

Understanding Barack Obama's Legacy in the Middle East: Leading from behind and Obama's strategic vision



Leiden University

Master of Arts in International Relations

MA Thesis International Studies

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15 900 words

29 September 2017

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1. Introduction

“[My particular ambitions] end up being rooted not just in me wanting to prove myself, but they end up being rooted in a particular worldview, a recognition that the world only makes sense to me given my life and my background if, in fact, we’re not just an assortment of tribes that can never understand each other, but that we’re, rather, one common humanity that can meet and learn and love each other.”¹ – Barack Obama, November 2016.

From the start of his first presidential campaign in 2008 to the last moments of his presidency in 2016, Barack Obama focused his rhetoric on changing the American role in the world and creating new American leadership abroad. In analyzing Barack Obama’s grand strategy and foreign policy legacy, most emphasis centered around traditionally utilized perspectives of the IR theories of liberalism and realism and their focus on the changing power dimensions in the international environment, as well as on the domestic pressures and realities that Obama had to deal with throughout his presidency. As the quote above illustrates, Obama himself refers to another influence on his decision-making, namely that his ambitions are rooted in his worldview. This idea will form the core of this piece, and it seeks to answer the following research question:

- How does Obama’s personal strategic vision explain his adoption of a ‘leading from behind’ approach to the Middle East?

During his first term as President, many argued that a singular doctrine or coherent grand strategy could not be found in Obama’s foreign policy. Leslie H. Gelb argued in 2012, for example, that “his principle shortcoming was failing to formulate strategy and understand its interplay with power.”² However, in an interview with Obama administration officials by *The New Yorker* author Ryan Lizza an administration official referred to his foreign policy/grand strategy as “leading from behind.”³ This

¹ Doris Kearns Goodwin, “BARACK OBAMA AND DORIS KEARNS GOODWIN: THE ULTIMATE EXIT INTERVIEW”, *Vanity Fair*, November 2016.

² Leslie H. Gelb, “The Elusive Obama Doctrine”, *The National Interest*, 121 (September 2012), 18.

³ Ryan Lizza, “The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring remade Obama’s Foreign Policy”. *The New Yorker*, 2 May 2011.

phrase was coined with regard to the administration's role in the UN-mandated intervention in Libya as a response to the eruption of violence during the Arab Spring in 2011. Lizza stated that this expressed standpoint demonstrated that "Obama may be moving toward something resembling a doctrine."⁴ The phrase became a catchphrase, frequently used by media, to interpret Obama's approach to the Middle East. Scholars have attempted to use the administration's 'leading from behind' approach as a generalization in order to create a better understanding of Obama's grand strategy legacy. Scholarship published during Obama's second term as president seemed to agree with Lizza's statement. One group of scholars focused their analyses on the nature of the international environment, which has changed significantly in the past few decades and consequently demanded a different US strategy. Another group of scholars explained 'leading from behind' by focusing on the domestic environment in the US. They argue that as Obama's priority was to build his liberal domestic legacy, focused around health care reforms and rebuilding the economy, this meant that he played a less interventionist role in international affairs.

While both groups of scholars point to essential aspects of decision-making in American grand strategy, these arguments are not sufficient to fully understand Obama's 'leading from behind' approach to the Middle East. This thesis will argue that both groups focus too much on longer-term developments in their arguments. The changing international environment, with the rise of other powers such as the BRICS and the changing dimensions of international security have been going on for decades, as well as domestic arguments such as a deteriorated economy – which was part of the Bush legacy. These two groups do not consider the significant role that the President himself has played in the formulation of a grand strategy. Some scholars have attempted to bring this perspective into the debate about Barack Obama's legacy. An example of this is Georg Löffmann's opinion that recognizes the unique contribution that Obama made. Instead of seeing Obama's foreign policy and grand strategy as part of long-term trends, Löffmann recognizes that Obama introduced a new definition of American identity in which a grand strategy of leading from behind is

⁴ Lizza, "The Consequentialist".

key.⁵ Leading from behind, according to this line of thinking, becomes a broader term for the ways in which the Obama administration saw the world and the United States' role in it. Leading from behind became an overarching approach of the Obama administration's strategy in the Middle East. The current thesis will build on this approach to Obama's legacy and focus on the personal strategic vision of President Obama in order to create a better understanding of the administration's approach to the Middle East.

The next section will provide a literature review of scholarly arguments about the sources of grand strategy, which are generally focused on the influences of the domestic and the international environment on grand strategy. However, it will be illustrated in section 3 how these are insufficient to explain Obama's strategy toward the Middle East. The remainder of the paper will go into *what* Obama's personal strategic vision was, *how* this influenced decision-making processes within the administration (section 4) and how this was reflected in his approach to the Middle East (section 5).

⁵ Georg Löfflmann, "Leading from Behind – American Exceptionalism and President Obama's Post-American Vision of Hegemony," *Geopolitics*, 20:2 (2015), 311.

2. Literature review

The concept of grand strategy is complex and can be interpreted in many different ways. Before going into the debate about the so-called sources of grand strategy, or the determining factors that influence the formulation of a grand strategy, it is therefore necessary that a clear definition of grand strategy is provided. A simple, useful, definition is provided by historian Hal Brands, who defines grand strategy as “the intellectual architecture [that] gives form and structure to foreign policy”, and as “a purposeful and coherent set of ideas about what a nation seeks to accomplish in the world, and how it should go about doing so.”⁶ At its core, then, grand strategy is the combination of a set of ideas and beliefs, and the policy that is subsequently carried out based on these beliefs. It should be remembered that grand strategy is a dynamic process that takes into account changes in the world and handles these accordingly, or in the words of Brands “grand strategy both influences and is influenced by the behavior of others.”⁷ Subsequently, a number of core tenets of a grand strategy can be identified. According to Brands, these components are as follows: “a clear understanding of the nature of the international environment’, ‘identification of the country’s ‘highest goals and interests within that environment’ and ‘the primary threats to those goals and interests’, and an appreciation of ‘the ways that finite resources can be used to deal with competing challenges and opportunities’.”⁸ By no means is this a definite definition of the concept of grand strategy, but it can be used as a starting point for going into different aspects of grand strategy. More attention will be paid here to the academic debate surrounding different types of motivations that influence American grand strategy approaches.

There is a general scholarly consensus that since the end of the Second World War, American grand strategy has been based on a combination of two different approaches to US grand strategy rooted in both the IR theories of liberalism and realism.⁹ This strategy will henceforth be termed

⁶ Hal Brands, *What Good is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 3.

⁷ Hal Brands, *What Good is Grand Strategy?*, 5.

⁸ Hal Brands, *What Good is Grand Strategy?*, 3. As quoted in: Michael Clarke and Anthony Ricketts, “Did Obama have a Grand Strategy?,” *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 40:1-2 (2017), 297.

⁹ Clarke and Ricketts, 298.

'liberal hegemony', and its roots in the liberal internationalist approach to grand strategy, as well as the offensive realist primacy approach will be illustrated.¹⁰ The main aims of the liberal internationalist grand strategy are to promote democracy and free trade and economic liberalization across the world, combined with the promotion and establishment of new international and regional institutions.¹¹ With its roots in the interbellum international order, the American commitment to the establishment of and continuous (financial) support for international institutions such as the United Nations and the Bretton Woods system becomes clear. The neoliberal worldview is also evident in the continuing American efforts at economic liberalization around the world and the creation of free markets. These (neo)liberal aspects of American grand strategy were supported to different degrees by different American presidents, and they are also evident in several of Obama's policies. A number of examples that can be found are his efforts to make international trade deals such as TTIP and TPP and his intent to increase American financial contributions to the United Nations. Furthermore, his rapprochement with the International Criminal Court provides another example of his commitment to core liberal values and aspects of liberal internationalism.

While the liberal aspects of 'liberal hegemony' focus on creating a more prosperous global society based on cooperation within numerous institutions focused on promoting democracy and values such as the protection of universal human rights, the offensive realist focus on (national) security also influences the American grand strategy of liberal hegemony significantly. At the core of this offensive approach, lies the belief that since the fall of the Soviet Union the United States has been the sole super power in the world and that the preponderance of its power is necessary for the maintenance of peace globally.¹² This has brought with it a distinct sense of purpose, and

¹⁰ For example, Barry Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014); Clarke and Ricketts "Did Obama have a Grand Strategy?"; Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, William C. Wohlforth, "Don't Come Home, America, The Case against Retrenchment," *International Security* 37: 3 (2012/13), 7-51; G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Joseph S. Nye Jr., "East Asian Security: The Case for Deep Engagement," *Foreign Affairs*, 74:4 (July/August 1995), 90-102.

¹¹ See, for example, Brian Schmidt, "Theories of US Foreign Policy," in: *US Foreign Policy*, eds. Michael Cox and Doug Stokes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 16, 17-18.

¹² For example Schmidt, "Theories of US Foreign Policy," 16; Barry R. Posen and Andrew R. Ross, "Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy," *International Security*, 21:3 (Winter 1996-1997), 30.

justification for the United States to take a more activist role in global affairs, in order to protect liberal values such as democracy and universal human rights globally. In the post-Cold War international order, the US has come to adopt the role of the world's policeman. Although the grand strategy of liberal hegemony has always received critique from different groups within American society, in recent years the criticism has become increasingly more vocal. Several realist scholars have argued for a more limited American approach to global affairs because of changes to the international environment. This critique focused mainly on the *offensive* realist core of the strategy.

2.1 International sources of grand strategy

In terms of grand strategy, a number of scholars propose a defensive realist approach. This approach has been defined in many different terms, such as 'offshore balancing',¹³ retreat,¹⁴ restraint,¹⁵ retrenchment,¹⁶ or divested hegemony.¹⁷ Although these scholars all emphasize different aspects of the strategy, these scholars have, in recent years, all called for a more limited American approach to the world. Some argued that the US should retreat from NATO and leave it to Europe, and that American forces and resources should be withdrawn from the Middle East. They argue that in the current international order it would be in the United States' best interest to "pull back from many of its overseas commitments."¹⁸ The US should focus its efforts and resources instead on maintaining its hegemonic position in the Western hemisphere and only commit itself to other regions if "a potential hegemon emerges that the local power cannot check."¹⁹ If military intervention is deemed necessary, the US should aim to avoid committing to 'boots on the ground' and instead utilize its air and naval

¹³ For example Christopher Layne, "From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing, America's Future Grand Strategy," *International Security*, 22:1 (Summer 1997), 86-124; John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "The Case for Offshore Balancing, A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy," *Foreign Affairs*, 95:4 (July/August 2016), 70-83.

¹⁴ For example, Robert J. Lieber, *Retreat and Its Consequences, American Foreign Policy and the Problem of World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

¹⁵ Posen, *Restraint*.

¹⁶ See Lieber.

¹⁷ Nicholas Kitchen, "Ending 'permanent war': Security and economy under Obama," in *The Obama Doctrine: The Legacy of Continuity in US Foreign Policy*, eds. Michelle Bentley and Jack Holland, (London: Routledge, 2017), 9.

¹⁸ Lieber, 11.

¹⁹ Stephen M. Walt, "Don't Knock Offshore Balancing Until You've Tried It," *Foreign Policy*, December 8 2016.

power.²⁰ This military approach can be termed a 'light footprint'.

Important to discuss here are the reasons why these defensive realist scholars propose that the United States should turn to this more limited approach to grand strategy. The arguments presented by realist scholars such as John J. Mearsheimer, Stephen W. Walt, Barry Posen and Christopher Layne are based on an understanding of the international order rooted in realist theory. The realist perspective on the nature of the international order is centered around the belief in a global balance of power. This leads to the assumption that "regional balances of power [will] emerge without the United States needing to reengage unless at some future point its national interests were directly challenged."²¹ Posen argues that the 'liberal hegemony' strategy is dangerous because of the danger that less powerful states may 'free ride' on the power of the American military and economy. Furthermore, extensive American defense spending puts a large burden on the US financially. This connects to the realist fear of empire overstretch. The rise to prominence of other nations in the international order, such as China but also Russia's increasing militarization, also presents a threat to the security of American forces because these states are becoming more capable and willing to push back against American global presence, increasing the security threat as well as increasing costs for the US.²²

Prominent liberal scholars, such as John Ikenberry, have also presented arguments in favor of a different American approach to dealing with the world. Ikenberry argues that there are three different versions of the liberal international order, in three different periods. Liberal internationalism 1.0 is based on the interbellum American approach aimed at creating a new form of international cooperation led by President Woodrow Wilson. Liberal internationalism 2.0 is the post-

²⁰ See Layne; John J. Mearsheimer, "Imperial by Design," *The National Interest*, 111 (January/February 2011), 16-24; Lieber, 10.

²¹ Lieber, 69.

²² See Barry R. Posen, "A New U.S. Grand Strategy," *Boston Review*, 1 July 2014; Derek Davison, "Bachevic and Mearsheimer on Obama's Legacy," *Lobellog*, 17 January 2017; Christopher Layne, "The End of Pax Americana: How Western Decline Became Inevitable," *The Atlantic*, 26 April 2012.

1945 internationalism that found its shape in the Cold War.²³ He argues, alongside his realist colleagues, that there is currently a crisis in this international order of the post-1945 era. According to Ikenberry, the core of this crisis is that the incentives for the US to “undertake global responsibilities, provide public goods, and support and operate within a system of rules and institutions” were “altered and weakened” with the end of the bipolar world of the Cold War era.²⁴ This new international environment also displays an erosion of the traditional Westphalian norms of sovereignty and the rise of new stakeholders. These issues “raised questions about participation and decision making in global governance.”²⁵ Lastly, Ikenberry recognizes a shift in the sources of insecurity and conflict in the current global system.²⁶ The role of non-state actors in civil wars, for example those that emerged in the Middle East after the Arab Spring of 2011, can be seen as an example of this process. Ikenberry argues that currently, the international order is moving towards what he calls ‘liberal internationalism 2.5’. This scenario would mean that the United States would renegotiate the bargains in areas of economic and political leadership, while hegemony is maintained in the security realm.²⁷

According to Ikenberry, under Barack Obama the United States took “small but meaningful steps to move the United States into more intense cooperation with other countries—and not just in East Asia.”²⁸ This illustrates Ikenberry’s argument for the need to bargain in the fields of economic and political leadership, which Obama has done according to Ikenberry. Ikenberry believes that Obama’s approach to the world is one of pragmatic internationalism, and not liberal internationalism. His view is based on two assumptions about the international order.²⁹ Firstly, that there has been the emergence of a multipolar world. While realist scholars argue that this is a reason for the US to focus on maintaining regional hegemony in the Western hemisphere and letting other

²³ G. John Ikenberry, “Liberal Internationalism 3.0: America and the Dilemmas of Liberal World Order,” *Perspectives on Politics*, 7:1 (March 2009), 71.

²⁴ Ikenberry, “Liberal Internationalism 3.0,” 79.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 79-80.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

²⁸ G. John Ikenberry, “Obama’s Pragmatic Internationalism,” *The American Interest*, 8 April 2014.

²⁹ Ikenberry, “Obama’s Pragmatic Internationalism”.

powers take control in other regions, a liberal approach to this reality is that it forces the US to “find ways to lead through new sorts of coalitions.”³⁰ Obama has made efforts to build such new coalitions by establishing cooperation with ASEAN, through attempts at economic liberalization such as the TTIP and TPP, and through the Iran nuclear deal of 2014.³¹ Secondly, Ikenberry argues, this reality means that there is an increasing “security interdependence between the United States and other countries”, calling for the necessity of “new and intensified forms of security cooperation.”³² These examples illustrate that Ikenberry, too, sees the international environment as a driving force behind the administration’s strategic decisions.

The Obama administration’s leading from behind approach encapsulates the previously presented scholarly arguments. In many of Obama’s speeches and policy documents about the American role in the world, he emphasized changing international (power) dynamics.³³ The first few pages of Obama’s first National Security Strategy in 2010, for example, highlight the changing international environment as an important reason why the United States should change its attitude to the world. It acknowledges the threats posed by the rise of non-state actors and the emerging powers such as the BRICS.³⁴ This illustrates that the changing international environment formed a critical part of the Obama administration’s strategic choices. This is no surprise, since presidents have always had to deal with international dynamics in their foreign policy decisions. What sets Obama apart from his predecessors is that instead of pursuing continuity with previously established foreign policy norms, Obama clearly chose to break from tradition with regards to his Middle East strategy. With his leading from behind approach he chose to remain involved in the region, but in a limited way in order to protect liberal values in the region. This discrepancy illustrates that the international environment was not the major factor that defined the Obama administration’s way of thinking about grand strategy toward the Middle East. Other factors were also at play here.

³⁰ Ikenberry, “Obama’s Pragmatic Internationalism”.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ See Barack Obama, *National Security Strategy*, Washington, DC: The White House (May 2010); Barack Obama, *National Security Strategy*, Washington DC: The White House (February 2015).

³⁴ Obama, *National Security Strategy* (May 2010), ii, 2-3.

2.2 Domestic sources of grand strategy

Another group of scholars recognizes a different starting point in the formulation of American grand strategy: the domestic environment. Rosencrance and Stein were among the first to make the argument for this case, stating that “[d]omestic groups, social ideas, the character of constitutions, economic constraints (...), historical social tendencies, and domestic political pressures play (...) a pivotal, role in the selection of a grand strategy.”³⁵ This exemplifies a move away from a structural realist approach to international relations, to an approach in which constructivist (and also neoclassical realist) arguments are better represented.³⁶ Their volume introduces arguments based on the nature of the domestic system, such as how political decisions are made, a country’s strategic culture, the role of subnational groups in making decisions, “ruling domestic ideas”,³⁷ the nature of a domestic society, domestic societies, and divisions within the political elite.³⁸ Wittkopf and McCormick provide a useful framework of interpretation for these variables. The first level of analysis they present is the societal environment, which includes previously mentioned variables of strategic culture, the influence of domestic society (such as public opinion), divisions within the political elite, the role of subnational groups (such as lobby groups), and ruling domestic ideas.³⁹ Closely connected to the societal environment level is another key influencer of the domestic sources of grand strategy: the state of the domestic economy.⁴⁰ The economy is a fundamental aspect of nearly all presidential political decisions. In the case of Barack Obama, the state of the economy at the start of his presidency was at its worst since the Great Depression, putting serious constraints on his options with regards to grand strategy because he was forced to focus on reviving the domestic economy before being able to focus on grand strategy. Another level of analysis of the domestic sources of American grand strategy, as Wittkopf and McCormick argue, is the institutional setting of the United

³⁵ Richard Rosencrance and Arthur A. Stein, *The Domestic Bases of Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 5.

³⁶ Eugene R. Wittkopf and James M. McCormick, *The Domestic Sources of American Foreign Policy: Insights and Evidence* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 1999), xiii-xiv.

³⁷ Rosencrance and Stein, *The Domestic Bases of Grand Strategy*, 13.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

³⁹ Wittkopf and McCormick, xvi-xix.

⁴⁰ Sara M. Birkenthal, “Grand Strategy in U.S. Foreign Policy: The Carter, Bush and Obama Doctrines” (CMC Senior Thesis, Claremont McKenna College, 2013), 17.

States. This centers around the relationship between “the institutionalized presidency, the Congress, and the cabinet-level departments and other agencies with foreign affairs responsibilities.”⁴¹

Wittkopf and McCormick recognize the role of individual decision-makers and their positions, character, and the position they have within the decision-making process as the last key aspect of the domestic level of analysis of American grand strategy.⁴²

In this thesis, it will be argued and illustrated that the actions of individual decision-makers (such as the president) should be seen as another, distinctive, influencing force for American grand strategy contributing to the above mentioned international and domestic determinants of American grand strategy. This angle of analysis focuses not only on the individual contributions of decision-makers, in this case President Obama, but also on the *reasons why* they make decisions the way they do. A question posed by Shafer and Walker illustrates the controversy of including the role of the individual as a separate influence on grand strategy: “Do beliefs passively mirror reality or do they actively steer the decisions of leaders independent of external realities?”⁴³ Scholars who recognize individual decision-making by leaders as part of the domestic sources of grand strategy see the role of the individual as passive. A different approach is presented by those who believe in the active role of leaders in decision-making. This group of scholars, in contrast to taking the more passive approach, takes an agent-centered approach. Taking this type of approach will improve the understanding of Barack Obama’s leading from behind approach to the Middle East because it moves beyond the more traditional arguments of domestic versus international influences on grand strategy. In the following research, several aspects will be considered to illustrate the agent-active approach of Barack Obama’s personal strategic vision.

The first aspect of Obama’s strategic vision that will be discussed is Obama’s understanding of the world. His personal perspective on the nature of the international order, and the role that the United States should play in it, is essential to understanding what he based his decisions on.

⁴¹ Wittkopf and McCormick, xxi.

⁴² Ibidem.

⁴³ M. Shafer and S. Walker (eds.). *Advances in Foreign Policy Analysis: Beliefs and Leadership in World Politics: Methods and Applications of Operational Code Analysis* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 6-7.

Subsequently in section five more attention will be paid to the specific ways in which this strategic vision was reflected in Obama's decision-making in Middle East policies. Here, the focus will be on the individual motivations of Barack Obama, instead of seeing his behavior and that of other decision-makers as part of the domestic level of analysis, as Wittkopf and McCormick argue. Birkenthal introduces another relevant variable to look at connected to the personal decision-making of the president: leadership style.⁴⁴ These variables are intrinsically connected to the personal opinions of the president, and it is especially interesting to look at the ways in which these decisions were influenced by Obama's strategic vision and belief system. The specific aspects of Obama's strategic vision will be discussed in section four. In the next section, the role that domestic and international sources of grand strategy played during the Obama presidency will be evaluated, in order to establish that they are not sufficient in fully explaining Obama's approach to the Middle East.

⁴⁴ Birkenthal, 73.

3. International and domestic sources of grand strategy under Obama

Throughout his presidency, Barack Obama has emphasized the need for a different approach to the American role in the world. The leading from behind approach that became central to his strategy toward the Middle East after the start of the Arab Spring can be seen as an example of this different approach. Many of Obama's realist critics argued that Obama did *not* change the strategies of his predecessor in the region. They chose to only acknowledge the fact that Obama decided to remain involved in the region, and like his predecessor, still used force in the region. This, however, fails to account for the differing intentions, objectives and ambitions for these forces. Obama chose to remain involved in the Middle East, like his predecessors, but it is more important to find the reasons why he was still involved, and to analyze the ways in which he remained involved. In this section, it will be argued with examples that the Obama approach to the Middle East - leading from behind - was indeed a break from the past and that international and domestic causal factors alone are not sufficient in explaining this change of strategy. This highlights the importance of taking an agent-centered approach and looking at the personal strategic vision of President Obama.

3.1 International sources of grand strategy under Obama

The changing international environment is the core argument that is presented by scholars who believe that the determining factor for grand strategy lies in the international sphere. As was illustrated in the previous section, these changes occurred on different levels. First of all, the international security environment is changing, with a diffusion in types of threats presented by numerous different non-state actors. In the Middle East, this process was accelerated following the Arab Spring. The rise of terrorist groups such as ISIS has made the reality of terrorism in this region more complex. Russia's decision to intervene militarily in the Syrian conflict, as well as the continuing threat of Iran also affected the security environment significantly. In many of his speeches, policy documents, and interviews, Obama has referred to these changes. He argued that these changes called for the United States to reinterpret its role in the world. According to Obama, the US should be more cooperative in international affairs. Obama argued that more focus should be placed on American soft power and forming new alliances, whilst at the same

time the use of force should never be totally excluded from the options.⁴⁵ The ways in which the Obama administration dealt with terrorist threats in the Middle East illustrates a different approach from his predecessor. Where George W. Bush chose to fight terrorism in the Middle East through the direct deployment of troops to the region, Obama chose to base counterterrorism efforts around a lighter American footprint. As part of this light footprint strategy he initiated a shift to the use of air and drone strikes instead of ground forces. The burden of war was also externalized by outsourcing to local counterterrorist actors instead of taking full responsibility as the US.⁴⁶ This more limited approach to the Middle East can be seen as a key tenet of the Obama administration's leading from behind approach. However, the changes in the international security environment that the group of scholars recognize as a determining factor in grand strategy-making are not new. The rise of non-state actors in the region, such as Hezbollah, Al Qaeda, and ISIS, has been a persistent reality since the American invasion of Iraq of 2003, because of the instability this brought to the region.⁴⁷ It needs to be mentioned though that this trend has increased significantly in response to the power vacuums that were left in multiple countries in the region following the Arab Spring.⁴⁸ Similarly, Iran has been making efforts to become a regional hegemon, and thus challenge American interests, ever since the Iranian revolution of 1979.⁴⁹

Secondly, scholars see the emergence of a multipolar system as a major influence on grand strategy. The economic rise of countries such as China and India have created a different international environment. This development, however, is also part of a long-term trend in the global order. In 2009, the newly installed Secretary of State Hillary Clinton alluded to this when she expressed her intentions for the new Obama administration to "[tilt] the balance away from a multipolar world and toward a multi-partner world", implying that the world at the time was already multipolar.⁵⁰ This can be illustrated by looking at the rise of China in terms of its booming economy and increased defense spending. China

⁴⁵ For a more detailed outline of Obama's opinion on the use of force, see Barack Obama, "A Just and Lasting Peace" (Nobel Lecture for Nobel Peace Prize, Oslo, Norway, December 10, 2009).

⁴⁶ See Andreas Krieg, "Externalizing the burden of war: the Obama Doctrine and US foreign policy in the Middle East," *International Affairs*, 92:1 (2016), 97-113.

⁴⁷ Shams uz Zaman, "Rise of the Non-State Actors in Middle East: Regional Dimensions," *IPRI Journal*, XV: 1 (Winter 2015), 61.

⁴⁸ See Vincent Durac, "The Role of Non-State Actors in Arab Countries after the Arab Uprisings," *IE Med. Mediterranean Yearbook 2015*, 37-41.

⁴⁹ Michael Mandelbaum, "America in a New World," *American Interest*, 23 May 2016.

⁵⁰ Glenn Kessler, "Secretary of State Clinton Says U.S. Must Partner with a Great Number of Actors," *Washington Post*, 16 July 2009.

surpassed the American share of world GDP based on Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) in 2014, and continues to rise while the US share continues to decline.⁵¹ In terms of defense spending, although the US is still the biggest spender by far, the Chinese have made significant strides in the past decade. While China spent roughly 20 billion US\$ on military in 1989, this figure had more than doubled to about 43 billion US\$ by 2000 and has steadily increased to an impressive 225 billion US\$ by 2016.⁵² A 2012 projection by *the Economist* projected that “China's defense spending will equal that of the United States by 2025”, presenting a serious threat to American hegemony in the South East China Sea.⁵³ What these numbers indicate, as can also be said for the arguments presented in the previous paragraph, is that all these developments in the international environment *predate* Obama’s presidency. However, Obama’s predecessors did not feel the pressure of these changing realities in the international environment, since they chose not to change the US grand strategy direction in the Middle East and instead retained an approach of liberal hegemony. The American involvement in the Gulf Wars, Iraq War, and Afghanistan are the most prominent examples of this. The question then remains: how can Obama’s different approach to the Middle East be understood? This illustrates that other factors were influencing Obama's decisions in finding a grand strategy approach to the Middle East, which will now be discussed.

3.2 Domestic sources of grand strategy under Obama

Domestic economy

In this section, attention will be paid to the three levels of domestic sources of grand strategy: the state of the domestic economy, the societal level, and the institutional level. The state of the domestic economy. This formed one of the most pressing realities that the Obama administration had to deal with when Obama first came to office. The US was in the worst recession since the end of the Great Depression of the 1930s. This had major effects on the Obama administration, as is to be expected. The 2010 National Security Strategy illustrates this clearly, with an entire section dedicated to explaining why it is necessary that the US first focuses on rebuilding at home before it can return to “shaping abroad”.⁵⁴ These domestic

⁵¹ IMF Datamapper, “GDP based on PPP, share of world (Percent of World),” *International Monetary Fund*, 6 September 2017.

⁵² “SIPRI Military Expenditure Database,” *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, 6 September 2017.

⁵³ See Layne, “The End of Pax Americana.”

⁵⁴ See Obama, *National Security Strategy* (May 2010), 2, 9-10, 18-19.

developments certainly took their toll on the way the Obama administration spent its money. However, if the state of the domestic economy had been the major influence on Barack Obama's grand strategy, then it would have been more logical for him to first make cuts in the defense budget in order to put this money towards rebuilding the economy.⁵⁵ Instead, Obama decided to allocate *more* money to the military in order to finance a military surge in Afghanistan. Between 2009 and 2011, Obama chose to increase the military spending from 680 billion US\$ in 2008 to 760 billion US\$ in 2010. In 2011, after the domestic economy was more stable Obama chose to start increasing the military spending steadily: from 750 billion US\$ in 2011 to about 600 billion US\$ in 2016.⁵⁶

Societal level

A second domestic source of grand strategy is the societal environment. Therefore attention must be paid to the power of domestic ideas, and how they influenced Obama's presidency. The concept of American exceptionalism provides an excellent example of how domestic ideas impact on the formulation of grand strategy. Jonathan Monten, for example, argues that "U.S. national political identity is expressed in foreign policy primarily through the idea of "exceptionalism."⁵⁷ George Löfflmann agrees with this when he claims that "American exceptionalism provides (...) the articulation of the country's identity in world politics."⁵⁸ Traditionally, American exceptionalism encapsulates the idea that "a special and unique set of social, political and economic features elevates the historical development of the United States above and beyond that of other nations."⁵⁹ Throughout American history, this self-image has served as justification for American hegemony (and expansionist policies such as the imperial policies of the Philippines in the early 1900s). George Löfflmann takes the idea of exceptionalism as a starting point for interpreting Barack Obama's foreign policy and grand strategy. Interestingly, he concludes that Obama's foreign policy was based

⁵⁵ Thomas C. Donnelly, "Doctrine of Decline: Obama has done lasting damage to the military," *National Review*, 23 January 2017.

⁵⁶ "SIPRI Military Expenditure Database."

⁵⁷ Jonathan Monten, "The Roots of the Bush Doctrine: Power, Nationalism, and Democracy Promotion in U.S. Strategy," *International Security*, 29:4 (Spring 2005), 119.

⁵⁸ Löfflmann, 313.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

on “a post-American exceptionalism [that] attempts to recalibrate the American identity of unique superiority and global responsibility toward a grand strategy of engagement, ‘burden-sharing,’ and ‘leading from behind’ that aligns the United States closer with others, and engages it less directly militarily.”⁶⁰ In short, Obama’s interpretation of American exceptionalism was a *move away* from the ruling definition of American exceptionalism that has guided the grand strategy of liberal hegemony ever since the end of the Second World War. Obama’s leading from behind approach is different because it combines the belief in the United States’ “‘unique’ strengths and values with a careful appreciation for the scope and limitations of US power.”⁶¹ This illustrates how it was Obama’s *new* understanding of American exceptionalism that has influenced his decision-making in international affairs, and not the traditional domestic idea of American exceptionalism. Barack Obama’s approach of leading from behind has reinvented the traditional understanding of American exceptionalism and this exemplifies the fact that prevailing domestic understandings are not sufficient to explain Obama’s decisions. This is a reason for the current research to go deeper into Obama’s new and controversial interpretation of the idea of American exceptionalism, and answer the question *why* he chose for this different interpretation. In the following section the argument will be made that the personal perspectives of President Obama were crucial in the administration’s approach to the Middle East.

Institutional level

The third domestic source of grand strategy is the institutional level. This refers to the relationship between Congress and the President in terms of foreign policy-making. Traditionally, foreign policy in the US has always been an area of so-called high policy, where the President has a relatively high level of power. Under President George W. Bush, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, these powers expanded significantly with the passing of the War Powers Act, which authorized the President to declare war/wage war on a country without Congressional approval. Barack Obama utilized this legal

⁶⁰ Löffmann, 311.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 320.

power once, in the context of the US role in the Libyan intervention, bringing the leading from behind approach into the discussion.

The nature of foreign policy decision-making in the US mainly depends on the President, since he is the one with ultimate decision-making power. However, in the domestic sphere, many different types of groups can influence the opinions of the president. Narizny focuses his argument on the role played by domestic pressure groups in the formulation of American grand strategy.⁶² One such pressure groups is public policy and foreign policy think tanks. Donald E. Abelson argues that because of President Obama's decision to include foreign policy experts beyond the ones in his own administration (such as think tanks and universities) allowed these groups to exert more influence on foreign policy and grand strategy decisions than they could with Obama's predecessors.⁶³ Although the degree to which these think tanks influenced decision-making will not become clear until insiders speak out about it, historically speaking think tanks have always had significant influence on foreign policy-making simply because their people were close to decision-makers and worked at the White House. Important to illustrate here, though, is that these think tanks would not have become part of the foreign policy debate if Obama himself did not decide he wanted to include their opinions. As Abelson recognizes, it was "Obama's pragmatic and more inclusive approach to policy-making, combined with his intellectual curiosity, [that] created an environment where think tanks could flourish."⁶⁴ In this sense, then, Abelson's conclusion is that it was Obama's personal preferences that led to the inclusion of think tanks.

The relationship between Congress and the President, the key aspect of the institutional level of analysis, is shaped by which party has the majority in Congress. In the first two years of Obama's presidency, the Democrats had a majority, while Republicans held the majority in the remaining years. This put increasing pressure on the administration, but institutionally Congress has less power

⁶² Kevin Narizny, *The Political Economy of Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 1-2.

⁶³ Donald E. Abelson, "Changing Minds, Changing Course: Obama, think tanks, and American foreign policy," in *Obama and the World: New Directions in U.S. Foreign Policy*, eds. Inderjeet Parmar, Linda B. Miller, and Mark Ledwidge, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 108.

⁶⁴ Abelson, 117.

in the foreign policy realm than the president. Increasing polarization was another feature of Obama's time in office that defined the relationship between Congress and the President. In the early 2000s, scholars hypothesized that the increasing level of polarization in US politics would mean that "American foreign policy will become characterized less by continuity and more by deep swings between accommodating and hardline policies as Democrats and Republicans alternate in power" and that "increased resistance to presidential foreign policy initiatives from the partisan opposition in Congress will mean that presidential dominance of foreign policy will decline."⁶⁵ Hurst argues, however, that Barack Obama's presidency illustrates that these hypotheses did not come true. Instead of the return to more accommodating policies for the Democratic president, Hurst argues that the extent of internal differences within the Democratic party is larger than within the Republican party, providing Obama with a larger ideological leeway to execute his beliefs in foreign policy.⁶⁶ This reasoning is focused on the realities of domestic American politics, illustrating the interconnectedness of the previously discussed societal level and institutional level of analysis.

This section has illustrated that Obama's strategic choices were influenced by both the domestic and the international environment. In his National Security Strategies and the rhetoric he used in some of his speeches he acknowledges the changes also outlined by scholars such as Mearsheimer, Posen, Walt, Layne, and Ikenberry. Similarly, Obama is also clearly influenced by changes in the domestic environment of the United States. The bad state of the domestic economy, as well as growing polarization in domestic politics forced Obama to make specific choices. However, this is not the end of the debate on the topic. Obama goes on to use these developments to propose a different American strategy and attitude to the world. This attitude, which is also encapsulated in his leading from behind approach to the Middle East, is different from that of his predecessors despite the fact that international and domestic trends and challenges remained similar. What makes it so different is the specific way in which Obama combined both realist and liberal approaches to

⁶⁵ Steven Hurst, "Parties, Polarization, and US foreign policy," in *Obama and the World: New Directions in U.S. Foreign Policy*, eds. Inderjeet Parmar, Linda B. Miller, and Mark Ledwidge, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 99.

⁶⁶ Hurst, 102.

grand strategy. This combination of approaches has always been central to American grand strategy, but Obama gave a new interpretation of it. As many commenters have argued, Obama's specific approach has made it hard to identify Obama in terms of traditional approaches to American grand strategy and foreign policy. He is neither an idealist nor a realist, and neither a dove nor a hawk.⁶⁷ This difficulty to identify Obama illustrates the need to look beyond international and domestic influences on grand strategy and instead take a closer look at the individual level. The next section will focus on this individual level by analyzing Barack Obama's personal strategic vision.

⁶⁷ For example Dueck, "The Accommodator: Obama's Foreign Policy," *Policy Review*, (October and November 2011), 17-18; Donette Murray, "Military Action but not as we know it: Libya, Syria and the Making of an Obama Doctrine," *Contemporary Politics*, 19:2 2013, 159; Timothy J. Lynch, "Obama, Liberalism and US Foreign Policy," in *Obama and the World: New Directions in U.S. Foreign Policy*, eds. Inderjeet Parmar, Linda B. Miller, and Mark Ledwidge, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 43.

4. Obama's Personal Strategic Vision

“My particular ambitions started cohering around creating a world in which people of different races or backgrounds or faiths can recognize each other’s humanity, or creating a world in which every kid, regardless of their background, can strive and achieve and fulfill their potential. And those particular ambitions end up being rooted not just in me wanting to prove myself, but they end up being rooted in a particular worldview, a recognition that the world only makes sense to me given my life and my background if, in fact, we’re not just an assortment of tribes that can never understand each other, but that we’re, rather, one common humanity that can meet and learn and love each other.”⁶⁸ - Barack Obama

In analyzing the personal contributions of a president, his personal background is usually used as a starting point. In the case of Obama, this has been the central point of interest for many scholars because he was the first African-American president in history. Furthermore, his international background – he spent most of his childhood in Hawaii and Indonesia – and family history – he was raised by his white mother and grandparents because his father abandoned the family when he was a young boy – have been central in this debate. The quote that formed the start of this thesis is repeated at the start of the current section, because it illustrates very clearly how at the core of Obama’s worldview is the assumption that all people in the world are a common humanity. Furthermore, Obama argues very strongly here how the aspects of his personal background are not the only factors that can be used to explain his decisions. He states that despite the challenges that his childhood brought him, it was this belief in the shared values of all people that spurred his ambitions. These ambitions of “creating a world in which people of different races or background or faiths can recognize each other’s humanity” first became clear during his time as a community organizer in Chicago.⁶⁹ In *Dreams from My Father* Obama explores his origins, and more specifically relevant here the origins of his core values. Obama describes a situation where he found a newspaper article written by his father, focused on the following perspective on Hawaii: “One thing

⁶⁸ Doris Kearns Goodwin.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

other nations can learn from Hawaii, he [Obama's father] says, is the willingness of races to work together toward common development."⁷⁰ This is something Obama himself experienced as well, and that he brought to his work as a community organizer in Chicago. These values and ideas also found their way into his perspectives on foreign affairs.

This can be seen in his speech in Cairo in 2009. Obama also emphasized the humanity, mutual values, interests and aims shared by all people across the world.⁷¹ Interestingly, Obama referred specifically to how his personal background defined his belief in cooperation and the importance of bringing people together: "Part of this conviction is rooted in my own experience. I'm a Christian, but my father came from a Kenyan family that includes generations of Muslims. As a boy, I spent several years in Indonesia and heard the call of the azaan at the break of dawn and at the fall of dusk. As a young man, I worked in Chicago communities where many found dignity and peace in their Muslim faith."⁷² The following section will go beyond Obama's overarching ambition of bringing people together and look more closely at specific aspects of Obama's strategic vision.

4.1 Obama's strategic vision

The first aspect that is essential in defining Barack Obama's strategic vision is his understanding of the international environment, and the aims and priorities that come with this. At the core of this understanding of the international environment is the discussion about what the American role in the world should be. Many of his campaign speeches, press conferences, and speeches contained statements like the following: "In this uncertain world, the time has come for a new beginning, a new dawn of American leadership to overcome the challenges of the twenty-first century."⁷³ This new American leadership focused on a number of ideas about the American role in the world. First of all, Obama remained committed to the aims of liberal hegemony, still accepting that overriding American power was the reason why the US should lead: "We must (...) recognize the United States

⁷⁰ Barack Obama, *Dreams From My Father*. 2004. (Reprint, Edinburgh: Canongate Books Ltd, 2016), 26.

⁷¹ Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at Cairo University." 4 June 2009, transcript, White House Office of the Press Secretary.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ "Obama's National Security Team Announcement," *New York Times*, 1 December 2008.

has a unique capability to mobilize and lead the international community.”⁷⁴ In Obama’s words, the question central to America’s strategy was “never whether America should lead, but how we [the US] we lead.”⁷⁵ Finding this different approach to American leadership was an important reason why Obama’s policies toward the Middle East differed so much from those of his predecessor. This had to do with Obama’s different understanding of the limits of American power, and a new interpretation of American exceptionalism.⁷⁶

This attitude, and the recognition of the limits of American power, is significantly influenced by parts of Obama’s personal background. Many scholars have focused their analyses of this on Obama’s international upbringing, in both Hawaii and Indonesia which combined with his Kenyan roots and his cosmopolitan background (attending white elite schools) to create a multifaceted individual. An interview with *The Atlantic*’s Jeffrey Goldberg makes clear how Obama sees the Middle East. According to Goldberg, Obama believes that “one of the most destructive forces in the Middle East (...) is tribalism. [This is] made manifest in the reversion to sect, creed, clan, and village by the desperate citizens of failing states.”⁷⁷ More interesting, however, is how this part of Obama’s understanding of the international environment is shaped by his personal background. Goldberg recognizes that “part of his [Obama’s] memoir, *Dreams From My Father*, concerns the way in which tribalism in post-colonial Kenya helped ruin his father’s life—which goes some distance in explaining why he is so fastidious about avoiding entanglements in tribal conflicts.”⁷⁸ Obama himself states: “It is literally in my DNA to be suspicious of tribalism (...) I understand the tribal impulse, and acknowledge the power of tribal division. I’ve been navigating tribal divisions my whole life. In the end, it’s the source of a lot of destructive acts.”⁷⁹ This is an example of how his personal background influenced his way of thinking about conflicts around the world, and the reasons why according to

⁷⁴ Obama, *National Security Strategy* (February 2015), i.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ See Georg Löfflmann.

⁷⁷ Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine, The U.S. President talks through his hardest decisions about America’s role in the world,” *The Atlantic*, April 2016.

⁷⁸ Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine.”

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Obama this means that the US should be weary of getting into wars that originated from tribalism and its tensions. This was a part of his way of thinking long before he became president.

James Mann argues that Obama's age in terms of the generation cohort this placed him in was also of critical importance when it came to shaping his ideas about the way he saw the American role in the world. The financial crisis of 2008 and the 9/11 attacks created a significantly different reality for the United States. These years, the early 2000s, were the formative years of Obama's foreign policy experience. His predecessors in the 1990s were different in this period the U.S. had both military and economy primacy.⁸⁰ Furthermore, whilst America's standing in the Western world was high in the 1990s, the intervention in Iraq in 2003 had a very negative impact on its international reputation. For Obama, this meant a number of things for his ideas about foreign affairs and the American role in the world. He started believing in the importance of a renewed commitment to international institutions and international law, building new international coalitions and taking a limited military approach, all in order to deal better with the limitations of the 21st century in terms of resources and rising powers.⁸¹

A second key aspect of Obama's world view is his belief in the power of the US taking an accommodating stance toward adversaries, based on the idea that the US "will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist."⁸² This connects to the 'leading from behind' approach, because at the core of this approach is the aim to encourage other countries take their responsibility in the international order. American accommodation to adversaries, according to Obama, is a means to this end. This attitude is also reflected in *The Audacity of Hope*, where Obama describes his understanding of the nature of the postwar liberal world order. According to Obama, in this period, "the more America signaled a willingness to show restraint in the exercise of its power, the fewer the number of conflicts that would arise – and the more legitimate our [the U.S.'] actions would appear

⁸⁰ Mann, 71.

⁸¹ Obama, *National Security Strategy* (May 2010), 11-18, 22, 41-43,

⁸² Barack Obama, "First Inaugural Address," January 20, 2009, transcript, White House Office of the Press Secretary.

in the eyes of the world when we did have to move militarily.”⁸³ Here, he connects American concession-making in the past to the preponderance of peace, as proponents of a grand strategy of primacy also recognize. More importantly, Obama believes that this approach improves the perception and legitimacy of the United States in the world. The assumption that if the US makes concessions, others will follow, became central to his approach to many countries around the world. Obama’s accommodating attitude toward adversaries can, for example, be seen through his initial intentions to reset the relationship with Russia in 2009 with the implementation of the new START treaty. However, relations with Russia deteriorated quickly during Obama’s second term following the invasion of the Crimea and the Russian interference in the 2016 elections. His continuing efforts to normalize relations with Cuba and open trade negotiations were successful in 2014. In the Middle East, the accommodating approach to adversaries can also be found, this will be discussed in more detail in the next section by looking at a number of case-studies.

A third aspect of Barack Obama’s strategic vision relates to the ways in which the Obama administration aimed to increase the cooperation with partners and allies through multilateral cooperation and coalition-building. Ben Rhodes, deputy national security adviser for administration, said the following in response to the administration’s involvement in the intervention in Libya, which illustrates Obama’s focus on the relationship with the world and the American standing in the international order: “This is the Obama conception of the U.S. role in the world - to work through multilateral organizations and bilateral relationships to make sure that the steps we are taking are amplified.”⁸⁴ Furthermore, Obama’s ideas about multilateralism and coalition-building reflect Obama’s idea about the “new era of American leadership” that he set out to create during his presidency: “[r]eal leadership creates the conditions and coalitions for others to step up as well.”⁸⁵ This aspect, American humility combined with more traditional forms of American support, makes

⁸³ Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*. 2006. (Reprint, Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2008), 285.

⁸⁴ Scott Wilson, “On Libya, Obama willing to let allies take the lead,” *The Washington Post*, March 10, 2011.

⁸⁵ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Libya.” 28 March 2011, transcript, White House Office of the Press Secretary.

Obama's approach to international institutions unique. The ways in which the Obama administration utilized international coalition-building to make the American role in international affairs less direct, but still essential, reflect his ideas on this new type of leadership. Obama states in a 2011 speech on the Middle East and North Africa that he "believed then [with his 2009 Cairo speech]— and I believe now — that we have a stake not just in the stability of nations, but in the self-determination of individuals", illustrating a link with his own personal beliefs.⁸⁶ These ideas about the need for coalitions and increased cooperation with allies have also become the core of the Obama administration's leading from behind approach to the Middle East, which will be explored in the next section.

The three previously discussed aspects of Obama's strategic vision all relate to his perspective on the use of force, and more specifically his perspective on the definition of a just war. In the words of his national security advisor Ben Rhodes, relying on local forces and burden-sharing are "characteristics of how the president approaches foreign policy and military intervention."⁸⁷ Important to note is that this quote was a response to the administration's role in the intervention in Libya, which exemplifies that the approach in this case was illustrative of Barack Obama's strategic vision on the use of force and foreign policy more generally. Obama set out his ideas about the definition of just war, ironically, in the acceptance speech of his Nobel Peace Prize in 2009. He emphasizes several things about his perspectives on the American use of force. Firstly, he acknowledges that around the world, people are suspicious of the American use of force. He then goes on to counter these sentiments by arguing that "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."⁸⁸ This illustrates Obama's belief in American exceptionalism. Another example of this is the following: I believe the United States of America must remain a

⁸⁶ Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa." 19 May 2011, transcript, White House Office of the Press Secretary.

⁸⁷ Josh Rogin, "White House: Obama method for regime change better than Bush method," *Foreign Policy*, 24 August 2011.

⁸⁸ Obama, "A Just and Lasting Peace."

standard bearer in the conduct of war. That is what makes us different from those whom we fight. That is a source of our strength.”⁸⁹ With this, Obama also illustrates his belief that the US should lead by example. With regards to the use of force, Obama highlights that despite his constitutional right to act unilaterally, he is “convinced that adhering to standards, international standards, strengthens those who do, and isolates and weakens those who don't. (...) America's commitment to global security will never waver. But in a world in which threats are more diffuse, and missions more complex, America cannot act alone.”⁹⁰ This approach to the use of force illustrates how Obama’s personal strategic vision was based on two seemingly contrasting ideas. He justifies unilateral action, while clearly illustrating that this would always be a last resort and that he would prefer to work with others when it would come to the use of force.

Under Obama, the United States chose to externalize “the strategic and operational burden of war to human and technological surrogates.”⁹¹ This illustrates Obama’s commitment to finding coalitions and to limiting American boots on the ground (proposing a light footprint instead). Surrogate warfare is another example of the leading from behind approach, because it also centers on the idea that these other partners were empowered to take the initiative, allowing the US could be less directly involved.⁹² Furthermore, Obama himself illustrated how the previously discussed principle of ‘accommodation’ is connected to America’s standing in the world, which subsequently helps to secure a more limited American role in military interventions. If the United States makes concessions, or in the words of Obama “obtain[s] global buy-in”, this “allows the United States to carry a lighter load when military action is required.”⁹³ This approach to American military action became part of the official American defense strategy formalized under Obama’s 2012 National Defense Strategy paper, in which he outlined its aims. This policy document illustrates many of the key aspects illustrated above, and also highlights their connection to the ‘leading from behind’

⁸⁹ Obama, “A Just and Lasting Peace.”

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Krieg, 105.

⁹² Ibid., 106.

⁹³ Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, 310.

approach.⁹⁴

All in all, Obama's strategic vision is focused on creating a different direction for the American role in the world, which focused on a limited use of force, increased and strengthened cooperation with allies and partners, and an open approach to adversaries. Implicit in this strategic vision was the president's perception of his own role within making these changes to American foreign policy and grand strategy (and its role in the world). He acknowledges that he has had a strong sense of self-confidence since he was young in an anecdote about fights with his grandfather in *The Audacity of Hope*: "With a certain talent for rhetoric, as well as an absolute certainty about the merits of my own views, I found that I could generally win these arguments".⁹⁵ With regards to how this self-image affected his work in foreign policy as a President, Colin Dueck states that Obama "has tremendous confidence in his ability to personally dissect, articulate, and manage various stages of the foreign policy process. He is determined to play that role himself."⁹⁶ Mann also illustrates this, "by virtually all accounts [of the people he interviewed] the dominant influence on the Obama administration's foreign policy was the president himself. He was the main strategist."⁹⁷ This connects to another aspect of Barack Obama's strategic vision, which brings Obama's understanding of and assumptions about the nature of the international environment closer to the actual implementation and to actual policies: his leadership style and advisor selections.

4.2 Leadership style

It is in the institutional power of the President to appoint his own foreign policy and national security advisors. This can, and has been, seen as a way in which the domestic environment influences American grand strategy. However, that does not sufficiently take account of *why* a president makes these choices, or what they are based on. These questions will be explored in this section. James Mann argues that Obama was his own chief strategist, but more importantly: "Obama has also relied

⁹⁴ Barack Obama, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, Washington DC: The White House (January 2012).

⁹⁵ Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, 67.

⁹⁶ Dueck, "The Accommodator," 17-18.

⁹⁷ James Mann, *The Obamians, The Struggle Inside the White House to Redefine American Power*. Revised edition. (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), xx.

heavily upon his own small, informal network of close aids.”⁹⁸ This network of aids consisted of young people determined to contribute to Obama’s ambitions of changing the American role in the world, such as his Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes, and his Chief of Staff Denis McDonough. Obama personally invited them to work with him on foreign policy, despite their arguably limited experience in the field. Mann calls them ‘the Obamians’, who Obama “installed ... primarily on the National Security Council, and he often worked with and through them in formulating ideas and dealing with the foreign policy bureaucracies.”⁹⁹ Of interest here is Mann’s choice to say ‘with and through’ them, because this illustrates that they were used primarily as a tool by Barack Obama to reach his own foreign policy and grand strategy goals.

This can be illustrated by looking at the way decisions were made within the National Security Council concerning the role America should play during the Libyan intervention. The March 15 National Security Council meeting focused on the question of whether the US should send in forces to prevent Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi from continuing to kill his citizens. There was international pressure from France and Britain, who were calling for a no-fly zone. Obama’s Secretary of Defense Robert Gates was against using force (as American national security was not directly threatened), while Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was in favor. Obama asked his advisors present in the room if the no-fly zone would stop the threat to Libya’s citizens. When his advisors answered that this option would not prevent people from being killed, he said that he wanted more options.¹⁰⁰ In an interview in 2012, Obama explained his perspective on the reasons why the only two options presented were ‘yes’ and ‘no’ to intervention. He states that the people at the Pentagon only asked themselves the question of whether a core national security issue was threatened, while Obama was more interested in “calibrating our [the American] national-security interests in some new way.”¹⁰¹ In a second meeting on March 15, the Pentagon presented three different military scenarios. The first one was to only send support – for example in the form of intelligence – to their British and French

⁹⁸ Mann, xx.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., xiv.

¹⁰¹ Michael Lewis, “Obama’s Way”, *Vanity Fair*, October 2012.

allies. The second option was the no-fly zone that had been proposed before. The third option would go beyond the previous two options, and in addition to establishing a no-fly zone, proposed to also use American air power to target Libyan government forces on the ground.¹⁰² Despite the opinions of Gates and Clinton, Obama chose to go with the third option. It is interesting that during his decision-making process he also asked the opinions of the junior staff (Obamians such as Rhodes and McDonough) for their opinions on the matter. Obama states that “what was a little unusual ... is that I went to people who were not at the table. Because I am trying to get an argument that is not being made.”¹⁰³ This quote illustrates how he took matters into his own hands to make sure his own perspective on the matter was put into reality. When asked why Obama did not make the decision about the way to intervene himself, he responded: “It’s the Heisenberg principle, me asking the question changes the answer. And it also protects my decision-making.”¹⁰⁴ This illustrates the way in which Obama shaped a discussion that eventually made the result one that he wanted from the beginning. His leadership style includes as many people as possible in the decision-making process. This highlights how he was his own chief strategist. The United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1973 on March 17, which authorized a no fly-zone and authorized “all necessary measures” to protect Libyan citizens.¹⁰⁵ Obama went on to negotiate with his NATO allies for a limited American role in the intervention. In the Operation Odyssey Dawn, as it would be called, the United States would only deliver the air power necessary to do the initial bombings. The rest of the military campaign, on the ground, would be continued by other NATO allies (led by the UK and France), while the US would only contribute with intelligence, reconnaissance and surveillance.¹⁰⁶ This limited approach would be called ‘leading from behind’, which illustrates Obama’s focus on multilateral cooperation and finding new coalitions, while using a limited amount of American military forces (i.e. a light footprint).

¹⁰² Mann, xv.

¹⁰³ As quoted in Lewis.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973 (2011), 17 March 2011, S/RES/1973 (2011).

¹⁰⁶ Mann, xvi.

The examples provided in this section - from personal anecdotes of the president and his staff members, and from policy documents, speeches or his autobiographies - highlight a new perspective on the origins of Obama's leading from behind strategy that has not been sufficiently discussed in the academic debate so far. Taking an approach that is centered on the individual rather than larger trends in both international and domestic environments is key here.

5. Obama's strategic vision reflected in foreign policy decisions in the Middle East

The following section will analyze a number of case-studies in the Middle East during Obama's presidency. It will go into the specific ways in which the previously mentioned aspects of Obama's strategic vision can be found in these incidents. The following case-studies will be discussed: the Arab Spring and the civil wars in the region that followed it, developments in the American relationship with Iran, and developments in the American involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

5.1 Arab Spring and civil wars in the region

Although leading from behind initially only referred to the Obama administration's efforts in response to the Arab Spring uprisings in Libya, it can also be found in the responses to other uprisings in the region. Looking at the United States' involvement in the civil wars in the Middle East illustrates that Obama preferred to share the American burden of war by utilizing a strategy of surrogate warfare, using "human and technological surrogates."¹⁰⁷ The administration found human surrogates on two levels: by taking collective action with allies and partners, as well as by supporting local actors to take action.¹⁰⁸ Technological surrogate warfare meant the limited, or light, footprint approach to military action that focused on drone technology, but also placed greater emphasis in general on the use of technology in the many covert operations that the military undertook during Obama's presidency. As has been mentioned before, surrogate warfare illustrates a strategy of leading from behind, because it is aimed at empowering other actors to take their own responsibility. Examples of the American strategy of surrogate warfare can be found with regards to the administration's involvement in the war in Yemen, Libya and Syria, where the US chose to support and train forces in Gulf states such as Qatar to do the fighting on the ground, while the US would support with air strikes and thereby would limit the risks to its own people.¹⁰⁹

The Obama administration's response to the conflict in Syria also represents key aspects of

¹⁰⁷ Krieg, 97.

¹⁰⁸ See Obama, *National Security Strategy* (May 2010), 3, 4-5; Obama, *National Security Strategy* (February 2015), 8-9.

¹⁰⁹ Krieg, 108-109.

the leading from behind approach. Firstly, this is because Obama chose not to get the American military directly involved. Rather, he chose to support a group of rebels financially and in terms of training. Although the question remains as to how successful this approach was, it does illustrate Obama's commitment to surrogate warfare and a light American footprint in the region. Secondly, Obama's focus on diplomacy and finding a multilateral solution to conflicts was reflected in the context of the Syrian conflict. This became especially clear when Obama chose not to act upon his 'red line' comments regarding the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime.¹¹⁰ Instead, he chose to go follow a different path and work with Russia to come to a diplomatic solution that forced the Assad regime to hand over its chemical weapons as part of the UN Security Council Resolution 2118.¹¹¹

Many have criticized this move as an illustration of Obama's lack of commitment to his promises, or called it indecisiveness on the President's part. It was also connected to the debate about American decline, and an unwillingness to remain committed to the strategy and values of liberal hegemony and the protection of human rights abroad. More importantly, it illustrates Obama's personal commitment to soft power and diplomacy over using force. It is also connected closely to Obama's personal ambitions to defy the so-called Washington playbook. Obama himself responded to the critique on his 'red line' decision as follows: "I'm very proud of this moment, (...) the overwhelming weight of conventional wisdom and the machinery of our national-security apparatus had gone fairly far. [T]he fact that I was able to pull back from the immediate pressures and think through in my own mind what was in America's interest, not only with respect to Syria but also with respect to our democracy, was as tough a decision as I've made—and I believe ultimately it was the right decision to make."¹¹² Goldberg, in his large *Atlantic* interview with President Obama "describes that day, in Obama's mind, as 'liberation day, the day he defied not only the foreign-policy

¹¹⁰ Aron Lund, "Red Line Linux: How Putin Tore Up Obama's 2013 Syria Deal," *The Century Foundation*, 3 February 2017.

¹¹¹ United Nations Security Council. "Security Council Requires Scheduled Destruction of Syria's Chemical Weapons, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2118 (2013)," 7038th UN Security Council Meeting, SC/11135, 27 September 2013.

¹¹² Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine."

establishment and its cruise-missile playbook, but also the demands of America's frustrating, high-maintenance allies in the Middle East'.¹¹³ Important here is that both Obama's own recollection of this moment and Goldberg's subsequent comments on it illustrate how this decision was clearly made by Obama. He did not succumb to either domestic or international pressures and defied the so-called Washington playbook, highlighting how his personal strategic vision was of essential importance in the particular decision not to enforce the 'red line'.

The leading from behind approach also centered around "creat[ing] the conditions and coalitions for others to step up as well."¹¹⁴ In December 2016, in the last days of Obama's presidency, the situation in Syria became increasingly violent. However, it was not the United States but Russia that took the lead in trying to find a way toward peace. The Syria talks that took place in Astana in the final two weeks of January 2017 were led by Russia and Turkey, who did not formally invite the United States to join.¹¹⁵ In the opinions of many, the fact that the Obama administration did not push to be present here was a sign of weakness from the United States. However, this could also have been a strategic choice by the Obama administration to let other countries take the lead, especially since Syria is not a national security priority for the United States. Another factor to consider here is the fact that the transition between Obama and Trump's teams had started at this time and Trump would be the president at the time of the negotiations, making it hard for the Obama administration to act with agency on this matter.

5.2 Relations with Iran

The combination of Obama's emphasis on finding new alliances and his accommodating approach is clearly highlighted in his attitude towards Iran. From the moment of his inauguration, Obama sought to improve relations with the country (the principal adversary of American hegemony in the Middle East), inviting them to the official 4th of July celebrations and expressing an eagerness to strengthen

¹¹³ "'The Obama Doctrine': *The Atlantic's* Exclusive Report on the U.S. President's Hardest Foreign Policy Decisions", *The Atlantic*, 10 March 2016.

¹¹⁴ Obama, "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Libya."

¹¹⁵ Reuters Staff, "U.S. says it has not received formal invitation to Syria talks in Astana," *Reuters*, 13 January 2017.

relationships with the country. Obama thus reached out his hand to the country, while simultaneously he refrained from intervening or speaking out against the violence that erupted in Iran in June 2009 following peaceful demonstrations in Tehran staged in response to the controversial election results. This is an excellent example of Obama's desire that the US should make concessions in order to realize a more peaceful world (in this case because improved relations with Iran would diminish the threat that the country presents). In June 2010, the United Nations imposed several strong sanctions on Iran, in response to their ongoing attempts to develop a nuclear power program. US Ambassador to the UN Susan Rice's response to the acceptance of these sanctions was also illustrative of the accommodating stance of the Obama administration. She stated that "[t]he resolution offered Iran a clear path to the suspension of sanctions and reaffirmed the willingness of the United States and other countries to continue diplomacy for that purpose."¹¹⁶ It is interesting to note that while the sanctions were very strong, she still emphasized that there was a clear way out for Iran. Throughout Obama's first term, these messages to the Iranian government did not seem to have much effect. A turning point was reached in 2013, when the administration commenced bilateral conversations with the Iranian government. The result of these conversations was an interim nuclear agreement with Iran, which also included other actors such as Russia, France, Great Britain, and China.¹¹⁷ The result was one that would be expanded with the eventual 2015 nuclear deal, based on the same accommodation principle that "if you unclench your fist" – in the case of Iran this would be: stop with the nuclear program – the US is willing to "extend a hand" – which in this case meant lifting a number of the sanctions on Iran.¹¹⁸

5.3 Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Initially, when Obama came to power in 2009, he expressed his intention to continue the efforts of his predecessors to find a two-state solution to the conflict. Throughout his presidency, both

¹¹⁶ United Nations Security Council. "Security Council Imposes Additional Sanctions on Iran, Voting 12 in Favour to 2 Against, with 1 Abstention," Security Council 6335th Meeting, SC/9948, 9 June 2010.

¹¹⁷ Milena Sterio, "President Obama's Legacy: The Iran Nuclear Agreement?," *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law*, 48 (2016), 69-70.

¹¹⁸ Obama, "First Inaugural Address."

Secretary of State Clinton and her successor John Kerry organized talks between both countries, leading to a number of negotiations in 2013 and 2014. Despite their efforts, these did not result in a lasting peace agreement. In 2009, after a period of negotiations led by Clinton, both parties agreed to a temporary freeze of settlement buildings for nine months until September 2010. Obama's response towards the end of this initial period illustrated his accommodating approach to reaching results in international relations. The Obama administration wanted to extend the freeze, and to achieve this, the US offered to support Israel with military aid, including twenty F-35 fighter jets. The US also promised to oppose "any Palestinian attempt to obtain international recognition of statehood in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza without Israeli agreement."¹¹⁹ These offers, however, were not enough for Israel and Palestine to resume the negotiations at that time. In 2013, under Secretary of State Kerry, new rounds of peace talks appeared to be more promising and they lasted for a longer period of time, but in the end again neither parties were willing to fully commit to finding a lasting solution to the conflict. Throughout his presidency, Obama continued to offer substantial support to Israel. He pledged to support Israel with a sum of \$38 billion in military aid in the latter part of his presidency. This would have been the "single largest pledge of bilateral military assistance in U.S. history."¹²⁰ However, in the end Netanyahu decided not to agree to the Obama administration's terms and the deal fell through. In the last months of his presidency, Obama initiated a different direction, finally converting its rhetoric into action and forcing Israel to relinquish its efforts to expand its settlements in the West Bank. By abstaining from voting on the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2334, the United States allowed the passing of a resolution that "Israel immediately and completely cease all settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territory."¹²¹ This changed the American direction toward the conflict between both countries in the most significant way in over thirty years.

¹¹⁹ Ethan Bronner and Mark Landler, "A 90-Day Bet on Middle East Talks," *The New York Times*, 14 November 2010.

¹²⁰ Dan de Luce "Netanyahu Back Down in U.S.-Israel Military Aid Deal," *Foreign Policy*, 13 September 2016.

¹²¹ See Joseph S. Spoerl, "Understanding Resolution 2334: Did the Obama Administration Betray Israel at the UN?," *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs*, 14 March 2017; United Nations Security Council Resolution 2334 (2016), 23 December 2016, S/RES/2334 (2016).

While section 4 illustrated how Obama's personal background shaped his belief in the shared humanity of all people across the globe., the current section has illustrated how that attitude found its way into his decisions in the Middle East. In this region, Obama's strategic choices deviated from those of his predecessors. The administration's decision to allow the passing of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2334, as well as the signing of the Iran nuclear deal of 2015, illustrates how strongly 'inclined' Obama's belief in 'finding the shared values between peoples and countries' was. Furthermore, the ways in which the administration chose to be involved in the conflicts following the Arab Spring highlight the Obama administration's new interpretation on the role of the American world: limited American power calls for limited American involvement in conflicts in regions of little strategic importance.

Conclusion

This thesis aimed to answer the following research question:

- How does Obama's personal strategic vision explain his adoption of a 'leading from behind' approach to the Middle East?

The leading from behind approach of the Obama administration emerged after the Libyan intervention. It encapsulates aspects of the liberal internationalist as well as the realist approach to American grand strategy. This incorporation of both international relations theories into grand strategy has been central to the American approach to the world since the end of the Second World War. With respect to his understanding of American power, Barack Obama adopted a new approach. Whereas his predecessors adhered to beliefs that the offensive realist strategy of primacy defined as the US's role in international affairs, Obama's leading from behind approach illustrates a more limited approach to the world. He remained committed to American exceptionalism and a belief in the power that the US has in reaching results, but he recognized that results should be reached in a different way. For example, Obama advocated for a renewed American commitment to international institutions, which have always been an instrumental part of American grand strategy. His approach, however, was more often connected to American legitimacy with an emphasis on increasing America's standing in the world. This would also be used to justify an American 'retreat' from its military commitments abroad. This justification essentially combines liberal internationalism with forms of retrenchment.

With this new interpretation Obama created a new world role for the US – one based on limited direct engagement combined with a strong commitment to different forms of cooperation, through multilateral organizations and trade deals, and with allies and adversaries. This is key to explain the administration's choices in the Middle East. However, the causal mechanisms for this development and the connection to Obama's unique contribution have been somewhat distorted by two different attempts at scholarly explanation. One group of scholars argues that the Obama administration chose for the more limited approach toward the Middle East because of changing

dimensions in the international environment. According to this line of thinking, the shifting balance of power forced Obama to make strategic choices that meant a move away from the Middle East and towards Asia. Although this has certainly been an important factor behind the decision-making in the Obama administration, it is not sufficient to explain the specific leading from behind strategy the administration employed because this shift in the balance of power had been underway for a long time prior to his accession to the presidency. A second explanation of Obama's leading from behind strategy can be found by taking the domestic environment as a starting point for analyzing grand strategy. The arguments put forward by supporters of this viewpoint focus on aspects ranging from the state of the domestic economy, to debates and discussions in domestic society, to changes or continuities on the institutional level. The claim here is that these factors were most important in explaining the President's decision-making process. Although Obama, like his predecessors, strongly believed in ideas of American exceptionalism and saw the United States as the indispensable nation when it came to protecting liberal values in the world, his approach to this idea was more pragmatic. This pragmatic approach, which kept in mind the challenges of the state of the domestic economy as well as the growing polarization of the country, ensured that Obama's approach stood out from his predecessors. The focus on domestic realities is therefore not sufficient, since Obama chose to employ a *different* strategy to deal with challenges that predated his time in office. All in all, it cannot be denied that these two arguments have been important factors in the administration's policy choices. However, they focus too much on long-term developments that do not sufficiently explain Obama's leading from behind approach. Specifically the Obama administration's recognition of the limits of American power, and its willingness to put this into practice, clearly differs from the attitudes of his predecessors.

Looking at Obama's personal strategic vision, and where it came from, provides a different perspective with which to analyze Obama's grand strategy and foreign policy legacy. What does this tell us? Obama's personal background - his biracial roots, international experiences, and cosmopolitanism - shaped his way of thinking and ambitions about life and humanity more generally.

He explained this in his own words in autobiographies such as *Dreams of My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope*, as well as in the many interviews that were conducted throughout his presidency. His own personal experiences made him understand the ways in which the United States could (and should) increase its international standing in the world through cooperation. This focus on cooperation illustrates an attitude that Obama has developed from his experiences as a community organizer as well as throughout his political career. Obama's approach to the Middle East set out to create a new relationship between the United States and the region, which was revealed in his very first speech in the region in Cairo in 2009. His emphasis on finding a rapprochement remained true to the last years of his presidency. The Iran nuclear deal provides an example of how Obama's attitude of accommodation was successful in creating a new relationship with the country. Obama's family history, one filled with international experiences, also made him respect and understand others, and value the shared humanity of all people, a theme that returned often in his speeches and policy documents concerning the Middle East. The generation in which Obama came of age provided another influence for his strategic vision. In contrast with the more established political elite (both within his own party and in the Republican party), Obama's foreign policy experience only really commenced in the early 2000s. This period was characterized by challenging times for the American role in the world, and the limits of American military and economic power became clear.

Furthermore, Obama's coming of age during the Cold War and during the heat of the antiwar movement in the 1960s and 1970s also shaped a perspective that recognized the limits of American power in the world. This perspective was one of the driving forces for Obama to not get involved directly in the Middle Eastern region, but rather to employ a strategy of light footprint when it came to military interventions. Lastly, Obama's self-image and the self-confidence he possessed about his own power in decision-making was essential for the ways in which his strategic vision found its way into policy decisions toward the Middle East. In this way, it cannot be said that international and domestic developments alone, and Obama's response to these, shaped the new American approach that Obama gave to the Middle East with his leading from behind strategy. Obama's personal

strategic view on the international environment, the nature of conflict, the use of force, and leadership was also of crucial importance. In the words of one commenter, “Obama was his own chief strategist”, also in the Middle East.¹²²

¹²² Mann, xx.

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