Real Instituto Elcano working paper

'Houston, We Have Too Many Problems': The US, Iraq, North Africa, Afghanistan and… Syria

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Area: U.S – Transatlantic Dialogue
Working Paper 15/2012
2/11/2012

Elcano Royal Institute
Madrid – Spain
http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_eng

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Summary
This Working Paper addresses some of the pending aspects of this still unresolved chapter in the recent history of the Middle East and of President Obama's attitude to the Arab uprisings, offering a glimpse of the immediate course of US policy in the area.

Introduction[1]
The general consensus on the November 2012 US presidential election campaign is that foreign policy will not play a major role. Both candidates know that what concerns the voters is the economy and related issues on social and religious aspects of life in the US.

Based on Mitt Romney's statements when he was nominated by the Republicans and on the Administration's slight use of foreign policy issues, nothing capable of tipping the voting scales is expected. With the exception of Bin Laden's 'termination' and the standard reference to the Israeli-Palestinian issue, not even the sensitive topic of Iran has risen to the category of an election issue, to be used in the last stages of the campaign and in television debates. It all depends on the developments in Syria whether foreign affairs will become part of the argument. Still, Syria and other sensitive scenarios will not disappear from the radar after the election and will occupy a portion of the pending agenda of either the re-elected or the new President. This Working Paper addresses some of the pending aspects of this still unresolved chapter in the recent history of the Middle East and of President Obama's attitude to the Arab uprisings, offering a glimpse of the immediate course of US policy in the area.

After the outstanding success of the elimination of Bin Laden and the difficult resolution of the Libyan crisis, with the toppling of the Gaddafi regime, the Obama Administration has had to face, besides the perennial Israeli-Palestinian issue, the complicated deterioration of the situation in Syria and its potential for spill-over. Since his re-election and even while still campaigning in 2008, Obama has issued concrete statements and even entire speeches on each one of the stages of the process called the 'Arab Spring'. In response to the regime of Al-Assad in Syria, Obama seemed to be acting as he did in each of the successive falling dominoes in North Africa, confirming a strategy that included close cooperation with his allies but without direct intervention (especially in the military

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[1] The author is grateful to Maxime Larivé, Astrid Boening and Ronald Hall for their editing and bibliographical assistance.

sphere). The strategy followed during the 'Arab Spring' can be said to have been successful, if only in view of the ultimate results of the demise of autocratic regimes and the optimistic expectations for reconstruction and democratic development.

But Syria has posed a different challenge to the US. An array of differing opinions as to what Obama's policy would be and a handful of declarations of the Administration and the President himself offer a glimpse of future developments after the November election. This should provide some sort of sign of the policy to be implemented by either Barack Obama (if re-elected) or Mitt Romney (if successful in reaching the While House). Still, observers should at all times review the declarations and policy actions of the Obama Administration in previous years in order to predict what the future strategy might be if Obama is re-elected or how Romney's policies might differ.

As far as Obama's attitude to Syria is concerned, at least two forthright statements and declarations should be highlighted. One was issued early in 2012 and the other very close to the delicate period of the election conventions. On 19 August 2012 Obama warned Syria that it would face US military intervention 'if there were signs that its arsenal of unconventional weapons was being moved or prepared for use'. It was close to an ultimatum, but restricted to a specific area. He made this clear warning by confirming that the US was demanding that Al-Assad step down. Observers would remember that it was almost exactly a year earlier when Obama first called on the Syrian autocrat to resign, a rare action. On this new occasion Obama lamented: 'So far, he hasn't gotten the message and instead has doubled down in violence on his own people'. On 4 February 2012 Obama renewed his blunt request for Al-Assad's departure: 'I strongly condemn the Syrian government's unspeakable assault against the people of Homs and I offer my deepest sympathy to those who have lost loved ones. Assad must halt his campaign of killing and crimes against his own people now. He must step aside and allow a democratic transition to proceed immediately… Assad has no right to lead Syria, and has lost all legitimacy with his people and the international community… The suffering citizens of Syria must know: we are with you, and the Assad regime must come to an end'.

During the period leading to the election campaign's high season, observers of all factions and leaders of the Republican opposition issued a variety of views on how serious was the challenge facing the US President, what was the best way to proceed and what alternatives to the current Democratic government's policy a potential Republican Administration under Romney could offer. A consensus was that Syria was not like the previous episodes in the 'Arab Spring' but that it had much in common with other serious confrontations and US interventions, such as Lebanon, Afghanistan and the Balkans, among others. The standard analysis was that the US has frequently been pushed to intervene when American interests (real or perceived) are threatened. Meanwhile, another current of opinion thought that, on the one hand, an American policy of actively

supporting the Syrian opposition forces was not risk free. But, on the other hand, waiting on the sidelines of a conflict that might end up destabilising Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan (key neighbours) would be even more dangerous. Analysts have proposed that deep consultation, careful planning and continuous preparation for future actions should provide the US with the diplomatic tool that is available to other players. However, evidence showed that the diplomatic options were failing (UN) and that demands for military support for the Syrian rebels was on the increase.

Contrasting arguments pondered whether military support would make the war shorter and enable the rebels to succeed. Recommendations for increased support and direct military assistance would ultimately enhance US influence in the area after the regime's fall. Moreover, US support would weaken al-Qaeda's growing influence in the area. However, the record already shows that military power is not the only way to support the rebels. The Obama Administration has actually led international efforts to sanction governments and interests most responsible for the regime's violence. Calls for putting pressure on Russia and China were made, without much success after the latter exercised their power of veto at the UN.

In the background, Romney condemned Obama for a 'policy of paralysis' towards Syria. However, his own agenda for ending the massacre of civilians has been less clear than his claims. In the Republican entourage, accusations of ineptitude regarding the Administration's foreign policy have been made. On the one hand, they pointed out that the main reason for the alleged inaction was that Obama simply wanted to avoid a new military adventure in a sensitive election year. On the other hand, they criticised the Administration for not understanding how diverse actors (the United Nations, Russia, China and even Syria) operate.

The Republicans have blamed Obama for what he himself called 'leadership from behind'. This was his explicit programme when addressing how to topple Muammar Qaddafi in Libya. However, the Democrats answer that critics forget that this strategy policy was highly successful. It forced the allies to pitch in and at the end receive due credit. Still, Condoleezza Rice claimed that 'one cannot lead from behind'. Democrats did not respond with the clear argument that the Bush Administration's direct leadership led to the drama of Iraq.[2]

Let us now review the recent history.

[2] For a review of all these points of view, see Baker, Barrett, Cooper, Hayes, Kaye, Kristof, Lander, Larrabee, Nasr, Pollack, Rubin, Sanger, Schmitt and Wittes.

The Immediate Historical Setting

Reminiscent of past occasions in the period since the end of the Cold War, recent US Presidents have been facing hard choices when confronted by a succession of uncertain events in an emerging new world order. The change took place after the disappearance of the discipline that had previously been provided by the two superpowers. By competing for world domination (the principal goal of the USSR) or influence (mostly the aim of the US), Moscow and Washington were able to guarantee some stability until the Soviets faltered and Gorbachev gave up. Ironically, history has recognised as an impressive triumph the record of successive US Presidents, culminating in Ronald Reagan's strategy of pushing the Soviets towards a frantic arms race and economic competition that they simply could not afford to follow. But the victory gave way to a series of missed opportunities and shows of impotence when dealing with new threats, among them the most damaging: September 11.

Never since the attack on Pearl Harbor has the US had a better opportunity in triumph and in tragedy to claim a leading role in the new world order. Although ending in a sort of stalemate, the Gulf War was also a personal success for President George H. Bush. But his son was later to be hit hard with the double attack on September 11 on New York and Washington. The humiliation turned into an opportunity to lead in defending the ideals shared by the Western World and beyond. '*Nous somme tous Americains*', *Le Monde* claimed. But in a matter of months, by abusing NATO after having correctly activated its Article 5 for collective defence, the US President squandered most of the world-wide political capital he had accumulated. The invasion of Iraq, its occupation, evidence of abuse and torture in prisons, the conversion of Guantanamo from a base of no strategic value into a legal limbo, led to the President being universally criticised and domestically questioned, becoming a general embarrassment.

During the first two years of his first term as President, Barack Obama had faced a long campaign for re-election in the fall of 2012, experiencing a series of bitter disappointments and serious challenges. He inherited one of the worst economic crises in the history of the country and indeed in most of the rest of the world. He was defeated in his ambitious plan of forging a coalition for healthcare reform. He became frustrated by the resistance and dilemmas regarding immigration issues in a country that seemed to have lost its sense of national identity and security. He took note very late that his election in 2008 was mostly the product of the many high expectations of a disillusioned electorate in the US and of a people around the world who had been seeking an alternative to the loss of US prestige generated by the Bush Administration. The award of the Nobel Prize added to the aura already bestowed on him by the German masses who gathered at the Brandenburg Gate to acclaim a new Kennedy-like era and the emergence of what was seen as a 'black Camelot'.

Obama was brutally reminded that around two-thirds of the electorate did not vote for him. At least half of those who went to the polls preferred John McCain and Sarah Palin. This staunch opposition never forgave him for being the first black president in history and at the same time a part of the Ivy League intellectual and academic elite. Supported by a wave of populist strategy and propelled by the uncertainties of the economy, the non-Obama voters seized any opportunity available to question his ability to govern the country and lead the world.

This loose coalition of old-fashioned and radicalised Republicans, religious conservatives, Tea Party members, disillusioned Democrats and a growing number of middle class citizens threatened with joining the ranks of the poor, waited for an opportunity to question the foreign role of a US led by the odd trio formed by President Barack Obama, Secretary of Defense (about to pack and leave) Robert Gates and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (who produced a whole series of contradictory opinions). The opportunity came with the implosion of the Arab and Middle Eastern world.

The Democrat-inclined think-tank community and liberal columnists considered the actions of the US President to be prudent and decisive according to the circumstances, stages and countries involved. The Republican-oriented press and analysts took the opportunity to criticise Obama for what they considered a mistaken approach, either for doing too much or too little and too slowly.[3] Protagonists of the Bush Administrations expressed caution.[4] The leadership of the influential Council of Foreign Relations expressed open criticism.[5] The middle-of-the-road establishment vented certain doubts about the likely outcome of a novel US policy.[6] The mainstream analytical community rushed to explain what was happening and what may happen afterwards.[7] The radical left had a field day with the different policy initiatives of the Obama Administration.[8] In all, the new developments caught everybody as flat-footed as the President himself.[9] The fact is that very few expected the initial rebellion to evolve into open revolution as occurred in some cases.

[3] See commentaries by Elliot Abrams.
[4] See Rogin.
[5] See comments by Haas.
[6] See CBS/AP, Bartkowski, Dale, Ferguson, Flanagan, Jerome, Salem and Cordesman.
[7] See string of Foreign Affairs pieces in a special issue of May/June 2011. Some articles are worthy of careful study, including Anderson, Byman, Doran, Goldstone, Hamid,, Taleb and Shehata. An early result of this activity was a volume titled 'The New Arab Revolt' (Council of Foreign Relations). See also Cook's piece in *Foreign Policy.*
[8] See Chomsky.
[9] See, amongst others, the commentary by Alterman.

The 'Arab Spring'

Poorly aware of the intricacies of foreign affairs (in contrast with an impressive academic and think-tank elite), the American electorate faced a novel panorama of a region that was superficially and simplistically known for the perennial issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and then the confusion created by the Iraq adventure. Although still hurt by the attack of September 11, the American people became tired of the continuation of the stalemate in Afghanistan, the rising number of casualties, the elusiveness of Bin Laden and the erosion of social and educational programmes under competition from the cost of the war and pending issues in Iraq.

Then little Tunisia grabbed the evening news and the headlines of mainstream newspapers with the protests generated over the treatment of a fruit vendor who set himself on fire as a desperate response to the confiscation of a cart. Seen initially as an isolated incident when local riots forced the autocratic Ben Ami to leave, the real shock came later when a copycat rebellion took to the streets of Cairo and after a few days led to the resignation of Hosni Mubarak, the most important of the area's autocrats and a model for the US arrangements for underpinning security and stability in the region. Then, the spill-over to Libya raised concerns in Washington, but perhaps most especially in European capitals, when uncontrolled migration took the Mediterranean by surprise, arriving first on Italian soil as a stepping stone to other EU countries. When the pattern threatened to expand to other countries, from Morocco to Syria, where the authorities responded with a combination at different times of restraint and utter brutality, US Special Forces assaulted the complex where Osama Bin Laden, America's public enemy number one, had lived for at least five years, executing him and throwing his body into the sea.[10]

This epoch-making event did not eliminate the urgency of dealing with the still developing drama in North Africa and the latest outbreak in Syria, but it brought events to a head and underlined the need to reconsider policy in general towards the wider area running from Pakistan in the East to Morocco in the West.

Angles for Analysis

In this general setting, analysts have several ways of studying the appearance, evolution and possible outcomes of the crisis generated by the humble epicentre of the self-immolation of an unemployed young man in Tunisia. Although the object of scrutiny is the role of the US and the impact of the crisis on its society and foreign policy, a look at the consequences for Europe and the actions of the various actors is also advisable.

[10] For a selection of commentaries on this event, from a British source, see Cornish, Dormandy, Felbab, Price and Shaikh.

The first thing is to consider what has really happened. How have events been perceived from the outside, in Europe and in the US? How has this affected the EU as such and some individual member states? How are the crisis and its evolution perceived in the USs? How might they affect US domestic and foreign policy?

Regarding Europe's role, from the American point of view it is of the utmost interest to consider what the key European actors have done. The evidence clearly shows that, in the first place, on both sides of the Atlantic the western powers have dedicated themselves in the past to supporting dictators (or, alternatively, autocrats and benign monarchs) either actively or passively. In the second place, these illiberal regimes have blackmailed (and still do) Europe and the US with the illusion that they were the lesser evil. They were 'our sons of a bitch', to use the terms allegedly employed by F.D. Roosevelt to justify his support for Nicaragua's Anastasio Somoza García. This was no different from the support provided by Ronald Reagan to the military dictatorships of the 1980s, under the 'Kirkpatrick Doctrine' (authoritarian vs totalitarian regimes). One of the clearest examples of Washington and Europe looking the other way was the fundamentalist victory in the Algerian elections and the resulting tacit support for the military.

The most amazing dimension of this blatant pattern of extortion was that the fact that the 'victims' seemed to be satisfied with the understanding.[11] The culprits expected to be able to exert an undemocratic control over their societies as a reward for halting the rise of fundamentalist Islamic groups, especially when they became a clear prey to al-Qaeda. Certain interests in the US were also happy to see that the arrangement guaranteed the security of Israel, sandwiched between Syria (a flat-out enemy) and Egypt (a convenient ally since the times of Anwar Sadat), securing the flow of oil from the Gulf's medieval monarchies.

In addition to all of these 'benefits', the understanding provided protection for US investments in the area and covered its security needs (of a different degree in each country and sub-region). In any case, the US's limited direct security and economic interest in the general Maghreb sub-region was balanced by the value of stability in a flank of the sensitive pivotal location of the Suez-Gulf-Israel triangle.

Balance from a Bi-continental Point of View

For independent observers, the Mediterranean is of notable significance for Washington's inter-regional interests. The uncertainties posed by the still unsolved issues of Iraq need a stable flank to the west. The same can be said for addressing the larger problem of Afghanistan, where a 'victory' similar to that in Iraq has so far been illusive.

[11] See my comment 'Manual de chantage', *El Pais*, 31/I/2011, http://www.elpais.com/articulo/internacional/Manual/chantaje/elpepuint/20110131elpepuint_15/Tes.

When confronted with the third stage of the 'Arab Spring' uprising in Libya, in Washington the evidence was that Operation Odyssey Dawn demonstrated once more the EU's limitations and incapacity to deal by itself with the military options. It was the US that had to advance the argument for the implementation of the no-fly zone.

But the personal convictions of President Obama and his major advisors dictated the need to resort to a multilateral policy of action. The decision was not exclusively dictated by free-will or idealism. It was propelled by financial necessity and political ideological reasoning. Obama decided to resort to the use of NATO for the operation's management and easily convinced Canada to become a suitable partner, always ready for international missions under the pacification brand name. The arrangement was also made possible by the latent existence of a Mediterranean Dialogue within NATO and the role of other initiatives such as the Istanbul Cooperation Council. More decisively, the leading role taken by the US was also generated by the inability, once more, of the much-heralded-in-the-past European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) to get its act together. The US wasted no time with unnecessary diplomacy. Washington acted when conditions dictated the need for hard power.

The context has shown that energy supply continues to be the strategic central factor in pursuing the greater inter-regional objective of stability. However, oil and gas are not the only issue in some of the countries concerned. In fact, some in the area need energy sources as much as Europe does. This time, the pressure is to obtain this goal via the establishment of a viable democracy in certain countries where the status quo has been guaranteed by authoritarian regimes. Some of them are still not questioned.

During the first stages of the crisis, official US observers took notice that in the long-term strategy Egypt continues to be the pivotal state in the Arab world. While at the beginning Israel's reaction was muted as regards the emergence of the Egyptian crisis, it was expected that when confronted with the demand to return to the 1967 borders, the government would respond in the negative. This is precisely what Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu did when answering Obama's speech at the State Department on 19 May, prefiguring the coming strategy and explaining past actions.

What has the US Done?

From a domestic US angle and from a European perspective, there are several important questions. Of the utmost importance is what the US did when the first crisis developed, what it is doing now and what it should do in the future. An overall question is: 'what does all of this mean for the global policy strategy of the US and what is the impact on domestic politics and the economy? A wider theme is: what does all of this mean for EU-US relations? Two sets of items need to be differentiated and analysed. One is the

individual events and the subsequent responses; the other is the underlying intentions, including future action by the US.

A reading of Obama's intentions suggests at least two angles for research. One is the successive declarations of members of his Administration before and after the crisis erupted. This should be complemented by the analytical framework of think-tank experts and mainstream media columnists. Another, more simple (but at the same time prone to mistakes in distinguishing what was said from what was actually meant) is a systematic analysis of five seminal speeches made by the President in the last three years, since he was elected. Two of them were made during the first years of his first term. The first of the series was the inauguration speech, which set the tone for at least two main issues that would later dominate the challenges posed by the 'Arab Spring'. The second was a classic, direct message offered to the Muslim societies at the heart of the Arab world, exactly in the same city that later in 2011 would become the centre of attention of world opinion: Cairo. The third was the result of the surprise of the award of the Nobel Peace Prize. The fourth was a brief comment at the National University on the intervention in Libya. The fifth was made at the Department of State in the aftermath of Osama Bin Laden's liquidation.

In all cases, trend-setting events (inauguration, travel, anti-terrorist action, awards) dictated the tone, purpose and impact. What were the ambivalences and contradictions in the declarations that ensued? What is still the current line of action? Did the US truly implement the intentions expressed in the speeches? In what way were expectations not met and why?

Foreign Policy Planning and Practice through Presidential Speeches

All speeches by US Presidents bear a burden of comparison. Each successive inaugural speech is faced with resonances of the John F. Kennedy speech of January 1961. Much repeated, reformatted, used and abused by other politicians is the most famous passage: 'Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country'. But there is a more important part of this speech that has been labelled the 'Kennedy Doctrine', outlining the foreign policy not only of the Kennedy Administration but ambitiously claiming it should be the basis for any President and any period: 'Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty'. Historical experts have pointed out that this 'doctrine' is better understood as a cornerstone of US action in the Cold War, when the enemy was clearly the Soviet Union.[12]

[12] For an informational summary, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kennedy_Doctrine; for a bibliographical source see http://www.amazon.com/Oppose-Any-Foe-Intervention-Vietnam/dp/1594602069.

It is misleading in its application to all circumstances and periods. Some of the components are reasonably matched with the expectations and ideals dictating US national interest. However, the problem rests on the possible interpretations of two aspects: 'pay any price' and 'support any friend'. It depends on what the definition is of 'any price' when dealing with costly wars and interventions. Moreover, 'any friend' has too often meant the forging of alliances with autocratic and dictatorial regimes contrary to the ideals historically identified as essential to the US. The practical outlook of Roosevelt and Kirkpatrick seems to have been evident throughout the past century in the support of regimes as different (but also similar) as those of Franco, Salazar, Allende, assorted Latin American military officers and, lately, Arab autocrats. Some of them have been toppled (in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya) or are expected to be history soon (Syria), but others appear to survive (Saudi Arabia).

The Inauguration Speech

In a clear reference to what apparently had earlier been the priority of the Bush Administration in response to terrorism, Obama said, with no doubt or ambiguity, that it was necessary to 'reject as false the choice between our safety and our ideals'. In other words, terrorism could not be combated at the expense of violating human rights. He reminded Americans and the rest of the world that the 'Founding Fathers, faced with perils that we can scarcely imagine, drafted a charter to assure the rule of law and the rights of man'. He flatly reinstated that 'those ideals still light the world'. This statement would come back to haunt him when, despite his personal intentions, he failed to close down the prison in Guantanamo. When he achieved one of his most important accomplishments, he had to defend the execution of Bin Laden and the use of information obtained through the methods he had ostensibly banned.

At the same time, Obama recognised that the US has to accept the fact that it needed outside assistance. He recalled that earlier generations faced fascism and communism not just with missiles and tanks, but with firm alliances and enduring convictions. They understood that 'US power alone cannot protect us' (an eye on Europe?) and that they were not entitled to 'do as we please'. While most accept the fact that the US is the only world power with a global reach, in order to be fully successful and durable it needs the cooperation of others. Obama believed that 'instead they knew that our power grows through its prudent use; our security emanates from the justness of our cause, the force of our example, the tempering qualities of humility and restraint'.

The Nobel Prize Address

The speech delivered in Oslo by the recently inaugurated President was surprising in that it was made when Obama did not have the track-record to back it up. It was interpreted as a European endorsement of the promise made during the campaign and as inducement

to produce results. His opponents in the US congratulated him in public but behind the scenes regretted the rush in which the committee had awarded him the honour. Some in Europe and other parts of the world questioned the award's suitability while the US remained an occupying power and was still engaged in war.

In any event, the central issue of the speech was *war*. Obama's address was realistic: war is a fact, something inherent in human nature. And wars must sometimes be fought to confront tyranny and aggression. However, it is the belief of Present Obama (and of any other democratic leader) that all nations must adhere to certain standards, reflected in treaties and conventions. Consequently, this becomes an obligation also for the US: it cannot ask others to do what it does not do itself. This creed is a familiar reverberation of Kennedy's speech: 'whether you are citizens of America or citizens of the world, ask of us the same high standards of strength and sacrifice which we ask of you'.

Obama raised the issue of necessary military actions that go beyond the bounds of self-defence, most especially when executed against an aggressor of third countries. The President believes that in such a situation force can be justified on humanitarian grounds, a clear justification of the Libya operation. In any event, Obama remarked that all these actions should be guided by internationally-sanctioned rules on how to conduct war. The US, he said, obeys the Geneva Convention. This may be interpreted as an oblique allusion to the Bush Administration's questioning of the validity of this universal obligation when fighting a 'total war' on terror. Regimes that break such rules must be held accountable. The same can be said of those who use brutality against their own people. Peace, in essence, cannot be considered a customary absence of war. All those thoughts were to come to the surface when the protests led to open, peaceful defiance and when the temptation for the authoritarian regimes to exert repression was in the air. While the Tunisian and Egyptian military declined to suppress their own people, the Libyan dictator resorted to open violence. The US had no other option but to respond with force.

At the Heart of the Arab Streets

A few months after becoming President, Obama addressed all Arabs (and indirectly all Americans and the rest of the world) in their own natural scenario, at Cairo's main university. His speech emphasised certain points. First of all, he said that 'just as America can never tolerate violence by extremists, we must never alter our principles'. The American President admitted that '9/11 was an enormous trauma to our country'. However, 'the fear and anger that it provoked was understandable, but in some cases, it led us to act contrary to our ideals'. Therefore, the US had to take 'concrete actions to change course'. For this purpose, 'I have unequivocally prohibited the use of torture by the US, and I have ordered the prison at Guantanamo Bay closed by early next year'. He fulfilled his first promise, but failed to implement the second. In any event, he repeated that 'no system of government can or should be imposed upon one nation by any other'.

That does not lessen his 'commitment, however, to governments that reflect the will of the people'. Obama recognized that each nation gives life to this principle in its own way, grounded in the traditions of its own people. Echoing past speeches, Obama said that the US 'does not presume to know what is best for everyone'. This admittance matches the belief that the US 'would not presume to pick the outcome of a peaceful election'. Nonetheless, Obama has the 'unyielding belief that all people yearn for certain things: the ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed; confidence in the rule of law and the equal administration of justice; government that is transparent and doesn't steal from the people; the freedom to live as you choose'. The US President is convinced that those are 'not just American ideas; they are human rights'. That is why the US 'will support them everywhere'.

On Libya

In a rather minor speech delivered at one of the centres of the American establishment, the National Defense University, Obama denounced the fact that Khadafy had denied his people freedom at home and had escalated attacks when asked to halt them. It was definitely not in the US interest that this should continue. So military action, as stated in previous declarations, was justified. 'The United States has done what it said will do' was the explicit declaration. However, the prudent course of action, known to be one of the ingredients of the 'Obama Doctrine', was that actions should be taken in one country at a time, not everywhere.

While Obama appears not to endorse the traditional dogma of so-called 'American exceptionalism' (a concept resurrected by the Republican vice presidential candidate Pau Ryan) he recognises that the US is 'different' in the sense that it has the duty to be in the lead as regards the defence of universal values, at the same time it has the right to protect legitimate US interests. However, no matter what the arguments and the need to act, Obama has said several times that the US will not seek regime 'regime change' in such cases. Moreover, the President confirmed that the US will avoid isolated military action. Hence, the option of activating NATO to secure the humanitarian operation in Libya became a priority. In sum, US policy was propelled by the urgency of ensuring safety, matching US national interest with the protection of universal values. Under this logic, the US was forced to act and Obama was unafraid to do so.

The Bin Laden Declaration and an Arab Marshall Plan

The spectacular success of the operation to kill Bin Laden in his Pakistani refuge led Obama to comment extensively, this time at the heart of the US foreign policy establishment: the State Department. Expectations were high and pre-speech commentary

abounded.[13] The speech was delivered on 19 May and stressed the democratising goals of US policy in its universal dimensions, with the intention of drawing a parallel between historical American feats and the struggle then taking place in Arab countries. Ideas of transition and reform were at centre stage.

In concrete terms, Obama emphasised that US action would seek to put a stop to the use of violent repression and outright massacre. Libya was, naturally, singled out for attention, while Syria was next in line. In a follow-up declaration, Obama demanded that Bassar al-Assad should lead reform or go, as implemented earlier in Tunisia. Mild pressure is mentioned in the case of Bahrain, a sensitive country that is the base of the US fleet in the area and a crucial security sector to guarantee the flow of oil from key producers. While there are specific country references, a major one is absent: Saudi Arabia. This apparent 'oversight' reflects the conflict between American values and interests.

The US President needed to set the record straight in the aftermath to the dramatic killing of Osama Bin Laden. In the context of a post-war (Iraq) and a war (Afghanistan), he had to remind us of the American racial experience in historical cases such as the resistance led by Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, while also making reference to religious freedom and women's rights.

However, Obama insisted that politics is not everything. People want jobs, food, shelter and opportunities. The support for universal values has to be supplemented by concrete economic assistance. In addition to political aims, economic issues have captured the limelight. In what was heralded as an 'Arab Marshall Plan', Obama offered a series of programmes and projects that went beyond the traditional forms of US aid in the area, when security was the main concern. Economic development and trade policies now take the lead. In Egypt, a programme to reduce national debt will be needed to anchor the political transition. Enterprise development funds will be offered in that country and in Tunisia. A comprehensive Trade and Investment Partnership Initiative will be expanded to the whole area.

Finally, the issue that finally captured most of the media attention in the US was the ever-present and intractable confrontation between the Palestinians (backed by most of the rest of the Arab World) and the State of Israel. They have both been under pressure to negotiate and make concessions. The US insists that a first step should be a return to the 1967 borders. Palestinians, meanwhile, should explicitly recognise the existence of the State of Israel. The Israeli government would have to address the sensitive issue of the West Bank settlements. An innovative swapping operation will be needed. The vote in the United Nations by which the international body was to enforce the recognition of an

[13] See AFP, Cesari, Landler, Munro, Plinik, Seib, Spetalnik, Zogby, Cook, Cooper, Philip, Stone, Tisdall and Wilson.

independent, separate state, was a bone of contention between Washington and the Israeli government. The Israeli Prime Minister bluntly said, in an interview with President Obama right after the event, that the plan would be rejected.

Conclusion

This essay suggests that the weight of the evidence shows that Obama had created a formidable policy agenda to implement. The two years leading to the re-election campaign have been dominated by a major struggle to restore the economy at home and contribute to stabilising the world financial situation. In addition to the strategic tasks that he inherited as a result of the events of September 11, Obama has been facing new challenges in a convulsive Middle East and North Africa. As indicated in his speeches, the US cannot engage in this region in isolation. However, unless political and economic conditions are more favourable, it does not seem at present that Europe will be the partner that the US requires.

The EU has been going through a bad period, clouded by doubts about its real essence, threatened by the old European demons of nationalism and racism. Much of Europe is now suffering an acute economic malaise, financial instability and the incapacity to sustain its welfare systems, while the population is getting older and the young are out of work. Populism is the alternative often offered ready for consumption as a last resort by politicians seeking to maintain power or seize it from others. Southern Europe, which has most at stake in the current Arab crisis, is under serious financial and political pressure.[14] The EU's external policy has from the start of the crisis been virtually non-existent, beyond mild declarations that tend to follow in the footsteps of the pronouncement of the major European powers.[15]

The historical urgency and the unavoidable duty to deal with a region that is crucial for the stability of the EU's neighbourhood, could force Europe's leaders (whoever they are when the current decade closes) to act more responsibly. One way –probably the only sensible one– would be to form an alliance with Washington and join it in this new style Marshall Plan. This would be fair and responsible behaviour and a sign of gratitude for the 1950s policy that took Europe out of destruction, poverty and humiliation following World War II. A strong and cohesive EU would then be an ideal partner for such an endeavour. Meanwhile, Obama could communicate at home and paraphrase the famous quotation by admitting 'Houston, we have too many problems'. With the Endeavour and Discovery shuttles consigned to history, new, bolder ideas need to be developed.

[14] See my commentary 'Los retos del Mare Nostrum', *El Nuevo Herald*, 24/IV/2011 http://www.elnuevoherald.com/2011/04/24/927440/joaquin-roy-retos-en-el-norte.html; IPS; *Cinco Días*, http://www.cincodias.com/articulo/opinion/Retos-norte-Mare-Nostrum/20110426cdscdiopi_3/; and *El Correo* (Bilbao) http://www.elcorreo.com/vizcaya/v/20110418/opinion/retos-norte-mare-nostrum-20110418.html.

[15] Among commentaries on the role of Europe, see Dunne, Chopin and Hanau. From a Spanish perspective, see Torreblanca.

In Europe, EU leaders should listen to Kennedy and not ask themselves what the US can do for them in North Africa, but ask themselves what they can do for the whole of the Mediterranean. Obama has been wise in saying that the US 'cannot pay any price' to achieve its goals against the background of its current challenges. One lesson for the future will be that security will not be reached at the cost of liberty. To those in the past who benefitted from being the favourite 'sons of bitches', Obama should send the message that the US (and Europe) will not support any friend unless the task in hand can be seen as fair, legal and moral.

In sum, all the above questions will remain open until the moment in January 2013 when either a new President or a re-elected one takes the oath in his inauguration speech. The Middle East and Syria will certainly require his attention. In any case, both Obama and Romney would do well to review recent developments. The US will not able to afford to remain absent. It all depends on the degree and nature of involvement and the kind of cooperation crafted with European allies and other area actors if success is to be the result.

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