost their lives, millions have been made homeless, and the country has practically been destroyed, yet Obama's administration still claims to be searching for a political resolution to the conflict, without clarifying how this is to be achieved. This raises doubts as to whether Obama's foreign policy truly embraces the considered use of force and American leadership, or whether it is indicative of an American withdrawal from world affairs.

Another factor that Obama stresses is the need for restraint and level-headedness when the occasion to employ force exists. He proposes an alternative to the unilateral use of this US power as represented by action initiated through international organizations such as the UN, the IMF, and the World Bank, or through military alliances such as NATO.³¹ This also applies to sharing the costs since his administration's logic is based on a minimalist use of forceful influence in foreign policy and an endeavor to obtain legitimacy and international support, as well as negotiations between enemies.³² In other words, Obama, once more, stresses the effectiveness of other means within the

³⁰ The White House, "Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps," Office of the Press Secretary, August 20, 2012, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/08/20/remarks-president-white-house-press-corps>.

³¹ The White House, "Remarks by the President at the United States Military...", May 28, 2014.

³² Nicholas Kravov, "Iraq war defines foreign policy," *The Washington Times*, January 15, 2009, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/jan/15/iraq-war-defines-foreign-policy/?page=all>.

realm of America's global leadership, including diplomacy, economic sanctions, and strategic alliances.

Obama provides several examples in this context to affirm what he considers successes for this approach. He points to US action with its allies against Russia after its invasion of the Crimea region of Ukraine, and the effort to politically and economically isolate Russia by freezing its membership in the G8; however, he neglects to mention that this action failed to prevent Russia from annexing Crimea to the Russian Federation.³³ To further support his claims, Obama points to the US-led international coalition to impose tough economic sanctions on Iran, which led to the table for talks on its nuclear program. Obama however failed to mention that these sanctions have not prevented Iran from supporting the Syrian regime militarily, politically, and economically. The same applies to what Obama says regarding growing Chinese military and economic power, which is worrying US allies in the Asia Pacific, particularly since China has encroached in the South China Sea and entered into naval disputes with Japan, Vietnam, and the Philippines, all US allies. Although the United States has reiterated its support for its allies and warned China against infringing on their territorial waters, China continues to impose greater control over international waters and the territorial waters of these states.³⁴

The differences between the foreign policies of Obama and Bush are evident. Bush's administration stressed the US's right to act unilaterally, with or without legal cover, when it sensed any present or future threat to its security or interests.³⁵ In contrast, Obama stresses giving priority to action through international channels and regional alliances. It should be noted that the harbingers of a return to the approach of acquiring an international umbrella for any significant and costly action first appeared during Bush's second term (2005-2009), prior to Obama assuming the presidency in

³³ Editorial board, "At West Point, President Obama..."

³⁴ Trefor Moss and Julian Barnes, "US Making 'Important' Mistakes, Chinese General Says," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 31, 2014, <http://online.wsj.com/articles/u-s-making-important-mistakes-chinese-general-says-1401526934>.

³⁵ A'ishahWaheed, "The US invasion of Iraq: failings and consequences," *E-International Relations Students*, August 1, 2011, <http://www.e-ir.info/2011/08/01/why-did-the-united-states-invade-iraq-in-2003-and-what-went-wrong-with-the-subsequent-occupation-what-impact-has-the-war-had-on-us-foreign-policy/>.

2009. This was linked to the enormity of the failure and embroilment resulting from the Bush administration's declaring war in Iraq without legal cover and without a broad-based military alliance. American unilateralism led to the relatively unproblematic conquest of Iraq and the fall of its regime, but Iraq's occupation has proven to have its own complexities that US forces were not prepared for. For this reason, the Bush administration, once it had realized that it was drowning in the Iraqi quagmire,³⁶ returned to the UN—two months after the invasion—to request assistance in a country where US policies had erased all the components of national unity, popular cohesion, and the legal system.³⁷

Finally, embodying America's global leadership according to Obama is the willingness to act on behalf of human: "America's support for democracy and human rights goes beyond idealism—it is a matter of national security."³⁸ In saying this, Obama implicitly criticizes oppression, corruption, and tyranny, and points to the unrest in some Arab states, which he perceives as proof of the refusal to submit to tyrannical governments. He also tries to accredit a substantial part of the progress in democratization and human rights around the world to American initiatives in the form of diplomacy, foreign aid, partnerships with governments and individuals, and the sacrifices of the US army.

Nevertheless, Obama remains faithful to what he stated in his UN address last September. These issues, despite their importance for US interests and national security, do not signify that US interests and relationships are contingent on them alone. In this context, Obama is clearly indicating that American relations with Egypt, which witnessed a military coup at the beginning of July 2013 against its first civilian president, are anchored in security interests—from maintaining the peace with Israel, to shared efforts against violent extremism. For this reason, according to Obama's logic,

³⁶ The term "Iraqi quagmire" is attributed to Dick Cheney, former US vice-president under George Bush. He coined it during a 1994 interview when he defended the decision of the Bush Sr. administration not to invade Iraq at the beginning of the 1990s. The recording of this interview was released in August 2007, see Alex Spillius, "Dick Cheney Iraq 'quagmire' video hits the web," *The Telegraph*, August 21, 2007, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1560915/Dick-Cheney-Iraq-quagmire-video-hits-the-web.html>.

³⁷ For more detail, see "UN Role in Iraq," *Global Policy Forum*, <https://www.globalpolicy.org/political-issues-in-iraq/un-role-in-iraq.html>.

³⁸ The White House, "Remarks by the President at the United States Military...", May 28, 2014.

cooperation has not been disrupted with the new government; however, there continues to be pressure for reforms that Egyptians have demanded.

In practice, what Obama is stating is that he acknowledges the reality in any country, notwithstanding its violations of human rights, provided it protects US interests. In effect, he is adopting a pragmatic discourse rather than an ideological one, contrary to the claims he makes elsewhere in his speech. US support for the coup that took place in Egypt, in addition to its maintenance of alliances with some states that violate human rights, undoubtedly confirms this.

Summary

The foremost message Obama wished to impart in this speech is that he is no proponent of American isolationism, though his opponents accuse him of being so; however, he does reject the excessive use of American military force. The problem is that most critics of the Obama administration, conservative and liberal alike, are not so much requesting international US military campaigns as asking Obama to fill the void left by his policy of global retreat, which US allies view with suspicion. His speech did little to assuage their fears and criticisms, and even the US's two chief liberal newspapers, the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, criticized the president's foreign policy. The *Post* accused him of undermining the allies' belief in American leadership, and the *Times* noted that the speech lacked inspiration, and avoided dealing with many pressing issues, such as how to deal with the rapacious policies of Russia and China.³⁹ Obama is not wholly to blame for the supposed weakness of the United States' global role. He inherited from Bush a country that not only lacked morale, but was exhausted economically and militarily; a country whose ability and capacity to launch successive wars without paying a high price had declined. Obama's May 28, 2014 speech at West Point military academy echoed his two previous addresses at the academy and tackled the same challenges confronted at the start of his presidency.⁴⁰

³⁹ Editorial board, "At West Point, President Obama..."; The Editorial Board, "President Obama Misses a Chance on Foreign Affairs," *The New York Times*, May 28, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/29/opinion/president-obama-misses-a-chance-on-foreign-affairs.html?ref=opinion&r=1>.

⁴⁰ See: The White House, "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan," Office of the Press Secretary, December 1, 2009,

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan>. The White House, "Remarks by the President at United States Military Academy at West Point Commencement," Office of the Press Secretary, May 22, 2010, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-united-states-military-academy-west-point-commencement>.