The Obama Doctrine: A Modesty of Ambitions

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The turmoil sweeping the Middle East could be the crucible in which a new U.S. foreign policy is forged, one that champions political and economic freedom at the cost of short-term tradeoffs.

On April 22, 1793, President George Washington issued a proclamation decreeing U.S. neutrality in the war between France and Britain. "The duty and interest of the United States require," he wrote, "that they should with sincerity and good faith adopt and pursue a conduct friendly and impartial toward the belligerent powers." Washington's reason for issuing the proclamation was clear -- U.S. involvement could invite destruction upon his new and vulnerable nation -- though not uncontroversial, given that the French revolutionaries were inspired in great part by the American example.

Two hundred and eighteen years later, when revolutions broke out in Egypt and Libya, the U.S. once again hesitated. Our values and sympathies lay with the protesters, but backing them seemed risky, and our short-term interests appeared to counsel caution or, in Egypt, support for a comfortable status quo. Unlike in 1793, however, America was neither new nor vulnerable. Our capacity to back those drawing inspiration from our own struggle for liberty -- and many other revolutions since -- had grown, but our willingness to do so seemingly had not.

Our hesitation reflects, perhaps, a deeper uncertainty regarding America's role in the world. During the Second World War, we in the United States were rousted forcibly from our self-imposed isolation, and with our victory found ourselves thrust into a new contest with the Soviet Union -- a contest not only to claim Britain's relinquished hegemony but also to establish the liberty of all human beings. The depth of the danger and the totality of the conflict were bracing. In NSC-68, the top secret memo laying out U.S. Cold War strategy in 1950, the authors wrote, "The integrity and vitality of our system is in greater jeopardy than ever before in our history ... the risks we face are of a new order of magnitude, commensurate with the total struggle in which we are engaged."

This threat guided U.S. policy choices and imposed order on a messy postwar world. The need to defeat Communism and contest Soviet influence wherever it was found justified many means in our overseas dealings, and provided an

impetus at home for economic growth and scientific achievement.

Our victory over the Kremlin, on the other hand, threw these things into confusion again. While we reveled in our unrivalled supremacy, we faced a world of uncertainty. In his 1993 inaugural address, Bill Clinton celebrated our triumph "over Depression, fascism, and Communism," but warned that the world was "threatened still by ancient hatreds and new plagues." Nevertheless, the 1990s of my generation's youth were a global victory lap. We drunk deeply of our unconstrained power, danced on the graves of our enemies, and enjoyed our prosperity to the point of excess.

On September 11, 2001, those ancient hatreds and new plagues came together in a new and alarming form. America met the challenge of terrorism, engaging in what President George W. Bush came to describe as the "defining ideological struggle of the 21st century." But after two wars and restrictions on our own civil liberties were adopted with little dissent, doubts crept in. Our economic, geopolitical, and moral standing seemed diminished as we pursued a foe we struggled to understand. For all its destructive force, the extremism we battled seemed less impelled by a nefarious global design, like Communism, than symptomatic of deeper ills that beset much of the world.

And so the U.S. now finds itself with a foreign policy adrift. It aims to placate the world rather than define America's place and purpose in it. It is designed not to inspire, but to avoid giving offense. It acknowledges no enemy and treasures no alliance, and produces the tortured uncertainty evident in Washington's response to uprisings in Iran in 2009 and Egypt and Libya in 2011. Its ultimate failure lies in the modesty of its ambitions, which disappoints our friends and emboldens our foes.

The turmoil sweeping the Middle East, however, could be the crucible in which is forged a new U.S. foreign policy, one that once again champions political and economic freedom. The threads of this foreign policy have been visible for years. In his second inaugural, Bill Clinton spoke of "the world's greatest democracy leading a world of democracies." In his own second inaugural, George W. Bush expounded powerfully on the theme, vowing "to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world." President Obama has acknowledged that "the price of our own freedom is standing up for the freedom of others," but in Libya and elsewhere has proven reluctant to translate these sentiments into policy.

In two decades, words like these have no doubt brought periods of change, but there has yet to be an enduring shift in U.S. foreign policy. Our post-Cold War foreign policy has borrowed heavily from our Cold War foreign policy, but it turns out that we have carried over the wrong elements. We continued our tactical approach -- supporting friendly regimes with little regard to their domestic policies -- while losing sight of the overarching purpose that animated those policies -- safeguarding human liberty. That mission, as events in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East vividly demonstrate, remains only partially fulfilled.

But our old tactics no longer suit this purpose. What was in the 20th century a global struggle directed centrally from Washington, Europe, and Moscow is now a collection of local struggles. The threats to freedom are diffuse, as are the forces arrayed against those threats, which marshal in the public square and on the Web alike. Nevertheless, the true defining struggle of this century may be little different at its core from that of the last century -- not necessarily extremists versus moderates, but the defense of political and economic liberty against those who would stamp it out. Too often we have found ourselves on the wrong side of this struggle and conceded the banner of liberty and opportunity to extremists who wield it cynically to advance their own brand of tyranny. We cannot impose our views, but we can stand with local partners to advocate for political reform and human dignity.

Overseas, we must rethink our approach not only to political, but also to economic liberty; after all, polls suggest that

concerns over corruption and unemployment have fueled the turmoil sweeping the Middle East. Rather than charity that fosters dependence, our foreign assistance should be seed money that fosters capability and opportunity. This mindset already characterizes the Millennium Challenge Corporation, which distributes aid on the basis of criteria and proposals. The rest of U.S. assistance efforts should take up a similar approach. In addition, one of the most powerful forms of economic aid rests not on what we do but what we do not do -- impose barriers to trade and investment. Entrepreneurs and small businesses abroad can transform their societies, as we have seen in India and elsewhere; but to do so, they need access to Western markets that is often blocked by tariffs and other obstacles.

During the Cold War, our foreign policy choices involved painful trade-offs as we sought to contain and ultimately defeat the Soviet Union in the name of freedom. The trade-offs involved today in championing liberty will be different, but no less painful. In the short term we face the risk of instability and the wrath of entrenched interests, in exchange for benefits that may take time to materialize. But 2011 is not 1793, nor is it 1950. With the world's largest and most vibrant economy and an unrivalled military, we finally have the opportunity to pursue a foreign policy that advances both our interests and our values. Faced with a world changing so rapidly before our eyes, we also have an urgent need to do so.

Michael Singh is managing director of The Washington Institute. ❖

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