

THE 2014 NSS: TOWARDS AN OBAMA DOCTRINE?

In 2014, or possibly as early as 2013, the Obama administration will publish its second National Security Strategy (NSS). Its parameters are determined by substantial budget cuts. Therefore, the US will increasingly focus on its core interests. The next NSS will mainly be a response to three challenges: The redefinition of existing alliances; a renewed focus on Asia; and the containment of US drone missions. However, it is unlikely that the new NSS will constitute a coherent “Obama Doctrine”.



US President Barack Obama has appointed John Brennan, one of the architects of US armed drone strikes, as new CIA director. Washington, 7 January 2013.

REUTERS / Jason Reed

“[W]e will not hesitate to act alone, if necessary, to exercise our right of self-defense by acting preemptively...” These were the words of then US president George W. Bush in his 2002 National Security Strategy (NSS), marking the emergence of the “Bush Doctrine”. It formed the programmatic underpinning of the invasion of Iraq in March 2003. The 2002 NSS shows how important a National Security Strategy can be for the US and the rest of the world. Will US President Barack Obama follow up on the 2010 NSS and seize the second chance to formulate an “Obama Doctrine”?

In 1986, the US Congress required the government to submit annual reports on its strategy for national security. Since the presidency of Bill Clinton (1993–2001), the

established convention has been to issue such a report every four years. This ensures greater public attention for the NSS as a fundamental document on security policy. The importance of the NSS is derived mainly from three aspects: First of all, it gives the president the opportunity to establish foreign-policy priorities. Secondly, the long process of consultation leading up to its appearance involves multiple ministries and commits them to shared positions. Therefore, the process of its emergence may in many ways be more significant than the potential consequences of the strategy. Third, by submitting an NSS, every administration establishes its own benchmarks against which its foreign and security policy will be measured and compared for the following four years.

Obama began his second and final term in office in January 2013. Traditionally, US presidents use their second term to focus on foreign policy. Since they are not running for re-election, they can be less considerate of domestic lobby groups. Furthermore, campaigning for the president’s succession begins long before the end of his or her second term, which means that it is difficult to win Congressional support for ambitious domestic reform projects. However, foreign policy is the prerogative of the president; it is here that the president still has the most leeway.

So far, Obama has mainly made his mark in domestic politics. Upon coming into office, he promised “nationbuilding at home” instead of protracted, costly wars in the Middle East and Afghanistan. In 2011, the last US troops left Iraq, and “Obama’s War” in Afghanistan will largely be concluded by 2014. What comes next? The challenge for Obama lies in making his security policy agenda more explicit. In doing so, he is subject to strict limits imposed by his budget planning.

Contradictory effects of budget constraints

In June 2010, then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen stated that the rapid increase of the national debt constituted the largest threat to national security. Ever since, it has become clear that the defence budget will account for a significant part of the government’s austerity measures. Speaking at the Pentagon in January 2012, President Obama

announced a defence budget cut of about US\$500 billion over a ten-year period. On 1 March 2013, furthermore, the so-called “Sequester” took effect, imposing another substantial round of general budget cuts to the tune of US\$1.2 billion until 2021, which will to a large extent affect the defence budget. Overall, the defence budget for 2013 was about 12 per cent less than that of the previous year – the most significant budget reduction since 1955. While the Pentagon hopes that the Sequester will soon be ended and that the numbers will increase again in fiscal year 2014, that is far from certain.

These budget cuts set the parameters for Obama’s security policy planning. The effects of reductions so far are already being felt in the military. In the historical context, the troop reductions announced in 2012 are comparatively low, however – even after the cutback of land forces by about 100’000 soldiers and marines by 2017, the total force level will still

be higher than before 11 September 2001. In the US Navy and Air Force, the planned bud-

get economies will affect the number and quality of ship, aircraft, and weapons systems purchases. Despite the planned reductions of numbers, the armed forces are to become more flexible and agile. Therefore, despite the intended downsizing, there will be no fundamental impairment of operational readiness.

However, should the Sequester, which affects all areas of the defence budget, be upheld in addition to the regular budget cuts, the consequences would be far-reaching: Exercises would have to be curtailed or cancelled, and maintenance of equipment and gear would have to be reduced. In combination with the already planned downsizing, the effects on combat readiness of many units would be considerable. Therefore, the chiefs of all services have publicly warned of drastic consequences.

Nevertheless, the military dominance of the US is not immediately at stake. Should an agreement be reached in Congress and the Sequester be ended, which is likely at least in the medium term, the US armed forces will remain peerless overall and also unmatched in most conceivable conflict scenarios. At the same time, the budget cuts have a constructive side-effect: They force the government to prioritise and offer a justification for the deep cuts that

had been pending in any case. In short: While the US will not remain able to cover all eventualities in the future, the country will remain dominant, for a long time, in the areas where it chooses to be.

Three new developments

The first NSS under President Obama was published in May 2010. It primarily marked a decisive shift away from the foreign policy of George W. Bush’s administration. The new focus was on sustaining the foundations of US strength at home (education, economic power, a healthy national budget), greater adherence to international law, a focus on the “good war” in Afghanistan, and avoidance of an energy-sapping overstretch.

These principles, which rest on pragmatism and domestic politics, continue to determine the course. The next four years, too, will be characterised by a concentration on core US interests. However, three new interdependent policy fields have

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come into view since 2010 that will need to be shaped by the Obama administration: First of all, it will redefine its own role as “leading from behind” and at the same time increase pressure on its European NATO allies. Secondly, the stronger US alignment towards Asia will continue, with consequences for all fields of foreign and defence policy. And third, there will be increasing pressure on President Obama to contain the increasing use of drone strikes and embed them in a legal and coherent strategy.

Redefining existing alliances

During the NATO intervention in Libya that began in March 2011, the White House referred to Obama’s policy as “leading from behind”. This term implies that Washington will be making increasing requirements of its allies and will not be engaged militarily on all fronts, though it will offer political backing throughout. For instance, at the start of the Libyan mission, the US contributed the main share of forces. Also, most of the operations were led from the United States Africa Command in Stuttgart, Germany. From the start, however, the US had planned to hand off responsibility to its allies. Indeed, NATO took on operational control after a few weeks. About two years later, in spring of 2013, the US once again let France take the lead in the combat mission in Mali and limited itself to coordination and support with niche capabilities such as drones.

The message is clear: The US will no longer play a key role in relatively uncomplicated operations on the periphery of Europe. This is something Obama’s predecessors have also tried to make clear. Since the end of the Cold War, the US is less and less inclined to become engaged in the place of the weaker military forces of its European allies. The current president, however, is applying this precept rigorously due to budget constraints, the general war-weariness of the US public, and the shift towards Asia. The considerable logistical, technological, and operative problems that the European states encountered in Libya clearly reveal the consequences of this increasing US reticence and prompted words of warning from then US defense secretary Robert Gates to the European allies in June 2011 not to neglect their defence efforts.

It is important to note that even under Obama, “leading from behind” is not a general principle of US foreign policy. Should their core interests be affected, the US will continue to be willing to act unilaterally and lead “from the front”: Examples include such scenarios as an attack on Iran or certain operations in Syria. Contrary to the expectations of some critics, President Obama has not shied away from using military force – he has simply done so more selectively.

The focus on Asia and the “conventional turn”

The Obama administration regards those core interests as being situated primarily in Asia. This shift in focus of US foreign and security policy from the Atlantic to the Pacific, which some observers have also characterised as a “pivot”, had already crystallised at the beginning of Obama’s presidency. The president announced the new priorities in November 2011 – notably, during a speech in the Australian parliament. In the process, Obama made unmistakably clear that the US always has been and remains a Pacific nation.

In the 20th century, the US has waged three major wars in the Asia-Pacific region (World War II, Korea, and Vietnam), as well as countless minor and on-going operations. Tens of thousands of US soldiers from all branches of the armed forces are permanently based in Japan and South Korea; furthermore, the US guarantees the security of Taiwan. Nevertheless, from 1945 until recently, a majority of the country’s resources, especially military ones, have been tied down in Europe. The US Navy

US armed drone missions

- Responsibility:** US drone missions are operated by two organisations: the military and the civilian foreign intelligence service CIA. According to reports, responsibility rests with the CIA in the case of Pakistan as well as possibly other countries. At least in Somalia and Libya, the military's Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) has the lead. In Yemen, both organisations appear to be involved. The two have separate decision-making processes and separate, but partially overlapping lists of target persons. According to reports, the target lists are approved by President Obama personally; execution is carried out by the JSOC and the CIA. At least in some cases where civilians might be victims in addition to the target persons, Obama has also reserved the final approval of missions for himself. An exclusive responsibility of the military for drone missions is currently being discussed.
- Control:** Due to strict secrecy, legal and political control of the government by the US Congress is noticeably weaker in this area than with respect to conventional operations. The assassination of US citizen Anwar al-Awlaqi in Yemen in September 2011 raised fundamental questions concerning the legality of killings without the constitutionally guaranteed right to due process. This was also the reason for severe criticism on the occasion of John Brennan's nomination as CIA director. As Obama's counter-terrorism advisor, he had previously been a decisive figure in coordinating the drone missions.
- Targets:** Initially, only individually designated high-ranking leaders of groups in Pakistan were targeted by drone strikes. In recent years, the strikes have increasingly been expanded to mid-level leaders and ordinary fighters. In certain regions, Obama has given permission for so-called "signature strikes". Such attacks are ordered based on intelligence denoting movement profiles and other indicators even if the names and functions of the targeted individuals are not known with certainty. At least in Pakistan, the strikes appear to have had considerable effects on the core of al-Qaida and groups allied with it. They have severely depleted the ranks of its leadership and made internal communication very difficult. However, the effectiveness of the strikes is controversial with regard to the other areas where they are used.

divided its fleet equally between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans – which, considering the much greater size of the latter, amounted to an emphasis on Europe.

The main motivation for this renewed shift towards Asia is the rise of China. The increasingly assertive behaviour of Beijing, in particular in maritime conflict with many of its neighbouring states, has unsettled the region. Many states demand a credible and reinforced US presence to balance China's influence. Among these are formal allies such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia, but also states that continue to steer a course between the US and China, such as Vietnam and Thailand. As outlined above, the budget cuts both require and facilitate prioritisation: Already in January 2012, President Obama emphasised that the expected economies in the defence budget will not affect the US military presence in Asia. The US will even reinforce that presence in countries such as the Philippines, Australia, and Singapore, among other places. Overall, the US Navy will divide its forces at a ratio of 60:40 between the Pacific and the Atlantic.

The shift towards Asia also implies the return of conventional conflict scenarios. Unlike in Afghanistan and Iraq, the emphasis in Asia will be less on counterinsurgency and training security forces. Instead, it will be about access to sea- and airspaces, particularly where that access is to be secured

by force; defence of allies against conventional threats; and increasingly, building and expanding a missile defence system. Measures to combat terrorism, as supported by the US for years in the Philippines, will most likely remain the exception. While funding for special operations forces will continue to increase (as will their global presence), overall, the US will once more prepare increasingly for "classic warfare" and make preparations accordingly.

This "conventional turn" will be felt in the distribution of resources within the US military. Without question, this will benefit the Air Force and the Navy, i.e., those branches that had seen their relevance questioned in recent years. Their share in the defence budget as allocated to the armed services in 2014 is about 69 per cent. Likewise, the trend towards greater relevance of special operations forces remains unchanged. The price will be paid mainly by the conventional ground forces. This bureaucratic competition over resources reflects strategic decisions that have a great deal of impact on the military options available in the future.

Containing the drone war

The use of drones, or unmanned aerial vehicles has become a hallmark of Obama's counter-terrorism policy. Nowhere is his

willingness to use military force more evident than in the struggle against al-Qaida and its allied organisations. However, this is also where the pressure is greatest on Obama to explain his policy transparently. One of the greatest challenges for the president in his second term will be to impart strategic coherence, a sustainable legal basis, and a stable political framework to the escalating drone war.

Already under President George W. Bush, armed drones were deployed against targets in Pakistan, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Since Obama's accession to office in January 2009, however, the area of operation has been widened and both the number of mission and the number of groups targeted by drones have significantly increased. The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) has found that drones were used for 95 per cent of all assassinations carried out outside of the main combat areas of Afghanistan and Iraq. Under President Obama, the number of such missions outside of the two main theatres of operations have increased sevenfold, from a total of 50 strikes under George W. Bush to 350 and counting under Obama. In addition, so far unarmed drones are reported to operate at least in Nigeria and Mali.

There is no doubt that significant parts of the local populations reject the strikes vehemently. Among the reasons are sympathy for the killed fighters and anger over the deaths of innocent bystanders, which are tacitly taken into account as unavoidable or unintended collateral damage. As the number of drone strikes increases, targeting not just key personnel of jihadist groups but also other actors, many critics argue that the line is blurred between international terrorists, national Islamist fighters, and local insurgents.

Obama needs to impart strategic coherence and a sustainable legal and political basis to the drone war.

This policy is meanwhile being criticised both in the US media and in Congress as well as by renowned think tanks. In view of the drone missions, which are seen as haphazard and excessive, observers are becoming increasingly sceptical. They argue that the drone strikes lack both an unequivocal legal basis and a concept for a political framework. The challenge for such a strategy is to redefine the struggle against international terrorism and thus to impart coherence to the new technological capabilities of the CIA and the military – for in-

stance, though coordination with development projects and long-term military aid or complementary diplomatic initiatives. Without such an overarching strategy, the critics say, the air strikes will remain merely a short-term successful tactic that may however have detrimental long-term consequences.

NSS 2014 – Defining an Obama Doctrine?

President Obama faces numerous foreign-policy challenges. A number of the problem areas that have been on his agenda since he came into office – such as Iran's nuclear programme, the challenge from North Korea, the war in Afghanistan, and the impasse in the Middle East peace process – continue to demand his attention. However, if he wishes to formulate a programmatic and coherent NSS that will impart a solid foreign-policy profile to the three remaining years of his second term, he must find answers to the most important new questions – redefining alliances, the attendant renewed focus on Asia, and containing the drone war.

Obama is a pragmatic president. The ideological foundations of his predecessor are alien to him; however, neither is he bound by some of the established traditions of US foreign policy. He is also sceptical towards “master plans” in foreign policy. He is guided by a clearheaded view of US interests as defined by himself. Thus, the NSS 2014 will most likely not contain an “Obama Doctrine” that could, or would wish to, match the Bush Doctrine of 2002 in terms of coherence, ideological conviction, and claim to absolute validity. However, Barack Obama will nevertheless need to present answers – merely distancing himself from his predecessor will not suffice to give profile to his foreign policy.

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I ISSN: 2296-0244

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