

# WAR ON THE ROCKS

## We're We Watching the Same Presidency? Obama Was Not a Restrainer

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As we wait to see what shape President Donald Trump's foreign policies will take, debate over former President Barack Obama's legacy continues. Did Obama successfully end the war in Iraq, or did he help create the Islamic State by withdrawing U.S. troops too soon? Was it prudence or poor judgment that kept Obama from intervening in Syria's civil war? The Obama era will have a deep impact on policy debates for years to come, serving as a template that will shape how decision-makers think about the use of military force. Getting the assessment right is crucial. Unfortunately, many seem to view it through the wrong lens.

In a thoughtful [recent article](#) here at *War on the Rocks*, Paul Miller reviews the most recent president's foreign policy legacy and concludes that Obama's "instincts for restraint" had "damaging consequences for American security." He over-learned the lessons of George W. Bush's hyper-interventionism, Miller argues, and as a result, he "retrenched when he should have engaged."

Miller's analysis is a useful corrective to many of the rosy late-term [paeans](#) to the former president's handling of foreign affairs, most of which gave Obama's foreign policy too much credit for [coherence](#) and gloss [too quickly](#) over its failures.

Unfortunately, though Miller lands several punches, criticizing the Obama administration for exercising too much restraint in foreign policy is both a misuse of the term "restraint" and a gross mischaracterization of what was wrong with foreign policy under Obama.

There were many things to dislike about American foreign policy during the Obama years, but too much restraint simply was not one of them. Miller is right to argue that Obama bucked the conventional wisdom in Washington far less often than he himself claimed, but Miller fails to mention that the worst flaws of Obama's foreign policy — an overreliance on military intervention and overconfidence in the ability of the United States to control political outcomes abroad — were simply carryovers from the Bush administration.

To be sure, Obama was not the one who invaded Afghanistan or Iraq, but he embraced and expanded the global war on terrorism in every other dimension. On his watch, Obama participated in regime change in Libya, ordered a massive increase in a global drone campaign, provided material support to Saudi Arabia in its war in Yemen, and escalated (and later maintained) open-ended nation building and internal defense efforts in Afghanistan. Obama was many things, but a restrainer he was not.

Let's review Miller's case against Obama the restrainer.

First, Miller laments that, "there are some 50,000 fewer U.S. troops stationed abroad than there were in September 2001." He writes that there are now "about 200,000" troops overseas. The correct number, as of last month, is actually 275,850. That's still an enormous number of forward deployed forces and can hardly be fairly associated with a grand strategy of restraint. Most proponents of restraint argue that all or most of these troops should come home.

Obama's approach in Afghanistan, Miller argues, doesn't fit "the myth of a foreign policy establishment addicted to strategically questionable interventions" and pressuring a reluctant president to pursue them. "A far simpler explanation is that Obama saw the wisdom of the bipartisan consensus and chose to follow through on his own campaign promises," Miller concludes.

But that is a misleading portrayal of what happened in the lead up to Obama's decision to escalate the military campaign in Afghanistan. Multiple first-hand accounts attest to what Bob Woodward reported was "a vintage White House trick, one that offered the illusion of choice," where the military and civilian national security advisers reviewing Afghanistan policy, in the words of then Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, gave President Obama "three options, two of which are ridiculous, so you accept the one in the middle." The military was "really cooking the thing in the direction that they wanted," Obama told Woodward. "They are not going to give me a choice."

Consider this passage from David Sanger's Confront and Conceal:

Obama knew that to fulfill his campaign promise to focus on the Afghan War, he had little choice but to accede to the Pentagon's longstanding requests for more troops. But despite his campaign pledges, he was growing skeptical about what could be accomplished by doubling the size of the force. "I think he hated the idea from the beginning," one of his closest advisers told me early in 2012. "He understood why we needed to try, to knock back the Taliban. But the military was 'all in,' as they say. And Obama wasn't."

This is not to say Obama would have been a dovish restrainer in the absence of the so-called "Blob," but it is hard to deny the pervasive influence of the national security bureaucracy in making interventionism the default characteristic of American foreign policy. It is therefore curious how Miller comes to the conclusion that the Washington-based foreign policy establishment isn't reflexively interventionist, on net.

On Iraq, Miller's primary critique is that Obama withdrew all U.S. forces in December 2011 instead of pressing the Maliki government in Baghdad to approve a new Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) that allowed for a residual presence. According to Miller, although the Obama administration did try to negotiate a new SOFA that would keep 10,000 troops in Iraq, "when negotiations got difficult, he walked away." But that depiction differs considerably from the accounts of people who were involved in the negotiations and much in-depth reporting at the time. Talks were stalemated for months and in the end Baghdad wouldn't agree to allow a residual force unless the troops could be stripped of immunity from Iraqi law.

Many critics of Obama's decision to withdraw argue that the administration just didn't try hard enough. But one is at pains to find a single detractor who can detail precisely what negotiating tactic or position would have made the Maliki government cave to U.S. preferences for a residual force. If it were so simple, one wonders why the Bush administration, whose desire to keep troops in Iraq no one doubted, was forced to accept a SOFA in 2008 that called for complete withdrawal in 2011.

On Syria, Miller vacillates between mischaracterizing Obama administration policy as too sheepish and arguing that the foreign policy establishment's impulses to intervene earlier and more forcefully were non-existent. "[T]he myth of Washington's self-destructive interventionism...played directly into Obama's decisions regarding Syria," Miller writes, and were "used to justify his refusal to act."

Both assertions are wrong. The foreign policy establishment put significant public pressure on the Obama White House to do more in Syria. A persistent Republican critique was that Obama failed to give early support to the rebels, instead allowing Assad's opposition to be corrupted by foreign jihadists. Even some Democrats, including within Obama's own administration, pushed hard for imposing safe-zones. The bureaucracy's penchant for intervention was evident in the leaked internal memo signed by over 50 State Department officials calling for strikes against the Assad regime—an apparent last resort after years of trying and failing to get Obama to approve a more muscular response. Think tank scholars lambasted Obama's apparent reluctance to expend American blood and treasure to save the Syrian people. There were daily howls of opprobrium in the media over Obama's failure to use military force in Syria for the sake of credibility.

While it's true Obama resisted pressure to initiate in Syria another certain U.S. quagmire in the Middle East, he was hardly a non-interventionist. He authorized early support for rebels, steering arms, equipment and money both directly and indirectly. Following reports that Assad had crossed Obama's "red line" drawn around chemical weapons usage, the administration made a full-throated attempt to mobilize public opinion and get congressional approval for military intervention. It was only the unavoidable politics of the moment that threw a monkey wrench into the plans. The American people opposed it, Congress wouldn't vote for it, the U.N. Security Council wouldn't approve it, the British Parliament voted against joining in the mission. And by 2015, the United States was bombing Syria regularly in the campaign against ISIL, an approach that is closer to the "Washington playbook" than Miller depicts.

This is hardly a case study in resisting knee-jerk interventionism. A major military intervention in Syria would likely have been disastrous, but Obama's limited interventionism also made things worse. As Eva Bellin and Peter Krause argued back in 2012,

The distillation of historical experience with civil war and insurgency, along with a sober reckoning of conditions on the ground in Syria, make clear that limited intervention of this sort will not serve the moral impulse that animates it. To the contrary, it is more likely to amplify the harm that it seeks to eliminate by prolonging a hurting stalemate.

The International Crisis Group seemed to second this assessment: "Syria indeed has become an arena for outside meddling, but the meddling has been far more effective at sustaining the fighting than ending it."

To appreciate just how strange it is to call Obama's foreign policy restrained, and how misguided it is to use Obama's foreign policy to judge a grand strategy of restraint, let's imagine for a moment an alternate history in which U.S. presidents make a different set of very plausible choices—choices in line with a true grand strategy of restraint.

In this alternate world, instead of responding to the attacks of 9/11 by launching a full-scale invasion of Afghanistan and toppling the Taliban, the United States would have opted for a more limited attack focused on punishing Al Qaeda severely and attempting to root out and kill its leaders, including Osama bin Laden. Then, declaring Al Qaeda duly disrupted, the president would have pulled out troops, leaving Afghanistan to its own devices after providing stern warnings about the consequences of harboring terrorists in the future.

At the same time, the United States would have focused on improving its homeland defense and would not have declared a "global war on terrorism." Though real, the threat of terrorism is in fact quite modest and, at any rate, is not amenable to interventionist solutions. This more restrained approach to Afghanistan would have secured all the major benefits the United States ever achieved in its actual history (i.e. disrupting Al Qaeda and killing bin Laden), but at far less cost and without entangling the United States in the losing battle that the fight for Afghanistan has become.

Even more critically, without the driving narrative of the war on terror, our imagined president would never have invaded Iraq, thus avoiding one of the worst foreign policy decisions in U.S. history since Johnson's decision to escalate the war in Vietnam. Similarly, the United States would not have encouraged regime change in Libya nor would it have launched a drone campaign in search of terrorists to kill across seven different nations, as Obama did.

Had the United States pursued this approach, consider how much better off both the United States and the Middle East would be. Most obviously, many thousands of U.S. and coalition service members would still be alive and the American public would have been spared most of the jaw-dropping price tag of the global war on terror – estimated at between \$4 and \$6 trillion so far. The Taliban, Saddam Hussein, and Gadhafi would likely still rule in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, but on the other hand none of those nations would have produced the Islamic State or given it the room to terrorize Iraq and Syria the way it has done. On top of that, the citizens of

the region would have been spared the horrific violence unleashed by American intervention and the ensuing chaos and competition. NGOs estimate that war in the region has killed, directly or indirectly, as many as a total of 1.3 million Afghans, Pakistanis and Iraqis since 9/11, including up to 200,000 civilians. On top of all of this, the absence of ongoing American military intervention would take the wind out of the sails of both jihadists abroad and potential homegrown terrorists here in the United States.

In short, such a grand strategy would likely have produced so vastly superior a set of outcomes that it hardly seems necessary to keep writing in defense of restraint. But tragically we do not live in that alternate world. In reality, we must confront the fact that Bush did make the decision to pursue regime change in Afghanistan and Iraq, and that both Bush and Obama embraced an aggressive interventionist war on terror that assumed the United States could remake South Asia and the Middle East and defeat terrorism through military means at a reasonable cost.

In criticizing Obama for exercising too much restraint, Miller makes the same mistake that many other foreign policy analysts make: his aperture isn't wide enough. He's stuck in the operational mindset, bemoaning the tactics employed in our various interventions in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Afghanistan and beyond, and failing to recognize America's ubiquitous military involvement in these and other elective missions. He worries that more than 275,000 American troops stationed across Europe, Asia and the Middle East aren't enough of a global footprint. He's not arguing against restraint. Rather, he's arguing that our deep engagement wasn't deep enough.

Obama "oversaw the collapse of order across the Middle East" and "did little" to discourage coups in Mali, Egypt and Thailand, Miller writes. He failed to act to reverse the rise of unpalatable political developments in Turkey, the Philippines, Austria, Greece and Hungary, or to stand up to "Russia's aggression in Europe and China's coercive diplomacy in the East and South China Seas."

In making these accusations, not only does Miller fail to provide any reason to believe that more of the same failed policies should have produced better results, this limitless conception of America's global interests and responsibilities also betrays an unwarranted confidence in America's ability to shape events. In this Miller has plenty of company here in Washington D.C.. As Micah Zenko put it, "The illusory belief of America's ability to shape, leverage, influence, sway, direct, or control foreign events is widespread within Washington's foreign policy community."

In stark contrast to this conventional wisdom, a foreign policy of restraint stems from the appreciation that the United States is not automatically responsible when things go wrong somewhere in the world. Nor does the fact that the United States would like to manage complex global trends mean it can always do so. Obama appeared to grope his way towards these insights during his presidency. The real stain on his foreign policy legacy is that he did not get far enough.

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