

Obama sounds a quiet revolution in foreign policy

Written by The Conversation

President Obama's publication of his [2015 National Security Strategy](#) on February 6th is the kind of event that generates great heat and discussion among a relatively small group of policymakers, pundits and those few academics connected in some way to Washington's halls of power.

It is largely ignored by the rest of us.

Even the New York Times only devoted a couple of stories to it: [one](#) previewing its release and [one](#) (republished from the wires) summarizing its content.

It is easy to understand why we would overlook just another government report. But we shouldn't ignore this one.

Because it isn't just another report. In fact it is arguably the most important foreign policy report issued by any president. Each gets to do it once in four years – and in each they provide a blueprint for their administration.

National Security Strategy reports make official statements about four things: a president's priorities in terms of threats, the values that he intends to emphasize, the means he intends to use and the strategy he hopes to pursue.

By historic standards, this one was, to put it mildly, a doozy in all four dimensions.

The threats

First, the threats. The report included some predictable things like the threat posed by Jihadist militants and nuclear proliferation. These have been part of a succession of such reports, by both Republican and Democrat.

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Yet President Obama has greatly expanded the definition of core security threats to include things never discussed before. There are threats where there is no readily identifiable “enemy” at all such as pandemics (notably Ebola, of course). Climate change too makes the list, a controversial move given a [significant percentage](#) of America’s population refuses to acknowledge its existence and many Republicans challenge its scientific veracity.

The cherry on the top of this particular section is, however, the stress on the importance of economic security.

This isn’t something that many presidents have talked about since Franklin D Roosevelt. And when he talked about our greatest fears in 1941, he never codified it in a national security document. It is, perhaps, a sign of our times that the current president has committed himself to prioritizing the fight against economic insecurity at home, as the rich get richer and, if the data is to be believed, the [poor get poorer](#) .

Finally, it’s also significant what DIDN’T make the threat list. Well, for starters there is no “axis of evil” language. And when Iran (and the ongoing negotiations) is mentioned, the language is diplomatic and more positive than George Bush’s. There is talk of Iran’s responsibilities but no threatening language. Even the discussion of Russian “aggression” uses words that that the administration can easily “walk back” (to use DC jargon) if we reach an agreement on the Ukraine.

The values

Here the president has returned to some significant basics – ones that take aim at his predecessor.

Barack Obama repeatedly emphasizes the importance of respecting the rule of law and universal rights in a direct reference to America’s use of torture, rendition and black site prisons.

As he goes on to say,

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“When we uphold our values at home, we are better able to promote them in the world. This means safeguarding the civil rights and liberties of our citizens while increasing transparency and accountability. It also means holding ourselves to international norms and standards that we expect other nations to uphold, and admitting when we do not...In recent years, questions about America’s post-9/11 security policies have often been exploited by our adversaries, while testing our commitment to civil liberties and the rule of law at home...For the sake of our security and our leadership in the world, it is essential we hold ourselves to the highest possible standard, even as we do what is necessary to secure our people.”

While critics can point to the president’s own failures to do so for the last six years (from Edward Snowden to his failure to actually close Guantanamo), one can only admire his forthright statement about what he intends to do for the next two.

The means

George W Bush hated the United Nations so much that he sent [outspoken](#) UN critic John Bolton to be America’s ambassador there. The result was a long period of unmitigated American criticism of the UN and threats to forestall the payment of our contribution to the running of the organization.

Obama, and his ambassador Samantha Power, are far more invested in the organization, despite the occasional squabble.

The notion that America must sustain “international norms” this is not a term not used by any prior president. It is mentioned here in various forms a dozen times. To do so, America will have to “fortify” multilateral institutions like the UN.

Last but not least: the strategy

It is in this area that the president has repeatedly come under recent assault from his critics. They claim either that he has no “grand strategy” or that he has one that they don’t like. This report won’t assuage them. It has no bold visionary declarations. But it does contain some interesting nuggets.

Principle among these is Obama’s call for “strategic patience.” The fact that it has to be

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emphasized is in itself revealing. America's muscular political culture emphasizes the need for quick solutions, often involving the demonstration of resolute leadership. In foreign policy this often manifests itself in calls for the overwhelming use force as a first response rather than a last one. Our consumer culture of instant gratification and sensationalist media coverage only magnifies this pressure.

Yet here is a president telling many Americans what they are unaccustomed to hearing: that there are significant limits to what we can do.

He warns against "overreach." We can, for example, degrade the Islamic State in the short term but it will take time to destroy them. No "mission accomplished" here.

Effective foreign policy requires patience, the intelligent use of diplomacy, America's economic heft and, yes, its military – but only in very select, strategic and limited ways.

It would be easy to dismiss this year's National Security Strategy as inconsequential. Obama has less than two years left in office and there is a temptation to see the 2016 election as one that simply "resets" foreign policy. But that risks being naïve.

Reorienting America's foreign policy priorities – through the Pentagon, the State Department and Homeland Security – is like changing course on an enormous tanker. It takes a lot of time and resources to initiate change, and then it is often even harder to revert course.

This document may well set a quiet revolution underway – one that each presidential candidate will have to respond to in the foreign policy debates to come in over the next 18 months.

Simon Reich does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has no relevant affiliations.

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