

US Foreign Policy in the 21st Century — Driving Factors for Continuity & Change

By Diana Friedman and Eric Lundell



Author Diana Friedman



Author Eric Lundell

The 2016 US presidential election has captured global attention with the primary successes of “outsider” Donald Trump, the unraveling of traditional Republican Party leadership, and the unexpectedly strong left-wing challenge of Bernie

Sanders in the Democratic Party primaries to Hillary Clinton. While all elections are important, the 2016 contest is a unique moment in modern US political history, highlighting tensions among the American public over the role of government in society, long-term economic trends, and the position of the United States in the world — as well as an “anti-establishment” sentiment benefitting both Trump and Sanders.

The election will be particularly significant for US foreign policy given the intensity of debate over basic perspectives on the global interests of the US. Since the end of the Cold War, the US foreign policy community has worked to develop a new guiding framework. While the policy establishment continues to refine this post-Cold War agenda, the George H. W. Bush (I), Bill Clinton, George W. Bush (II) and Barack Obama administrations have struggled to craft a durable consensus among the American people regarding the fundamental objectives of US foreign policy.

In the absence of a robust public consensus, each post-Cold War

administration’s foreign policy doctrine has essentially been reimagined by the next president. This mutable policy environment underscores the importance the next president will have. Within this context, US foreign policy will continue to be driven by the ongoing redefinition of US national interests in the post-Cold War era and by questions among the American public regarding how best to (1) protect national security, (2) maintain leadership while rejecting the role of “world policeman”, and (3) manage the impacts of globalization on the US economy.

Driving Factors in US Foreign Policy in Post-Cold War Era

During the Cold War period, various aspects of US foreign policy were subject to intense debate and underwent significant changes. However, fundamentally, policy was consistently guided by competition with the Soviet Union. Since the end of the Cold War, the US foreign policy establishment has worked to develop a guiding vision for a “New World Order”. Over the past 25 years, this vision has been challenged by a range of issues such as the growth of China, 9/11 and the rise of global terrorism, the Arab Spring, the global financial crisis, and the resurgence of Russia.

Over the past 16 years, US foreign policy has also been characterized by the swing in perspective between the Bush (II) administration’s doctrine of pre-emption and the Obama administration’s doctrine of limited intervention. Perceived flaws and intense partisan criticism of both approaches continue to generate intense debate among the US public about the appropriate direction for US foreign policy.

- *The New World Order of the 1990s:* As the dominant global power in the aftermath of the Cold War, the US became the leading defender of the status quo, working to preserve the geopolitical “New World Order” while promoting the “Washington Consensus” as a global economic vision. Both the Bush (I) and Clinton administrations attempted to form a new construct for foreign policy focused on US leadership of “global norms” and restrained use of military force to deter aggression, for example, launching Operation Desert Storm in reaction to Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait. A key US foreign policy debate emerged during the Clinton administration over the concept of “nation-building” given US involvement at that time in countries and territories such as Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia and Kosovo.
- *US Foreign Policy Post 9/11:* The events of 9/11 significantly altered US foreign policy, moving the Bush (II) administration into the “war

Photo: USAF photo by Staff Sgt. Corey Hook



Two US Navy F-18 Hornet aircraft fly over Iraq to assist the Iraqi Security Forces’ efforts against ISIS, March 3, 2016.

on terror” and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 remain the keystone event for US foreign policy in the 21st century and underlying driver of US policy in the age of “global terror”. During the Bush (II) administration, US foreign policy was increasingly associated with neoconservative concepts of preemption and unilateral action, as well as more general notions of the extension of freedom. However, by the end of Bush’s (II) second term, the American public was exhausted with the “Bush Doctrine”. In reaction, the Obama administration entered office in 2009 with the goal of recalibrating US foreign policy, emphasizing “smart power”, coalition building, and increased reliance on regional partners, as well as a more limited use of military force. As the Obama administration approaches the end of its second term, the American people are now expressing frustration with the “Obama Doctrine”.

- *Perceptions/Costs of Security — Non-Interventionism versus International Engagement:* Overall, events since 9/11, to include the challenge of “failed states” and the rise of global terrorism (e.g., al-Qaeda and Islamic State), have reduced the American public’s sense of security despite US superpower status. According to a December 2015 Pew survey, nearly 30% of Americans cite terrorism (18%), national security (8%) or ISIS (7%) as the country’s most important problem. In reaction to extreme partisan criticism of both the Bush Doctrine and Obama Doctrine, the US public increasingly questions how the government can best ensure national security. Debate has reflected both non-interventionist sentiments as well as calls for active international engagement. For example, according to the Pew survey, about 50% of Americans indicate that their concern about US action in Iraq and Syria is that the US will “not go far enough” in stopping militants, while 42% express concern that the US will “go too far”. Debate also continues over the perceived costs and benefits of serving as the “world’s policeman”, a role Obama has explicitly rejected.
- *Economic Effects of Globalization:* Fundamental US economic trends, particularly wage growth stagnation and increasing income disparity, also continue to darken attitudes among the US public toward globalization and trade as well as the role of the government in managing these issues toward the US “national interest”, however that term may be defined. The lingering effects of the Great Recession have accentuated this issue in the current presidential campaign.
- *Trans-Pacific Partnership:* US perspectives toward trade remain inconstant and considerably mixed. Only about 30% of Americans say that global trade issues should be a top priority (Pew, January 2016). However, presidential elections consistently heighten US trade-related political rhetoric. The current opposition to trade expressed within the Democratic Party primaries is no surprise, reflecting longstanding party attitudes. However, the leading candidates of the traditionally pro-trade Republican Party, Donald Trump and Ted Cruz, are also strident critics of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the leading US trade initiative. While some Republican opposition to the TPP is partisan or specific to individual provisions of the agreement, the success of candidates such as Trump implies that a small but vocal anti-trade faction is emerging

within the Republican political constituency.

The Rise of China

Amid the many challenges of the 21st century, the rise of China and increasing US acknowledgement of China as a disruptive power are two of the more consistent factors driving US foreign policy debate in the post-Cold War era.

- *Strategic Partner:* In the 1990s, increasing US imports from China created a mounting trade deficit and associated political tensions. However, the Clinton administration also promoted the concept of China as a “strategic partner” with the goal of bringing China into the New World Order of the 1990s.
- *Strategic Competitor:* The Bush administration specifically criticized Clinton’s “strategic partner” concept, instead identifying China as a “strategic competitor”. However, at the same time, the US also increasingly focused on the concept of facilitating China’s rise as a “responsible member” of the global community, to include the creation of the US-China Strategic Economic Dialogue.
- *Responsible Power/Disruptive Power:* The Obama administration has continued to emphasize the goal of facilitating China’s rise as a responsible member of the global community, promoting China’s adherence to global norms. At the same time, however, this vision is increasingly acknowledged by the US foreign policy establishment as aspirational in nature as a range of issues, from Chinese claims in the South China Sea to cybersecurity threats, reinforce perceptions that China’s rise will indeed be a disruptive force in the global order.

Despite the importance of China’s rise in the global order, however, this issue still does not have the same level of resonance in US foreign policy as 9/11 and the evolution of global terrorism.

The Obama Doctrine

Towards the end of President Bush’s (II) second term, his administration’s foreign policy was generally perceived both within the US and abroad as “overly aggressive” and overly reliant on the use of military force to the detriment of relationships with allies. The war in Iraq cast a long shadow over the 2008 presidential elections, helping to propel the relatively unknown Senator Obama to the White House.

- *Resetting US Relations:* In 2009, President Obama embarked on what critics derisively dismissed as an “apology tour” to repair what his administration considered to be severely damaged overseas perceptions of America. Although his optimistic messages of peace and unity — most famously calling for a “new beginning” between the US and Muslims around the world — did not come to fruition, the outreach helped establish a new tone for US diplomacy and erase much of the lingering animosity associated with the Bush administration, particularly within Europe.
- *Avoiding Another “Iraq”:* Obama’s insistence on avoiding a repeat scenario of the invasion of Iraq has been a key driver in every major

decision, serving as a defining trait of his foreign policy.

In his January 2016 State of the Union Address, Obama asked the question “How do we keep America safe and lead the world without becoming its policeman?” Overall, the president emphasized that:

- The US will act decisively (even unilaterally) in response to “direct” threats to the US and its allies.
- For other issues, which he labelled as “issues of global concern”, the president repeatedly referenced US leadership in building coalitions where possible and exercising restraint as appropriate.

In an increasingly multipolar world, the Obama administration’s response was to prioritize selective action where it believed US engagement could have the greatest positive impact. For all other issues, the administration has followed more long-term approaches designed at “managing” rather than “resolving” the matter at hand such as the threat from ISIS or the conflict in eastern Ukraine.

- *Conflict Management:* Obama has defended his foreign policy as a “patient” focus on long-term strategic interests over short-term, “reactionary” responses. Provocations from aggressors like North Korea and Russia are met with economic sanctions, imposing long-term costs while studiously avoiding military escalation. Engagement with long-term adversaries such as Iran and Cuba is pursued despite continued US concerns with these governments.
- *Use of Military Force:* Obama has drawn a clear distinction between issues presenting a direct threat to US national security versus instances where he perceives the costs of intervention to be higher than inaction. This outlook explains his approach to the Syrian civil war, as well as the duality between his aggressive use of drone strikes against terrorist targets and his reluctance to use a full range of military force, or indeed to even provide military aid to potential allies.

However, this “long game” approach provides limited immediate reassurances to the American public and enables critics to portray the administration as capitulating to more aggressive actors such as Russia and surrendering US global leadership.

Obama’s focus on multilateralism and “smart” diplomacy represented a “natural reaction” to the Bush Doctrine. However, as the Obama administration draws to a close, a significant portion of the US public as well as the rest of the world are now arguably dissatisfied with the Obama Doctrine, criticizing it for a lack of decisiveness. Obama’s infamous decision not to enforce his 2012 “red line” against Syria’s use of chemical weapons serves as a prime example. His failure to meet expectations for his “Pivot to Asia” (later renamed a “Rebalance”) serves as another. More recently, his administration’s failure to appreciate US public anxiety over ISIS in the aftermath of the 2015 Paris attacks also promoted the prevalent criticism among Republicans of Obama’s “feckless” foreign policy. Criticism of Obama’s foreign policy as “too indecisive” is indeed reminiscent of criticism only eight years ago about the Bush (II) foreign policy as “too aggressive”.

Photo: Official White House photo by Pete Souza



President Barack Obama and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan take a motorcade to the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC.

The US Foreign Policy Establishment

President Obama has at times expressed contempt for the Washington “foreign policy establishment”. Represented most visibly by a range of think tanks and policy institutes, this community has a key role in driving consensus and consistency in foreign policy during and across presidential administrations.

- *Areas of Divergence:* In Jeffrey Goldberg’s recent article in *The Atlantic* (“The Obama Doctrine”), Obama described how he broke with the “Washington playbook” when he decided not to enforce his “red line” against Syria. Obama criticizes the negative reactions from most of the foreign policy establishment to this decision as a stubborn and illogical insistence on preserving US credibility at all costs. He also took exception to criticisms related to his willingness to redefine alliances with longstanding US allies. “Free riders aggravate me” is now one of the most referenced quotes from the “The Obama Doctrine”, highlighting, after two terms in office, Obama’s frustration with foreign expectations of the US and his view on alliance partner responsibilities under the rubric of coalition building. In response, members of the establishment have called Obama’s framework a “downsized, less expensive, more risk-averse foreign policy” that has made US allies feel less secure and our enemies more emboldened.
- *Areas of Agreement:* At the same time, however, the Obama administration and the US foreign policy establishment also tend to agree on many basic principles for US foreign policy such as the importance of coalition building, rebalancing US global focus, the promotion of transparency with China, and — on a more specific note — support for the TPP.

In the aftermath of the 16 years of the Bush Doctrine and the Obama Doctrine, the US foreign policy establishment generally advocates for a framework that incorporates the strengths and avoids the excesses of both approaches — seeking a consistent and assertive foreign policy focused on maintaining US leadership of global norms through robust

coalition building and alliances. However, Obama's defiance of some of the establishment's "advice", the perceived failures of both the Bush Doctrine and the Obama Doctrine, as well as the current "anti-establishment" sentiments in US politics serve to dilute the establishment's consensus, influence, and — depending on the outcome of the 2016 election — perhaps its connection with US politicians.

Differences Within the Democratic Party: Clinton & the Progressive Wing

As the current Democratic frontrunner, Hillary Clinton is arguably the last major "establishment" candidate in the 2016 presidential campaign with the closest connections to the US foreign policy community.

- *A More Assertive Approach:* Although Clinton has generally emphasized her alignment with Obama's foreign policy, she is widely recognized as having more hawkish views, exemplified by her vote for the war in Iraq and vocal support for the intervention in Libya. Her campaign highlights her resolve to defeat ISIS, hold China "accountable" and "stand up" to Putin. Overall, Clinton supports a more "muscular", assertive vision of the Obama foreign policy, pledging to uphold continued engagement with Cuba and to forcefully implement the Iran nuclear deal.
- *Pressure on Trade:* Under pressure from Democratic Party anti-trade elements, Clinton has started opposing the TPP. However, TPP supporters have suggested that her criticisms are politically motivated, speculating that as president she would seek perhaps minor changes in the deal rather than abandoning the agreement altogether. As Obama's secretary of state, Clinton helped develop the concept of the rebalance to Asia and is invested in furthering that strategic focus.

Photo: US State Department



Official portrait of former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton

In contrast, the campaign of Bernie Sanders represents the left wing of the Democratic Party, framing foreign policy as a decision between war and peace, with a focus on human rights and assertions such as "war must be a last resort" and "we cannot and should not be the policeman of the world."

Republican Foreign Policy & the Trump Factor

Ronald Reagan's mantra of "peace through strength" remains central to Republican Party foreign policy debate. However, following the perceived failures of the Bush Doctrine, the range of GOP foreign policy debate has widened. In fact, some of the noninterventionist views adopted by progressive Democrats and (to a somewhat lesser extent) by the Obama administration have also surfaced within segments of the Republican Party.

- *Orthodoxy:* Traditional foreign policy voices within the Republican Party, such as Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham as well as Jeb Bush, still align many of their positions with the US foreign policy establishment. Jeb Bush's presidential campaign also closely reflected the foreign policy establishment's criticisms of the Obama Doctrine, stating for example, "Adversaries do not fear us and allies do not trust us. I will rebuild America's military, restore our credibility and leadership, and repair our broken alliances."
- *Fragmentation:* However, as Jeb Bush's failed campaign demonstrates, he and other traditional Republicans are increasingly losing relevance among their party constituencies. Instead, the two leading candidates in the Republican primaries, anti-establishment candidate Trump and Tea Party candidate Cruz, are both openly defiant of the GOP establishment.

Disaffected Republican voters supporting Cruz and Trump are not primarily motivated by US foreign policy concerns. However, this very ambivalence toward foreign policy, combined with a lack of respect for "establishment" leadership, undermines the ability of foreign policy experts to moderate some of these candidates' more extreme views.

- *Tea Party Influence:* The Tea Party advocates for radical change in US domestic policies and a reduction of the government's role in society. In foreign policy, Cruz has taken a relatively more "establishment path", pledging to restore US leadership in the world, defend US allies, and bolster the military. However, Cruz's platform reflects a more aggressively US-centric perspective, insisting on an "America-first" policy that does "not go picking fights around the globe" or "engage in expensive and protracted exercises in nation building". His most severe stance is arguably on terrorism, promising to "carpet bomb" ISIS and more broadly confront "radical Islamic terrorism". Ironically, his distinction between a forceful response to terrorist threats and nonintervention in circumstances where it is not in the direct national security interest of the US has some direct parallels to the Obama Doctrine (albeit with clear differences in rhetoric and execution).
- *The Trump Factor:* Even more so than Cruz, Trump reflects some of the noninterventionist trends in US foreign policy debate. Even more

Photo: US Customs and Border Protection photo by Josh Denmark



A view of the border fence between southern California and Tijuana, Mexico

Photo: Gage Skidmore



Donald Trump addresses supporters at a campaign rally in Las Vegas, Nevada.

so than Obama, Trump also reflects US debate over the balance in alliances, calling NATO “obsolete” and criticizing the US military alliance with Japan.

Trump has often been inconsistent about his policy positions and displayed a disregard for international norms and laws. However, his stated intention to compel Mexico to pay for a wall along the US border and to institute a temporary ban on Muslims entering the country highlight a nationalist, populist, and isolationist perspective. Similar to his populist views on immigration, Trump also consistently advocates for protectionist trade policies — opposing the TPP and contending that trade imbalances with China, Japan, and Mexico should be countered with higher tariffs, playing on public concerns about the impact of globalization on the US economy. Overall, Trump represents a break from the US foreign policy establishment well beyond any partisan differences between Republican and Democratic orthodoxy. The US foreign policy establishment is reeling from statements by Trump regarding nuclear weapons capability for Japan and South Korea, cutting oil imports from Saudi Arabia and other Arab allies to compel greater cooperation against ISIS, and the need for greater “unpredictability” rather than predictability in the US-China relationship and US foreign policy generally.

One consistent theme in Trump’s foreign policy statements has been a respect for “strength” and forceful action, playing on public frustration over Obama’s more “patient” and restrained leadership. Another consistent theme is the personal nature of all “Trump Doctrines”. While analysts scurry to identify his “key advisors”, Trump has famously identified his most important foreign policy advisor as himself. Asked on MSNBC’s “Morning Joe” who he relies on regarding foreign policy, Trump responded, “I’m speaking with myself, number one, because I have a very good brain and I’ve said a lot of things... I know what I’m doing and I listen to a lot of people, I talk to a lot of people and at the appropriate time I’ll tell you who the people are...But my primary consultant is myself and I have a good instinct for this stuff.” In March, Trump began to announce members of his foreign policy team and will continue making similar announcements in the coming months. However, as Trump’s statement to MSNBC’s

“Morning Joe” highlights, regardless of any advisors Trump may name, no advisor will ever truly have more significant influence on the Trump campaign than Trump himself.

Outlook

US presidential elections are always characterized by heightened rhetoric on both domestic and foreign policy issues. The 2016 season is no different, but definitely more extreme. The differences in the Democratic Party represented by the Clinton and Sanders campaigns can be considered traditional Democratic Party policy debates. However, the foreign policy debate in the Republican primaries, highlighting the conflicting positions of the GOP establishment, the Tea Party wing, and outsider/populist Donald Trump, represent the widest range in differences the Republican Party has arguably ever experienced.

- Overall, Clinton presents a more assertive “muscular” version of Obama administration policy. Were Clinton to win the White House, the foreign policy establishment would largely retain its influence, although the cracks in consensus that have emerged during the Bush (II) and Obama eras would indeed remain.
- Within the Republican Party, Tea Party influences argue for a more US-centric approach than party orthodoxy. Should Trump continue to reshape the party, the future of GOP foreign policy as well as the broader bipartisan influence of traditional foreign policy orthodoxy would indeed be in great doubt. **JS**

*Eric Lundell is president of International Technology and Trade Associates, Inc. (ITTA), a consulting company in Washington, DC.
Diana Friedman is a foreign policy and trade analyst at ITTA.*