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978-1-107-14248-0 - After Obama: Renewing American Leadership, Restoring Global Order

Robert S. Singh

Excerpt

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## I

## A return to strategy

Barack Obama's foreign policy has failed, but the American strategic mind has not yet closed. For the United States, the West and the cause of liberal democracy, the years since 2009 have comprised a succession of defeats, reversals and missed opportunities. Obama's presidency has left America weaker and the world more unstable than when he entered the White House. With few accomplishments, declining influence and diminished credibility, a dysfunctional Washington is in retreat, strategically adrift of its allies and a fading force to its foes. The principles governing the exercise of US power have become opaque, contributing to the fragmentation of a once robust liberal international order. Abdicating clear and decisive leadership has advanced the rise of serious threats to the security and prosperity of the world America made. Obama's presidency has been historic and perhaps transformational, but for all the wrong reasons. The United States and the West urgently require a return to strategy: the renewal of genuine American leadership and, thereby, a path to the restoration of global order.

*After Obama* makes a case for how this may come about. Obama's immense promise has proven illusory. Instead of affirming America's singular place in the world, the president allowed the world to redefine and diminish it for him. The leadership lacuna has ceded influence to Washington's adversaries. But neither polarized politics at home nor premature obituaries of the late, great United States preclude the revival of American power. The next president can reverse what the Obama administration has wrought, to advance in its place a grand strategy more firmly anchored in US interests and ideals. Informed less by nostalgia for nonexistent golden eras than a cautious confidence and, even, hope, the following pages assess what Obama got wrong, anticipate efforts to put matters right and offer an argument for change that America and its allies can believe in: a New American Internationalism in the service of a Second American Century.

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### The other great recession

President Obama claimed in his 2012 State of the Union address that, “Anyone who tells you that America is in decline or that our influence has waned, doesn’t know what they’re talking about.”<sup>1</sup> On the core metrics of national power, he was correct: America is not declining. But this is more despite than because of Obama’s foreign policies. Moreover, contrary to his assertion, the United States’ global influence is in deep recession. Ask whether the mullahs in Tehran, the Politburo in Beijing and the Putin mafia in Moscow will welcome or regret the Obama administration’s passing and the answer is self-explanatory. In geopolitics, an invariably wise strategy is to do what your rivals least favor. All too often, Obama charted the opposite course. America’s global leadership balance is in the red as a result.

Geopolitical influence is an expression of power effectively employed and an attribute of successful national leadership: getting others to do what you want them to do. Leadership is the mediating force fusing abstract power, as resources, into effective power, as influence: the strategic capacity to set agendas and tactical nous to persuade or coerce others to go along. By definition, powerless countries cannot lead. But through choice or indecision, a powerful nation can fail to lead. Such has been Obama’s America. An audit of global power confirms that while the American nation-state remains strong – the preeminent military, economic, diplomatic and cultural force on earth by a distance – its influence is waning as destructive anti-American forces wax worldwide.

Negative evaluations of the president may appear harsh or premature, driven by reflexive partisanship or worse. But even as a non-American and nonpartisan – not least a Brit all too conscious of his own nation’s ignominious retreat from global leadership and the “littler England” it heralds – criticism is unavoidable. A decent respect to the opinions of America compels the observation that, with the best will in the world, finding examples of Obama’s strategic success is a fool’s errand. Obama did not brand his time in government with outstanding acts of statesmanship. Instead, well-intentioned but naïve efforts to recast US leadership and set in motion a new set of global understandings have proven mistaken and costly. America may not have suffered the humiliations abroad of Jimmy Carter’s presidency. Nor has Obama been responsible for a specific blunder on the scale of Vietnam or the occupation of Iraq. However, although less obviously calamitous, the retrograde consequences of strategic retreat are at least as profound.

After the George W. Bush era, “leading from behind” appealed strongly to Democratic Party activists and an anxious public troubled by domestic strife. But Obama’s multiple failings as the free world’s leader compromised the pursuit of the national interest, leaving America increasingly ineffectual. From the egregious refusal to enforce redlines in Syria to the vacillating responses to Russian expansionism and Chinese provocations in Asia, a risk-averse

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Washington appears unable to shape – much less impose discipline upon – international relations. Worse still, it has frequently seemed unwilling even to try. Admittedly, in a defeatist fashion, Obama’s defining down of US foreign policy through negatives has been audacious. Abandoning the constructive ambition that historically informed grand strategy, his administration made clear everything that America will *not* do: deploy ground troops, determine deadlines by strategic rather than political needs, commit adequate resources beyond artificially constrained means, act decisively without the support of others or promote a balance of power favoring freedom. Overwhelmed by limits, both self-imposed and real, America appears unconscious of possibilities. Clear in the abstract about what it disapproves, the United States equivocates as to what it concretely stands for. Ambivalent about partners while credulous of adversaries, Obama’s pivot to America – the prioritizing of a progressive policy agenda at home – has underpinned retrenchment, retreat and accommodation abroad.

As America’s national debt has inexorably risen, the accompanying leadership deficit has left allies estranged while encouraging state and nonstate adversaries to challenge the basic norms of established order. Only the myopic could view the international system as one characterized by the “mutual respect” and shared interests so frequently venerated by the president. Rather, in place of international law and order, instability and disequilibria fester. A “broken windows” world has emerged in which rules are solemnly invoked but unenforced, fine-sounding principles idealized but undefended and professorial speeches substituted for effective diplomacy – with international law reverentially treated not as a complement to geopolitical leadership but the superior alternative. “Moral leadership is more powerful than any weapon,” Obama declared in 2009. But the perilous results of his statecraft strongly suggest otherwise.

Setting out to advance “global zero,” Obama has instead paved the path to nuclear proliferation. Attempting to “reset” relations, Russian bellicosity has been emboldened, shifting regional and global dynamics, with Moscow’s largest rearmament and territorial expansion since the Soviet Union’s collapse, a sharp contrast to America’s strategic withdrawal. Pledging not to increase the US nuclear arsenal while repeatedly disavowing the use of conventional force, American defense spending is on a trajectory inverse to multiplying threats – declining to just 2.9 percent of gross domestic product by 2017, its lowest level for fifty years, and posing a growing danger to national security. The post-Cold War security order and a Europe “whole and free” are threatened by a resurgent Russia intent on recreating a lost empire. While supposedly “pivoting” to Asia, Washington’s Pacific allies perceive an absent America bereft of strategic resolve, as Beijing more than ever competes aggressively across the full spectrum of power with a United States it sees as dedicated to, but incapable of, thwarting its rise. Reaching out to the world’s 1.6 billion Muslims, America remains no more popular today under Obama – and in some Muslim nations even less so – than his predecessor. The president who undeclared the war

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on terror to depart the Middle East for good has reluctantly returned, with Islamism spreading and sectarian conflicts raging uncontained. As US interventions in Libya and Yemen leave in their wake civil wars and terrorist havens, nonintervention in Syria fuels genocide, refugee crises and regional conflagration. Washington enables the dominance of theocratic Iran while unnerving democratic Israel as a four-decades-old regional order disintegrates. And having prematurely claimed al Qaeda's decimation, its meta-stasized offshoots compete with an even more brutal death cult, ISIS<sup>2</sup> – in failed and failing states from Afghanistan to Algeria – for the dubious privilege of returning the Middle East, Africa and South Asia to the seventh century and attacking the West through growing franchises of Islamist terror.

In this interdependent world, Las Vegas rules are inapplicable: what happens in one region no longer stays there. Yet US strategy appears fatalist and reactive, that of a bemused bystander. America's fading authority is regarded with resignation by allies no longer counting on Washington and contempt by adversaries neither respectful nor fearful of US power. The outsourcing of foreign policy has been a futile exercise in irresponsibility and ineffectiveness. Less the indispensable nation than a "dispensable" power by turns irresolute and irrelevant, Washington's unhappy reward for its frantic oscillation between engagement and disengagement is a diminished capacity to influence matters on the ground and the authoring of its own exit from critical theaters. Rarely has so little been accomplished for the investment of so much ineffectual diplomacy. Being apologetic about American power has not made Moscow or Beijing more compliant. Appeasing Iran has not altered its ambitions. Self-denigration about past sins has not pacified jihadists from Paris to Boston. Outside the United States – not least in China – Obama's tenure is regarded as the inflection point in a downward American spiral, ripe for exploitation and an epochal moment for international order. In trying to manage a world wary of US power but desperate for leadership, Obama has advanced the unravelling of global order to hasten the arrival of a "post-American" world that he purportedly sought to delay.

Because of Obama's strategic sabbatical, America's credibility is doubted and its entreaties disregarded. The resulting dimensions of the erosion of influence extend far and wide, to the detriment of world order and endangering of liberal values. It is not merely the United States that has been poorly served by policies rendering it an increasingly parochial power – the ageing global policeman opting for a more comfortable desk job for want of apparent criminals – but its allies as well. Not since the Cold War has collective security confronted so many concurrent threats. The future of the world's most successful military alliance, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), hangs by a thread, with US defense cuts abetting feckless European disarmament. The West's decades-long military edge is drawing to a dangerous end. The Pentagon has abandoned the commitment to be able to wage two major wars simultaneously; some question its capacity to emerge victorious even in one. The fabric

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of alliances is fraying. US security guarantees ring increasingly hollow, their atrophy awakening long-dormant regional security competitions and encouraging a risk-laden freelancing liable to ignite new conflicts.

At the same time, adversaries no longer fear American disfavor. Russia, China, Iran and North Korea perceive diplomatic indecision and military timidity. And while they repeatedly launch cyber-attacks against America and rearm for conflict, US forces remain ill-prepared, insufficiently resourced and inadequately configured to defend national interests and discharge global responsibilities. Underinvestment in the military and overinvestment in global cooperation has left America with more international challenges but fewer capabilities to meet them. Obama has violated the presidential equivalent of the Hippocratic Oath, to not harm America's standing – a curious achievement for a president whose supposed conceptual lodestar for foreign policy was “don't do stupid shit.”<sup>3</sup>

But the weakness here is, ultimately, not so much military as political. The troubling reality about American power is altogether new: that with threats multiplying, the United States is increasingly unwilling or unable to assume the lead in providing global governance, guaranteeing public goods and underwriting international security. Disdainful of “discretionary” wars, America in retreat is instead accepting of strategic defeats of choice. The international system is growing more fissiparous. Deterrence is weakening. Allies are vulnerable. Non-Western states' nuclear arsenals are expanding, with their ranks set to grow, most disturbingly in an imploding Middle East. Existential threats on the USSR's scale may be a thing of the past, but fearsome new ones from cyber-warfare to biological weapons and mass fatality terrorism are increasing their reach. The “doomsday clock” – an indicator of perceived proximity to global catastrophe, developed by the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists – now stands at three minutes to midnight, for the first time since the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962.<sup>4</sup>

At least as significant, the ranks of those who would consign the West's civilization to oblivion are growing within and without, while Western self-confidence languishes at a low ebb. Our collective political compass – the shared sense of who we are – is in flux. Under the Obama administration, ideological battles are no longer joined but abandoned on altars of a world-weary *realpolitik* and nebulous moral relativism. Clarion calls for freedom and democracy – a strategic leitmotif from Woodrow Wilson to George W. Bush – have been silenced. Confronted by nihilism and barbarism, such values no longer appear universally valid, even as the president persists in bearing witness to a fictional global order based on shared beliefs. But the norms of power have proven more compelling than the power of norms. The world is becoming safer not for democracy but for authoritarianism and less, not more, respectful of international laws, universal rules and common values. Obama enjoys quoting Martin Luther King's optimistic declaration that, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” History's incline, however, suggests

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that recent decades have been a precious aberration in the destructive annals of great power war. Forgotten among presidential paeans to international comity and community is the most timeless inconvenient truth: “If you want peace, prepare for war.”

The sheer scale of the administration’s fluency in failure is thus remarkable. Judged by the ambitious standards Obama set as a candidate, his foreign affairs management has failed. Assessed by allies’ confidence and adversaries’ fears, the most elementary national security tests have been flunked. Most importantly, evaluated in terms of the parameters of successful policy – whether US vital interests are better secured and global influence more advanced by the end of a president’s term than the outset – the Obama experiment has backfired. In seeking to depart from decades of America’s strategic culture, mistaken assumptions, misconceived priorities and misguided tactics have yielded a more turbulent world and a downgraded US power. A candidate who reached the White House intent upon entering the history books as the ultimate peace president will depart, not with the “tide of war” receding – as Obama assured in 2011 – but advancing. Cynics can be forgiven for estimating the greatest recession of recent years to have been in American leadership. The problematic legacy bequeathed the forty-fifth president is one requiring extensive remedial action to recover lost ground, reestablish US strength, and stabilize a world in dangerous disorder.

### **Audacity exhausted: American disengagement**

Obama assumed office with unprecedented goodwill. Within America, the symbolism of his election – racial, generational and ideological – was profound. Outside, after years of growing anti-Americanism, the “un-Bush” was welcomed almost everywhere with relief. Political elites around the world were anxious for good relations while mass publics anticipated bold acts on the international stage. To those for whom the Bush era had instilled a false sense of national insecurity wherein perceived threats – from terrorism and weapons of mass destruction to outlaw states – were “overblown,” Obama represented the avatar of rationality and threat deflation. His promise was to implement long-held progressive beliefs that US policy was too militarized and Manichean, where a more diplomatic, less strident approach would entice reciprocal concessions on the part of adversaries. The award of the Nobel Peace Prize – in essence, for not being his predecessor – represented an early manifestation of cosmopolitan credulity: “we are the ones we have been waiting for.”

The core to Obama’s approach was “strategic engagement,” a mission to “detoxify” America’s image and a message for its enemies, that “We will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist.” Engagement, “the active participation of the United States in relationships beyond our borders” as defined by the National Security Strategy (NSS) document of 2010, would repair the broken Bush years. Through the force multipliers of moral example,



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demonstrations of good intent and diplomatic outreach, steady progress toward a global constitution of sorts could advance. Not all nations would progress at the same pace, some proving reluctant rather than responsible. But a pragmatic concordat, a global “buy-in,” could nonetheless be reached through goodwill and accommodation. As Obama stressed in Prague in April 2009, “Rules must be binding. Violations must be punished. Words must mean something.”<sup>5</sup> In 2015, the president even defined the “Obama Doctrine”: “The doctrine is: We will engage, but we preserve all our capabilities.”<sup>6</sup> Though accompanied by calculated risks, engagement represented a better bet than coercive diplomacy, ostracizing enemies or resort to force.

Disregarding for the moment why Obama took the opposite view toward apartheid South Africa in the 1980s – when concerted isolation rather than “constructive engagement” was the progressive preference – the results of this conciliatory approach appear meager. True, the fists of Cuba and Myanmar have partially unclenched, promising modest gains in sclerotic states peripheral to US vital interests. But where those interests are seriously in play, Russian and Chinese fists appear even more tightly compressed and ostentatiously punching across Eurasia, the Near East and the Pacific Rim. As for Iran, the administration’s marquee example of success, the jury’s verdict at best remains “not proven,” despite the administration offering less an olive branch than entire forest for a nuclear accord. In short, Obama’s approach has yielded modest results where they are least consequential, and rebuffs and capitulation where they matter most. From Tehran’s serial violations of UN Security Council resolutions through Moscow’s “hybrid” wars and Syrian intervention to China’s man-made militarized islands in contested waters, rules have been unbinding, violations unpunished and words have meant – *Alice in Wonderland*-like – whatever the user wished. No geopolitical Rubicon has been crossed. In place of a zero tolerance for aggression is indulgence. Mendacity met hope, and mendacity prevailed while, like King Canute ordering the waves to cease in order to demonstrate his own powerlessness, the president solemnly observed to the UN General Assembly in September 2015 that, “we, the nations of the world, cannot return to the old ways of conflict and coercion.”<sup>7</sup>

Critics might object that a fair accounting should factor in Obama’s obvious good intentions, intelligence and sincere commitment to outreach. But many of the same critics tend, rightly, to depict geopolitics as akin to chess or poker. Positive intentions count for nothing in assessing risk and reward, calling bluffs and steadily prevailing. “Diplomania” has its limits, not least when, executed poorly, its signal accomplishment is racking up more air miles than accomplishments. Where engagement was initially most energetically expounded (Russia, China), it has been rebuffed. Where most necessary (the Arab uprisings, Syria, Ukraine) it was least apparent. Where most doggedly pursued despite its manifest dangers (Iran), its outcome appears chronically destabilizing and based on a geopolitical framework that collapsed almost as soon as it was concluded. “Smart” power? Ironically, engagement was a singularly inapt misnomer for

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the rank mismanagement of alliance relations. When even a sympathetic outlet like *The Economist* observes that, “many foreigners would welcome an American commander-in-chief who is genuinely engaged with the world outside America,” the substance and smartness of “engagement” can legitimately be called into question.<sup>8</sup>

Although tempting to dismiss the Obama Doctrine as comprising so little conviction that none could disagree with it, the president’s error was not a failure to understand the power of ideas, but rather, which ideas work. Skeptics might suggest Obama is only the latest president to fall into this trap. Realists have long lamented US strategy’s lack of an anchor in a sense of history or geopolitics and bemoaned Americans’ reluctance to recognize global affairs as a remorseless competition for advantage among states. Animated by America’s liberal political culture, US leaders have instead envisioned foreign policy as a teleological struggle for justice rather than a “permanent endeavor for contingent aims,” however much legitimacy and values remain important elements of grand strategy.<sup>9</sup>

But Obama departed decisively from his predecessors. It was not simply Obama’s reluctance to take more than rhetorical stands on human rights, rejection of support for democratic movements and reticence about military force. What was truly unprecedented was his belief in a strategic alchemy premised on a quixotic form of exemplarism: that other states’ behavior hinges on prior demonstrations of US good faith. Obama has seemingly been convinced that conflict arises not primarily from adversaries who comprehend each other’s irreconcilable ambitions all too accurately but from misunderstandings that American conciliatoriness can transform into cooperation. Yet the misunderstanding is entirely Obama’s.

The mismatch between presidential rhetoric and reality has found expression across foreign and national security policies. Where John F. Kennedy pledged America to “support any friend, oppose any foe,” Obama’s assistance was transactional and his opposition negotiable. Where Ronald Reagan’s Cold War strategy was bracingly straightforward (“We win; they lose”), Obama’s instead conveyed the impression of an insular force keen to reinvent itself at home by downsizing abroad; there was no “they.” Adversaries were merely pliable partners-to-be whom America had yet to persuade. The measuring rod for US credibility was less a commitment to internationalism than diplomatic maximalism and military minimalism, whether to end chemical attacks on innocent civilians or lend lethal aid to sovereign democracies under foreign assault.

Such has been the Obama administration’s conviction that diplomacy can change circumstances on the ground – rather than circumstances typically establishing the limits of diplomacy – that it is difficult even to comprehend the president’s approach to nonproliferation without prioritizing America’s prior good faith. The first recommendation Obama made in Prague was for the United States to set a positive example by cutting its nuclear arsenal, which



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would afford the requisite moral authority to persuade Iran not to develop nuclear weapons. But no evidence existed that US reductions alter the calculus of states contemplating going nuclear. The American arsenal has been reduced by 80 percent since 1991. Yet the North Korean, Pakistani and Iranian pursuit of nuclear capabilities intensified. Only when adversarial regimes have toppled, feared change or fallen under the US nuclear umbrella have they willingly disarmed. Foreign leaders base decisions about nuclear weaponry on their perceived strategic needs, not in response to disarmament. To imagine otherwise is merely to invite forces inimical to America to grow.

The president can more easily be forgiven for not anticipating seismic events such as the Arab uprisings. Even here, however, less forgivable were the twin failures of ignoring intelligence advice about looming threats – most notably ISIS – and refusing to respond effectively once the direction of change became clear: to play the hand he was dealt as well as possible, from pressuring Iraq into accepting an American presence that could serve US strategic interests to delinking Syria from the accommodation of Iran. Instead, Obama appeared to have morphed from a Shakespearean “lean and hungry” Cassius into a Hamlet-like figure suffering what psychologists term “overchoice”: confronted with so many options that whittling them down to a single one was more stressful than giving up altogether. In this, as in so much, the administration’s policy reflected less a sober assessment of geopolitical risks than the compelling domestic electoral imperative for a progressive president to distance himself from his predecessor’s militarism. But if no appetite existed for influencing the direction and pace of events on the ground from Syria to Ukraine, a more honest approach would have acknowledged both realities rather than offer cosmetic interventions of minimal benefit.

The defining moment in the shrinking of US influence came in the fall of 2013 with the confusion over, and ultimately the abandonment of, using force against Assad. The climb-down confirmed administration redlines as less solid than the French Maginot Line against the Wehrmacht in the 1930s, but similarly ineffective, reassuring Russia, China and Iran that the United States would talk loudly but carry only the smallest of sticks. Until 2014, when Americans turned their attention to ISIS, one could perhaps make the case that Obama’s aversion to military force synchronized with his core constituency and public opinion. But responsible governing requires defining interests and values and demonstrating the will to defend them. Obama simply refused to shape opinion. There are few examples in the history of any nation advancing its interests by dodging tough decisions or outsourcing leadership. Admittedly, the price of intervention was always uncertain in Syria. But the price of nonintervention has been brutally clear: an uncontained war whose spillover engulfed not only neighboring states but also nations far beyond. The Syrian debacle confirmed the credibility gap in Obama’s promises and weakening of US security guarantees. As the president asked in the aftermath of the regime’s chemical attacks, “If we won’t enforce accountability in the face of this heinous act, what does

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it say about our resolve to stand up to others who flout fundamental rules? To governments who would choose to build nuclear weapons? To terrorists who would spread biological weapons? To armies who carry out genocide?”<sup>10</sup>

What, indeed, Mr. President?

American adversaries received the message loud and clear. After two years of serial US concessions, nuclear defiance was rewarded and Iranian influence is on the march across the Arab Middle East. As former secretaries of state Henry Kissinger and George Shultz noted, “negotiations that began 12 years ago as an international effort to prevent an Iranian capability to develop a nuclear arsenal are ending with an agreement that concedes this very capability.”<sup>11</sup> For fifteen years, Tehran will never be further than one year from a nuclear weapon. Thereafter, it will be substantially closer. The threat of war now constrains the West more than Iran and, in the inevitable event of Iranian violations, the remote prospects for reimposing sanctions will primarily isolate Washington, not Tehran. Absent a new US strategic approach, the nuclear pact will reinforce rather than resolve the region’s challenges. Far from coolly assessing the risk-reward ratio, the agreement represented a high-risk bet on a change of Iranian regime behavior that recklessly gambled the future of America’s allies, the peace of the region and the wider world – one whose outcome Obama will not be around politically to pay during his lucrative post-presidency.

In legitimizing Tehran’s ambitions, the deal also undermines nonproliferation efforts. In Prague, Obama had pledged “to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons,” called for treaties to limit the weapons programs of established nuclear powers and reinforcing a faltering nonproliferation regime. Instead, with eyes wide shut, the White House rewarded Iran for persistent efforts to subvert that regime. The message to others was clear: even the most flagrant violations by the most dangerous regimes will not provoke a decisive US response. Failing to assuage their fears, the House of Saud is widely believed already to have made the strategic decision to secure its own arsenal, an outcome likely to encourage others – Egypt, Turkey – to create a poly-nuclear powder-keg. In seeking a capstone to his presidency, Obama has erected a tombstone to American influence in a region less crucial to US energy but ever vital to global prosperity and security.

What should other hostile powers infer? For the answer, we need not look far. Once unquestioned, American primacy is no longer assumed. Adversaries perceive a retreating power, uncomfortable with coercion and doubting its role. In Moscow, Putin seized on the opportunity to leverage maximum benefit to project Russian power, taking note of a military alliance – the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) – increasingly lacking an effective and interoperable military and a White House mystifyingly convinced that, “the measure of strength is no longer defined by the control of territory.”<sup>12</sup> For the Chinese, Obama’s presidency confirmed that American decline and China’s ascent were occurring more rapidly than anticipated. The conspicuous collapse of US resolve