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Obama's accidental ambition

In place of Bush-era democratisation, Obama has found himself trying to secure the world's ungoverned spaces



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The return of the realists ... A US radio operator near the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.
Photograph: Reuters

While President Bush's democratisation agenda seems like a historical chapter of long ago, characterised by hubris and ambition, that was blunted by the chaos of Iraq, Obama may have unwittingly set himself a more ambitious agenda: to protect America by securing the world's ungoverned spaces. After all, as Obama and Gordon Brown regularly state; we are fighting in the crucible of terrorism to ensure that plots cannot be made against us back home.

Bush's first-term agenda argued for changing governments from autocratic to democratic to ensure a safer world. Obama's election, on the other hand, heralded the return of the realists. Such an ideology stresses the value of state power in combating al-Qaida and similar non-state organisations. It looks therefore to use US power to change the capabilities of governments across the world. Pushed to its ultimate, it would mean buttressing weak states across much of sub-Saharan Africa, the Maghreb, the Middle East, Central and South Asia, all the way to Indonesia.

I do not mean to suggest that Obama originally intended to pursue such an ambitious global vision, but rather that he may become trapped in it by events and by his own narrative about the need to secure ungoverned areas. Emerging threats from Yemen and Nigeria, for example, may create an unstoppable momentum towards the US becoming what Thomas Barnett describes as the "Leviathan-like bodyguard to globalisation's advance".

Let us not forget that original intentions can be rapidly overtaken by events. Obama's predecessor had no initial interest in pursuing an expansive foreign policy. In fact, in 2000, candidate George Bush said that US troops should not participate in nation-building and should only fight and win the nation's wars. But then 9/11 allowed the neocons to pursue the "global war on terror", which has cost countless lives and more

than \$700bn. John Quincy Adams once wrote that "America does not go abroad in search of monsters to destroy", yet al-Qaida was not present in Iraq prior to the US invasion and was able to take advantage of the anarchy that followed state collapse.

Obama has inherited the consequences of the Bush administration's pursuit of monsters abroad. His initial response has been to expand US operations in South Asia, arguing that the terrorist "threat would arise should safe havens on Pakistan go unchallenged or should the government in Afghanistan fall to the Taliban again". Although a greater focus on Afghanistan was premeditated, the law of unintended consequences led to the stalling over the sudden escalation of violence and General McCrystal's call for more troops. Obama's best laid plans were being overtaken by events. To justify his reluctant commitment of 30,000 more troops, Obama quickly moved to add that they would be back by 2011, an idea that was quickly backtracked on by the secretaries of state and defence.

Securing the world's safe havens may be a larger task than democratising the world's governments. As Christopher Preble from the Cato Institute wrote: "The trick is not having the right plans, but having the power to implement them". Much of the world's territory is only partly sovereign, with weak governments unable to provide the levels of security that would prevent the establishment of terrorist training camps.

As is often the case, the US has instigated a military response to shoring up state weakness. Nowhere is this better displayed than in the advent of "aerial governance" – the proliferation of armed drones piloted from the US patrolling across an ever-expanding battlefield against threats as diverse as smuggling and piracy. Yet as counter-insurgency specialist John Nagl has outlined, "future conflicts will be protracted and hinge on the affected populations' perceptions of truth and legitimacy rather than the outcome of tactical engagements on the battlefield".

A core question is how effective US-led state-building can be against terrorism. After all it, was partly due to US support for the Egyptian and Saudi states that al-Qaida emerged in the first place. The non-sovereign areas of Sudan and Afghanistan simply became the incubators for these movements, so going after safe havens tackles the symptoms not the cause.

What is needed is a risk management approach towards terrorism. John Kerry was lambasted in his 2004 presidential campaign when he suggested that "we have to get back to the place we were, where terrorists are not the focus of our lives, but they're a nuisance". This is a difficult narrative to sell as commander-in-chief, especially when rightwing opponents can attack Obama for being "soft" (an example typified by recently elected Senator Scott Brown's advocacy of the effectiveness of waterboarding). Nevertheless, for Obama to craft a successful foreign policy he will have to be able steer the right course