



## America stands accused of retreat from its global duties. Nonsense

*Naysayers allege that American influence is waning and cite Barack Obama's inaction on Syria and Ukraine as proof that its foreign policy has been reduced to watching the 'bad guys' do what they like. That is a complete fantasy*

Michael Cohen

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A new word, it seems, has come to the fore to describe [US foreign policy](#) in the age of Obama: retreat.

The signs of alleged American fecklessness are everywhere: withdrawal from [Afghanistan](#), which followed the ignominious departure from Iraq; negotiations with the mullahs in Iran rather than bombs over Tehran; an aimless and hollow pivot to Asia that is failing to deter a rising China; a newly assertive Russia seizing territory without consequence; cuts in defence spending while al-Qaida franchises pop up across the Middle East and perhaps the worst of all sins – failure to stop the bloodletting in [Syria](#). It's a policy that Niall Ferguson calls "one of the great fiascos of post-World War Two American foreign policy". (Mental note: send Niall Ferguson a book about the Vietnam War.)

The charge isn't just being hurled in Washington. According to John McCain: "I travel all around the world and I hear unanimously that the [United States](#) is withdrawing and that the United States' influence is on the wane and that bad things are going to happen, and they are happening."

The charge of retreat is a potent one.

It's also a complete fantasy.

Those who argue that the US is retreating from the world stage don't understand the limits of US power, don't understand how the world works and, truth be told, don't appear to understand the meaning of the word "retreat".

The last point is a good place to start because from a merely objective standpoint tricky things called "facts" belie the notion of US disengagement. For example, a nation in retreat might forsake its alliance commitments, reduce its presence in international organisations and cede ground to rising powers. America is doing none of these things. No military alliances are being

shed, no international organisations abandoned and while the US is working to reduce its presence in one locale (the Middle East), it is slowly and methodically ramping it up in another (the Far East). In the process, the US is challenging the rise of China and some might argue putting itself on a crash course toward conflict with Beijing.

In the Middle East, the US diplomatic presence has rarely been greater. Secretary of state [John Kerry](#) singlehandedly propelled negotiations to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. The US and its international allies reached a deal with Iran to chill its nuclear ambitions and the US is now deeply engaged in talks toward a final agreement with Tehran, much of which was made possible by international sanctions pushed by the United States. And in January the US helped convene talks in Geneva aimed at resolving the [Syrian](#) civil war. This came only months after the threat of US military force against Damascus convinced the Assad regime to abandon its chemical weapons programme.

In both the Far East and Europe, the [Obama administration](#) is pushing ambitious trade initiatives. On Russia, the US has been leading the way in trying to punish Putin for his annexation of Crimea. Drones continue to fly in Yemen and elsewhere. And all of these big examples leave out the many small ways in which the US is promoting its foreign policy agenda in countries around the world.

Now one can argue that some of these efforts will not succeed or are ill-conceived – Kerry's peace efforts appear to be on life support and trade talks are going nowhere in the US Congress – but their mere existence is a crushing rejoinder to the idea of retreat.

So it raises the question: what are the anti-retreaters talking about?

First, arguments about retreat aren't really about retreat – they are about policy differences. Take for example, a recent op-ed by *Washington Post* columnist [David Ignatius](#) in which he outlines growing concern from Saudi Arabia. The Saudi king "is convinced the US is unreliable" (this is a familiar synonym for retreat), reported Ignatius, who also notes this view is shared by four other traditional US allies in the region: Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates and Israel. What do these four countries have in common? They don't like diplomacy with Iran, US condemnation of the military coup in Egypt or the refusal to go all out to topple Assad. In short, they don't like the US pursuing its interests in a way that goes against their perceived interests. Or perhaps to put it more bluntly, these are nations that recoil at signs that the US won't fight their battles for them or allow them to continue to free-ride off US security guarantees. What looks like retreat to them is actually restraint.

Second, it's politics, stupid. If there is one truism of American foreign policy it is that it is domestic politics by other means. For example, when the conservative magazine the *Weekly Standard* complains that at a time when America needs a leader who will "sound forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat" it is cursed to have a president who "has a piccolo that only calls retreat", it is not providing an accurate description of US foreign policy – but that's hardly the point.

Rather, these are evocative smear words intended to portray Obama (though honestly it would be any Democratic president) as spineless and weak. After all, in the 1950s, Democrats were the party that lost China; in the 1970s, they stabbed America in the back on Vietnam; in the 1980s, they were "blame America firsters"; in the 00s, they were merely "French" in their approach to foreign affairs. (Mental note: send anyone who used this slur a book on the Algerian War.)

While the specific insults might change, the attack line is always the same. If in the process they allow the person making the criticism to cover themselves in the mantle of toughness and strength – without having to bear any of the consequences for their policy positions – well, that's kind of the idea.

Third, those who argue that the US is retreating from the global stage have a very clear sense of what US leadership looks like – the use of American military force.

This is why the failure to bomb Syria has become such a cause celebre to the retreat crowd. Never mind that Obama fulfilled his policy goal of disarming Syria of its chemical weapons capability. "Diplomacy" is for wimps.

The failure to use force in Syria not only left Assad unpunished, it emboldened other world leaders, or so the argument goes. So Russian troops had barely stepped foot in Crimea before Obama's critics were blaming Putin's actions on Obama's Syria fecklessness. Of course, even if Obama had turned Damascus into a car park, he would never have sent troops to Ukraine to reverse Putin's aggression in Crimea. In other words, even if he did what the hawks wanted, it wouldn't have convinced Putin to act differently in Crimea, a fact well understood by both Putin and Obama's critics. In the child-like worldview of those bemoaning retreat, every missed opportunity for the US to bomb or invade a country is a clear and unmistakable signal to the world's bad guys that they can do whatever they want and the US will not lift a finger to stop them. Just as in 2008, after the US invaded Iraq and Afghanistan, Putin demurred at invading Georgia for fear of upsetting the fearsome and brobdingnagian George W Bush. Oh wait.

Finally, those who argue against retreat are besotted by the myth of American omnipotence and the idea that when America acts the world is transformed. Take, for example, the hawkish editor of the *Washington Post* editorial page, Fred Hiatt. In a [recent op-ed](#) complaining about Obama's flawed "global strategy", he asserted: "When democratic uprisings stirred hope from Tunisia to Egypt and beyond, some foreign-policy veterans ... urged Obama to seize the unexpected opportunity and help support historic change. Obama stayed aloof, and the moment passed."

If only Obama seized the moment, the Middle East today would be defined by Jeffersonian democracy and region-wide respect for human rights. As Obama himself sagely commented about such nonsense: "I hear people suggesting that somehow, if we had just financed and armed the opposition [in Syria] earlier, that somehow Assad would be gone by now and we'd have a peaceful transition. It's magical thinking."

For 12 years, the United States has maintained a troop presence in Afghanistan, fought a fearsome counterinsurgency, spent hundreds of billions of dollars – and that nation's leader wants America to leave even as his desperately poor country remains mired in civil war and

dysfunction. If that US presence can't stabilise Afghanistan with 100,000 troops – just as America failed fully to stabilise Iraq – what would lead anyone to believe that the intangible concept of US non-alloofness in Egypt, Syria or elsewhere would transform those nations?

Indeed, at its core, the retreat argument is informed by the unshakeable belief that more US power, more US commitment and more leadership will always produce better outcomes. The irony is that so many of those bemoaning US retreat are the same people calling for war with Iraq a decade ago.

It's almost as if those who advocated a calamitous conflict that undermined US interests, took more than 4,000 American lives (and many more Iraqis) and cost trillions of dollars in national treasure learned absolutely nothing from that experience. Whether those who believe in US omnipotence believe it or merely adhere to the notion because it furthers their political interests is hard to say. It's likely a mixture of both, but the impact is all too often disastrous.

Arguing that the US has interests everywhere and more importantly possesses the levers with which to affect the political trajectory of other nations has become an encouragement to one hubristic US miscalculation after another – from Vietnam to Iraq to Afghanistan. When the failure to use American force is consistently portrayed as a sign of weakness the political imperative is always to act.

And Obama who foolishly "surged" 30,000 American troops to Afghanistan in 2009 is hardly immune from the political pressure. Five years later, he seems far more inclined to take his cue from an electorate that has little interest in looking around the world for new monsters to destroy.

None of this is to say that US power and influence are worthless. Far from it. But there are serious constraints on how effectively that power can be exercised – and grave consequences when it is wrongly applied. As history has consistently shown, the United States faces enormous barriers in affecting events in faraway lands that have their own political, ideological, religious and ethnic idiosyncrasies.

In this sense, what is so often dismissively labelled as retreat, withdrawal or isolationism is, in reality, restraint and pragmatism on the global stage; acknowledgment of the limits on US power; recognition that the American people are tired of foreign misadventures; and an understanding that even the best of US intentions can lead to the worst possible results.

## **Key observers of international relations tell**

### **Lucy Fisher how they view the outlook**

#### **'IT'S RECALIBRATION TIME'**

*Charles Kupchan, senior fellow, Council on Foreign Relations, New York*

US foreign policy is going through a recalibration – there's a notion of retrenchment and rebalancing. Whether justified or not (and I think the linkage is weak), there is a perception

among the American public that the efforts of the US to do good abroad come, at times, at the expense of economic wellbeing at home. There is a demand for a reduced American role abroad.

The US is going through a political rethink right now, which is most pronounced in the Republican party. Although at one time the repository of a strong and resolute security policy, for many among the Tea Party and the Libertarians, ambition abroad too often comes at the expense of liberty and prosperity at home.

That view has a long tradition in American history; the most open proponent now is Rand Paul.

The "pivot" towards Asia is a rebalancing that has been taking place since the end of the Cold War and which will continue in the years ahead. The Obama administration is simply the first self-consciously to articulate it.

The bar for intervention abroad is higher today than it was a decade ago. The US is going to be more selective and more circumspect about intervening militarily, but if Iran's nuclear programme continues to proceed, that strikes me as a case in coming years that may be above the bar.

### **'WE DON'T GAIN FROM WAR'**

*Thomas Henriksen, senior fellow, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, California*

The president seems to be having trouble domestically, but foreign policy is part of that emerging negative picture. It looks like America isn't doing well in places such as Syria. It hasn't appeared strong in the Crimea crisis.

There are cycles in American foreign policy. America seems to extend itself, and then, although the Pentagon never entirely reverses it, it slows down. We've had a swing back and forth over the last four American presidencies. An interventionist in George Bush, then restraint with Bill Clinton, who didn't intervene in Rwanda and did in Bosnia only reluctantly, then extravagant intervener George W Bush, now Obama. If the cycle holds true, we'll have a more interventionist president whoever wins in 2016.

The average American doesn't stand to gain anything from a war abroad, but in fact stands to lose something: if not blood then treasure. There are certain companies that want, if not war, then the defence budgets, in order to sell products and new armaments to the Pentagon. If you're a hawk in America, you have to admit that there's a very large military-industrial complex that does sell arms to the US military.

But most Americans would agree that the US needs a very strong army to be able to enforce order, overawe enemies and keep the peace and stability.

### **'THE US IS AN ENDURING POWER'**

*Bruce Jones, director of Project on International Order and Strategy, [Brookings Institution](#), Washington DC*

There's strong support for engagement in the world, diplomatically and economically. But historically, the US goes into a war-weary phase after major wars; the question is: how long will this phase last? The US is trimming down from its huge highs of the two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; that's very different from disengaging from the world.

American energy "independence" is a misnomer: the US will still feel the impacts of global price shifts. But increased security of supply coming from US and regional gas and oil does shift thinking about foreign policy. There's a big debate ahead: should the US export energy to its allies? Or try to play a broader stabilising role in global energy markets?

The US needs to return to a narrower focus on using force to deter and meet tyranny, but democracy promotion as a matter of economic, diplomatic, and political relations is and should be an enduring part of us foreign policy.

We've entered a phase where the dominant narratives are about the decline of US power, the "rise of the rest" and the coming disorder. But they're grossly exaggerated. The US is an enduring power, the "rest" are divided and there's strong capacity and strong demand for US leadership in the international system.

## **'WE SHOULD PULL IN OUR HORNS'**

*Justin Logan, director of foreign policy studies, [Cato Institute](#), Washington DC*

The US is not becoming isolationist. It is telling that our refusal to enter a few new wars is being characterised as such. More than a fourth of the planet's countries are formal treaty allies of the United States and we spend almost as much on our military as does the rest of the world combined. We are less interventionist than under the Bush administration, but that is damning with faint praise.

The US ought to act like what it is: the most secure great power in modern history. We have two weak, friendly neighbours to the north and south, and two giant moats to our east and west. Economic interaction and trade have not made distance militarily irrelevant. We have a huge economy, a military that is capable of defeating any foe and thousands of nuclear weapons. We should pull in our horns a bit and come home. We are unlikely to do this however, because, perversely, our security allows us to do lots of reckless things abroad with little consequence to voters. Neoconservatives in the Republican party have spent millions of dollars to make sure their ideas dominate GOP foreign policy.

Whoever is in the White House, Washington is likely to remain an interventionist power until something forces it to stop and I do not see this on the horizon.

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