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Presidential Doctrines, the Use of Force and International Order

Did the US' military and legal reactions to the 9/11 attacks fundamentally transform its foreign and security policies? Joseph Siracusa doesn't think so. He argues that the so-called Bush and Obama Doctrines have had more in common with previous presidential approaches than most people realize.

By Joseph Siracusa for ISN

In the ever-changing landscape of international relations, the extent to which the actions of the United States contribute to justice and order remains a source of contentious debate. Indeed, it is difficult to find a point in recent history when the United States and its foreign policy have been subject to such polarised and acrimonious reflection, both domestically and internationally. Notwithstanding recent 'decline' debates and the rise of emerging powers, the United States continues to hold a formidable advantage over its chief rivals in terms of formal power assets more than twenty-five years after the end of the Cold War. Few anticipated this situation; on the contrary, many assumed that, after a brief moment of unipolarity following the collapse of the Soviet Union, international affairs would soon regain a certain symmetry. Instead, US hegemony is still par for the course. In this context, because the foreign policy 'doctrines' of American presidents remain an important driver of the outlook of the United States, these doctrines continue to play a significant role in shaping international order. Though they have veered from isolationist to interventionist to expansionist over the years, these doctrines in fact exhibit a remarkable continuity – even in the post 9/11 era. Each doctrine has sought to shape international order – through military means if necessary – in accordance with a vision of American 'exceptionalism.'

Isolationism and empire

Many analysts believe that the only thing we need to understand about a state in International Relations is how much power it has – and that other factors are largely irrelevant. This approach, however, is especially inappropriate in the case of the United States. In particular, it ignores the enduring influence on American foreign policy of the manner in which the United States ascended to power in the first place. The biggest oversight may be the influence of the discourse of exceptionalism – associated with the country's revolutionary origins and with the tension between isolationism and expansionism that characterized American foreign policy in the 19th century. During the Cold War, this discourse was modified through a series of presidential foreign policy 'doctrines' and continues to have ramifications for U.S. conduct and international affairs today.

The first American foreign policy doctrine – the Washington doctrine – emerged out of the disorder of the years before and after the American Revolution. While the new constitution orchestrated a new supreme government that attained international recognition, the young state maintained significant political and commercial ties with European powers and had to contend with European interests along its northern, western, and southern borders. In his farewell address, George Washington famously implored his successors to be wary of the ‘vicissitudes’ of European politics and to avoid ‘entangling alliances’. This wariness was duly cultivated by his successors. By the conclusion of Thomas Jefferson’s presidency in 1809 a new style of American diplomacy had appeared. The desire to avoid complex and potentially harmful affairs with “outside states” would become a significant theme in U.S. foreign policy for well over the next hundred years.

Throughout the 19th century, however, the impulse towards isolationism was in constant conflict with the reality of a growing empire. The acquisition of territory via annexation not only shaped American identity, it ultimately provided the state with a set of geographical, economic and security assets. In ‘securing’ the region not just from Europeans, but also from native Americans, territorial expansion was the crucial factor in the subsequent ascent of the United States to superpower status in the 20th century. A significant early manifestation of this ‘moment’ was the assertion of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, which sought to eject European powers from the Western hemisphere altogether, as this was now being imagined as an American sphere of influence.

The tension between isolationism and imperialism was carried forward into the 20th century. In this sense, Woodrow Wilson’s 1917 war aims can be seen as a globalized version of the Monroe Doctrine. Though grounded in the discourse of exceptionalism that had justified a tendency towards isolationism, Wilson’s efforts ultimately re-entangled the United States in European (and global) affairs. Despite a brief period of isolationism after the Great War, the 1920s mark the beginning of the period in which the establishment of an international order based on American values became the foundation of US foreign policy.

A global Monroe Doctrine?

After World War II, the economic and technological superiority of the US provided the Truman administration with a much wider array of policy options. Combined with the threat of Soviet expansionism and Stalin’s apparent inability to adhere to the agreements established in wartime conferences, the Truman administration feared that leftist ideology would ripple throughout Western Europe if it did not attempt to impede it. As the ideological divergence between the two superpowers widened, the United States abandoned its fear of entangling alliances. As the terrain of international relations became increasingly ‘bipolar’, the largest and most destructive arms race in history ensued.

Extending the Truman doctrine of ‘containment,’ Eisenhower and Kennedy would project US-Soviet competition into new domains. Eisenhower pursued a more proactive policy of ‘liberating’ states from the Communist threat, while also incorporating the concept of massive retaliation into the suite of containment instruments. While Khrushchev’s policies towards Berlin and the West were less provocative than Stalin’s, Washington affirmed the belief (powerfully articulated by George Kennan) that the Soviet Union could only be managed through American military power. In this regard, Kennedy’s doctrine of ‘flexible response’ was ultimately an adaptation of Eisenhower’s, while Lyndon Johnson demonstrated ‘Monroe-esque’ thinking in his concern that Communism was creeping into the regional sphere of influence in Latin America.

Subsequent doctrinal variations broadly reinforced this theme of global management through military power. While Nixon required allies to assume primary responsibility for their own defense, this retreat from unconditional defense guarantees to lesser allies was motivated as much by financial concerns

as by the re-examination of strategic and foreign policy objectives. It reflected Nixon's goals of détente and nuclear arms control with the Soviet Union and the establishment of formal diplomatic relations with China. Concern over the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and internal developments in Iran would soon lead to a renewed emphasis on confrontation. Zbigniew Brzezinski, the architect of the Carter doctrine, believed that détente had allowed the Soviets to expand under the guise of superpower co-operation and stressed the need to compete with Moscow ideologically, particularly in the developing world. In a final variation, Reagan's strategy entailed opposing Soviet influence by supporting anti-Communist guerrillas against the governments of Soviet-backed client states. On balance, Reagan's approach was more offensive than those of his predecessors—particularly in regard to newly declared leftist states. Though largely conceived as a response to a perceived lack of American will—the so-called 'Vietnam syndrome'—the momentum of the Reagan doctrine certainly helped to trigger the collapse of the Soviet economy at the end of the 1980s.

Bush, Obama and the use of force

To many, the events of 9/11 seemed to sweep away the foundations of US foreign and security strategy. In many ways, the fear that chemical, nuclear and biological weapons could be secured by non-state actors did transform the doctrinal foundations American security established throughout the Cold War and during the Clinton administration. The new strategy of the Bush administration, for example, revealed a profound new sense of vulnerability, drawing extensively upon fears of a "nuclear 9/11." Moreover, in pointing to a "new" environment of global terrorist networks, "rogue states", and WMD proliferation, Bush called for radically different responses to security threats, including the use of "pre-emptive" measures to counter long-term, potential threats, "even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy's attack."

Yet there are equally significant continuities between post- 9/11 doctrines and pre-9/11 ones. For Bush, of course, the United States was now at war with a global adversary that was every bit as dangerous as those it had previously encountered in the twentieth century. While what became known as the "War on Terror" was deeply contested - with a lengthy spectrum of analysts questioning its strategic rationality, its implications for relations with the wider Muslim world, and its domestic legality - the United States was clearly moving into a more volatile epoch, similar in character to the Cold War in terms of diplomatic tensions, national security challenges, and the constant spectre of a subversive antagonist determined to undermine international order itself. Although the election of Barack Obama in 2008 raised hopes of a dramatic shift in US foreign policy domain, little has actually changed in the US's approach to military force and international order.

While the Obama administration has been more willing to offer legal justifications for the use of force, the content of these justifications continues to stretch the self-defence article, mixing pre-emption and prevention. By continuing to separate the *imminence* of a threat from its *immediacy*, the Obama administration has indirectly condoned one of the Bush doctrine's most heavily criticized features. This broad interpretation of the right of self-defense, as well as the congressional authorization to use force, have enabled the Obama administration's drone program and the air strikes against the Islamic State (ISIS) in Iraq and Syria in 2014-15. Indeed, over a decade after the 9/11 attacks and the identification of Al Qaeda-affiliated groups as 'lawful' targets, this justification for the use of force is increasingly evident and could expand further after Obama's tenure in office concludes.

In the absence of an independent judicial system capable of enforcing international law, one is tempted to consider US security policies to be in pursuit of a general authorization for the use of force *itself*. While Obama restrained policies in Libya and Syria demonstrated a disinclination towards using force on a large scale, this may paradoxically lower the threshold for using force in the context of targeted killings through drones. Drones, of course, have proven attractive for a president who has

little interest in putting 'troops on the ground' and recognizes the domestic popularity of this 'dehumanized' form of warfare. Moreover, in the context of the Arab Spring, Obama reserved the right to use force unilaterally to defend U.S. security interests and came close to doing so when chemical weapons surfaced in Syria in 2013.

In the post 9/11 era, therefore, presidential doctrines continue to play a significant role in the foreign policy outlook of the United States. Due to the United States' vast national security apparatus, remarkably dynamic economy, complex array of alliances, and highly exportable popular culture, these doctrines remain an important feature of international order. Though they have veered from isolationist to interventionist to expansionist, they also exhibit a remarkable degree of continuity. Each has invariably sought to shape international order in accordance with a vision of American 'exceptionalism' - and to do so through military means if necessary.

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