



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

This is a repository copy of *Conceptualising Change and Continuity in US Foreign Policy*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/95845/>

Version: Accepted Version

Book Section:

Holland, J and Bentley, M (2013) Conceptualising Change and Continuity in US Foreign Policy. In: Bentley, M and Holland, J, (eds.) *Obama's Foreign Policy: Ending the War on Terror*. Routledge Studies in US Foreign Policy . Routledge , Abingdon, Oxon , pp. 192-201. ISBN 9780415662604

© 2014 Routledge. This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in *Obama's Foreign Policy: Ending the War on Terror* on 23 September 2013, available online: <http://www.routledge.com/9780415662604>. Uploaded in accordance with the publisher's self-archiving policy.

Reuse

Unless indicated otherwise, fulltext items are protected by copyright with all rights reserved. The copyright exception in section 29 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 allows the making of a single copy solely for the purpose of non-commercial research or private study within the limits of fair dealing. The publisher or other rights-holder may allow further reproduction and re-use of this version - refer to the White Rose Research Online record for this item. Where records identify the publisher as the copyright holder, users can verify any specific terms of use on the publisher's website.

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

Conclusion

Conceptualising Change and Continuity in US Foreign Policy

Jack Holland and Michelle Bentley

Barack Obama's foreign policy is characterised by both change and continuity. He has not ended the War on Terror, but he has reshaped the conflict, in ways that fit with his personal views on war, the use of force and the American national interest. At times, his values have run up against the realities of occupying the Oval Office (e.g. the failure to close Guantanamo) and, at others, he has adapted his thinking on seeing firsthand the threats the American nation continues to face (e.g. after the Christmas Day bomb plot). The interplay of choice and constraint has featured in many of the chapters in this book. Here, we begin by laying out some of the considerable areas of agreement that they share, despite competing theoretical approaches. Second, we consider how appeals to volition and structural limitation might be reconciled through a structural-relational understanding of structure and agency. Third, we outline one, potentially fruitful, way of conceptualising change and continuity in American foreign policy, which helps to account for Obama's apparently prolonged period of stasis. Fourth, and finally, we turn to consider where Obama's foreign policy will head during his second term in office, based both on the contributions to this volume and the issues his presidency is likely to face in the next four years.

Understanding Continuity: The Dynamics of Restraint

While the chapters in this book address a wide range of issues, specifically as discussed from a variety of theoretical perspectives and paradigmatic approaches, there remains an overriding commitment to the idea of continuity between the administrations of Bush and Obama. Although certain differences in foreign policy construction can be identified, overall the contributors to this volume highlight clear evidence of similarity between these two presidents. Both in terms of policies enforced (for example, the continued use of drones in the AFPAK region and an on-going commitment to certain aspects of nuclear weapons control strategy) and the narratives constructed to express and institutionalise foreign policy, comparatively little has changed since the days of the Bush administration and the now infamous 'war on terror'. In understanding continuity, this has effectively been framed as a question of agency. Particularly for those who had anticipated wholesale change during Obama's first administration, the failure to bring about any major shift in US foreign policy has been constructed as an issue of how far Obama can be held responsible for his actions. To what extent was he able to impose his ambitions and desires on America's foreign policy? Was he free to construct foreign policy in whatever way he wished? Or were there restraints in place that Obama could never hope to overcome, specifically restraints that can explain the continuity that can be seen between his time in office and that spent by Bush? And if so, to what degree, if any, is Obama constrained by such factors?

In developing this, the debate on continuity can be constructed as a spectrum of political freedom. At one end of this spectrum is absolute agency; the idea that Obama's actions are what he intended all along. That despite any rhetoric of change, Obama never intended, or gave any indication, that foreign policy would differ substantially from that instigated by Bush in the wake of 9/11. Continuity is entirely Obama's will. At the other extreme, it has been argued that Bush created such a pervasive foreign policy that Obama is entrapped. Obama has been unable to break out of the policies, ideas and expectations associated with the 'war on terror'. His presidency is defined entirely by the one that went before him. Within this context, assessing US foreign policy since 2008 is about deciding where on this spectrum we, and specifically the contributors to this volume, would place Obama. How far is Obama his 'own man' when it comes to his actions on the international stage?

This volume effectively starts at the first end of the spectrum, where McCrisken argues that a detailed analysis of Obama's rhetorical commitments prior to election reveals that his current foreign policy strategy is what he intended all along. There is no evidence to suggest Obama ever promised the massive shift in foreign policy that some expected. Indeed, McCrisken demonstrates that "there is considerable evidence to suggest that far from being trapped in the Bush narrative, Obama has always shared its core assumptions and that long before he was elected president he was a 'true believer' in the war against terrorism." Within this context, continuity is the product of intention. We do not need to look to the identification of restraints on Obama to explain consistency in foreign policy. Our explanation can be found in Obama's own ambitions and belief.

But others do not find this explanation alone satisfactory. While many contributors in this book will – to varying degrees – accept the idea that Obama possessed some agency in respect of constructing foreign policy, they would also argue that there exist decisive restraints on the 44th president. Obama has not been (entirely) free to develop foreign policy however he may choose. And it is here that this volume starts to spread out across the spectrum of agency to identify and analyse the various ways in which Obama may not have acted of his own volition.

In effect, two forms of restraint are identified within this volume: systemic pressure and the legacy of the War on Terror. For Quinn and Kitchen, restraint is manifest in structural dynamics. Continuity is the product of systemic factors that override agency; Obama is constrained by the system in which he operates. He is still empowered to the extent both Quinn and Kitchen present him as a pragmatic figure responding to those pressures; a figure that works with the influences of American decline or adapts the priorities of US foreign policy in order to best reflect geopolitical shifts. Yet this is still a case where Obama is viewed as constrained and subject to influences beyond his control that determine the agency with which he constructs foreign policy. Indeed, this is reflected in the third section of this volume, where Aaronson provides evidence in support of the idea of systemic restraint, specifically that the US is no longer in a position to pursue the unilateral extremes of the ‘war on terror’. While Obama retains a commitment to intervention, he has realised the limitations on the expression of US power, seen in his less aggressive and multilateral approach to

situations such as Libya. Interestingly, this is also reflected to a degree in McCrisken's argument, where he argues that: "Obama is a highly deliberative and careful president who contrasts favourably not only with Bush but also with other predecessors who were caught in difficult wars such as Lyndon Johnson during Vietnam." In this sense then, McCrisken agrees with the arguments here on Obama's performance, despite the different approaches in respect of agency.

Others in this book also identify restraint as a key factor in understanding the scope of Obama's foreign policy, but interpret this less as a form of structural pressure and more in terms of the on-going legacy of the 'war on terror'. The limitations and constraints on Obama's actions are not (only) the consequence of systemic dynamics, but the product of pervasive politics. The foreign policy put in place by Bush in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington DC has proved highly persistent, not just in terms of the institutionalisation and normalisation of that policy, but also its discursive construct. As Jackson, Bentley and Solomon all argue, the very structure and impact of the 'war on terror' – as Jackson would term it, the 'regime of truth' that was created – was so engrained within the US political system that no predecessor could hope to break out of it. The 'war on terror' is a political way of life; a narrative, an idea and a form of affect that confines Obama. Even where a sense of agency may still be allowed for – an idea that Obama is not trapped beyond all scope for his own imposition of policy – it is still argued that the sheer strength of the Bush administration's approach to foreign affairs has inherently determined post-2008 policy. And once again, these ideas are reflected in those chapters in this volume outlining specific policy areas. For Aslam, while there are

elements of change in respect of Obama's policy in the AfPak region, this can still be framed as an issue of continuity in which Bush's policy sets the scene. Similarly, Futter also presents this as a case where the framework instigated by Bush – this time in respect of nuclear weapons control – limited the actions of Obama. While Obama has taken steps forward on this issue, not least in respect of the START process, it can still be viewed as a direct continuation of Bush policy.

Critically, these two forms of restraint are not mutually exclusive. This is not a case of 'either/or', but one in which both conceptualisations of constraint can apply, each explaining a different aspect of continuity. Indeed, these are intrinsically linked in that they both centre on this same notion that Obama has in some way been constrained during his first administration and that this produces clear similarities between his time in office and the administration he succeeded. As such, even where they construct separate notions of restraint, they both seek to explain the same issue of continuity; specifically as within this same context that Obama is in some way entrapped. Similarly, while the contributors to this book would undoubtedly place varying degrees of emphasis on the role of agency, there are still clear parallels between them. While some view Obama as more restrained by the factors they have identified than others, they still collectively support the idea that there exists balance between capability and constraint that shapes the outcome of foreign policy. There are restraints on Obama that lie beyond his control and which have produced similarities in foreign policy to Bush that many (rightly or wrongly) believed would not have happened. And it is the fact that that each of the contributors will put the

president somewhere along this spectrum that unites them and which is essentially the theme of this volume.

Structure and Agency: Obama as Strategic Actor

If Obama cannot implement change in American foreign policy then who can? Surely, elected as President and Commander-in-Chief and enjoying the relative centralisation of power accumulated through the frequent crises of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Obama should – if he so desired – be able to fundamentally alter the direction of American foreign policy. And yet ‘virtually all of the main policy planks of the war on terror put into place by the Bush administration’ have been and ‘are being continued in the new administration’ (Zalman and Clarke, 2009: 102). For Jackson, even the greater emphasis on wielding ‘soft power’ as a corrective to the mistakes and excesses of the Bush administration’s preference for hard power can be seen as ‘part of a strategic realignment designed to shore up the discourse, rather than evidence of a change in direction’ (2011: 405).

How then can we account for continuity in the foreign and security policy of the United States under President Obama? Do the realists or constructivists have the best story to tell? Or has Obama actually done as he has chosen and always intended? Or maybe both are correct? Has Obama internalised the structural constraints of the War on Terror, such that he has opted to temper an agenda of change? Such questions cut to the heart of issues of structure and agency, which

lay at the heart of the social sciences. It is possible to find explanatory purchase in a number of the above arguments, despite their pulling in different directions and limits to commensurability. In order to greater appreciate how insights from across these theoretical traditions might better sit together requires us to revisit and revise our understandings of conduct and context, and of an isolated agent separated from an 'outside' structure.

As Jackson (2011: 406) argues, 'it is doubtful that', ultimately, 'even if President Obama really wanted to change the course of the war on terror or bring it to an end'. There 'is little evidence for this' or to suggest 'that he could actually do it in the present context'. The political risks involved in attempting to overhaul the powerful discursive and material structures of the War on Terror, rooted as they are in 'American identity and political culture and directly tied to hegemonic interests and daily material practices' are simply too great for a president characterised by prudence, caution and perpetual risk assessment (Jackson 2011: 406). Obama also 'represents the interests of the foreign policy establishment and ending the war on terror (without a replacement threat to focus on) would run counter to the material and political interests of US hegemony, which entail, among other things, locking in strategic supremacy, maintaining power 'beyond challenge', securing unipolarity and the like' (ibid.). Obama then, as a strategic agent – an intelligent and instrumental politician – is aware of the strategic context in which he operates. The inherited demands of the American national interest, centred on the maintenance of hegemony and even primacy (Bacevich 2004, 2005) are internalized by Obama, as are the political and cultural limits to change. The structural limits to change – realist

predictions of decline, institutionalist recognition of vested interests and established policy agendas, and constructivist accounts of discursive and cultural bias – are woven into the volitional decisions of elites, such that it is only possible for researchers to find an analytical, rather than empirical divide between them.

Numerous attempts have been made to overcome the limitations of excessively intentionalist and structuralist social science (e.g. Archer 1995; Sztompka 1991). Frequently, however, these efforts have fallen short due to an inability to overcome the ontological dualism of structure and agency. Giddens' (1984) 'structuration theory' is probably the most famous of these efforts to date. Giddens argues that structure and agency are flip sides of the same coin. We can only see one or other at any given moment; they are ontologically intertwined but epistemologically we are incapable of viewing both simultaneously. The solution he presents is to methodologically 'bracket off' one from the other in order to enable an alternating analysis. This bracketing, however, risks leaving the researcher 'incapable of interrogating the internal relationship between structure and agency' (Hay 2002: 120).

This limitation is encapsulated in the original coin analogy. Structure and agency should not be seen as flip sides of the same coin, but as metals in the alloy from which the coin is forged. For Jessop and Hay, the distinction between structure and agency is 'purely analytical' and should not be reified into a 'rigid ontological dualism'. Structure and agency, 'from our vantage point' do not exist independently, 'but through their relational interaction'; they are 'completely

interwoven' such that we cannot see the 'alloy only the product of their fusion' (Hay 2002: 127). Jessop and Hay's strategic-relational approach leads to a focus on the substantive interplay of *strategic action* and the *strategically selective context* it operates within and impacts upon.

A strategic-relational approach therefore turns from the abstract notions of structure and agency to consider substantive examples of the interaction between strategic actors and the strategic context in which they are located. It recognises that 'agents both internalise perceptions of their context and consciously orient themselves towards that context in choosing between potential courses of action'. Likewise, contexts present an 'unevenly contoured terrain which favours certain strategies over others and hence selects for certain outcomes while mitigating against others' (Hay 2002: 129). Over time, strategic action yields 'direct effects' upon the context in which it occurs and 'strategic learning' as actors judge the effects of strategic action to modify future agency (Hay 2002: 133). The 'interaction of strategy and context therefore serves to shape both the development of that context and the very conduct and identity of strategic actors after the event' (Hay 2002: 134).

By focusing on the broader social science questions of structure and agency, rather than the relative minutiae of intransigent debates, for instance between realism and constructivism in IR, we can see how competing explanations of continuity in American foreign policy might be brought together into a coherent whole. Systemic decline, institutionalisation and dominant discourses characterise the context of American foreign policy. This context not only

'constrains and limits the options and choices of agents' (Jackson 2011), it also enables and shapes those choices. Structure works through and to make possible strategic action, as well as to encourage particular choices that might not be pursued in an alternative set of circumstances. Through the internalisation of contextual factors, it is perfectly feasible that McCrisken, Quinn *and* Jackson are correct. Obama may well opt for continuity, but that conscious decision is likely conditioned by the structural limitations that he, as a strategic agent – an instrumental and intelligent politician – is acutely aware of and acts in accordance with.

Understanding Continuity: Change as Punctuated Equilibria

Although structures 'are not fixed or immutable ... they can be extremely powerful constraints at a given juncture' (Jackson 2011: 406). This is likely one such juncture. American decline could certainly be halted and reversed; the War on Terror will likely, one day, be de-institutionalised and cease to drive security policy; and dominant discourses will be contested and destabilised in time. Right now, however, the structures of the international system, the contemporary architecture of US security policy, and American popular culture, are all working against any desire for greater change that Barack Obama might harbour, were he presented with a different state of affairs. That Obama chooses to work within and through the dominant structures of the War on Terror, rather than against them, speaks volumes about the strength of the current paradigm of American foreign and security policy. For many, this will be a troubling thought.

Therefore, as we begin to conclude, let us consider under what conditions change might occur, and whether this is a likely prospect in the near future.

In order for rapid and dramatic political change to be achieved, conduct and context – strategic agency and a strategic context – need to come together in a particular way, to construct events as a crisis, symptomatic of broader underlying and morbid conditions, the solution to which requires a new policy trajectory (e.g. Hay 1996, 2002; Croft 2006; Jackson 2011). An ‘unforeseen rupturing event’ can certainly help, but whether or not that event is interpreted as ‘unforeseen’ depends on culture and construction. Whether or not it is seen as ‘rupturing’ depends on the narratives that political elites choose to make use of in framing its meaning. For Jackson (2011), Obama potentially could have seized upon key moments during his presidency, around which he could have framed a pivotal moment of transition: the dusk of one era and dawn of the next.

The killing of Osama bin Laden and drawdown of American troops in Iraq were two such moments. Obama, however, is not an obvious norm entrepreneur (e.g. Quinn 2011). A cautious, prudent president – who weighs options carefully and acts pragmatically to minimise risk – is unlikely to venture far from the status quo. This leads Jackson (2011) to state that Obama is the guardian of the War on Terror and predict that ‘all things being equal, the actual practices of the war on terror will continue along their current trajectory under the new administration with only slight tactical adjustments’. And, of course, were there ‘another terrorist attack in America, even a relatively small-scale attack, the evidence suggests that it would be reflexively interpreted as proof of the

dominant narratives and the war on terror would be reconfirmed as the dominant, commonsensical paradigm' (Jackson 2011: 407). Despite the apparent obviousness of this particular claim, such a statement indicates just how far away the United States is from ending the War on Terror.

In view of these limited opportunities for change in the strategic agency of American political leadership and the strategic context in which they are located, perhaps it is better to look to the prospects of creeping, 'gradual change over a long period brought about by sustained resistance to the dominant discourse'. Oppositional voices 'can destabilise and deconstruct accepted knowledge, eventually leading to a' different kind of crisis: a crisis of credibility, whether of politicians or the narratives that sustain them and their policies (Jackson 2011). Events such as the quagmires of Iraq and Afghanistan, or the fallout from the global financial crisis', if sufficiently seized upon by the media and the public, have the potential to provide a discursive opening for a new decisive intervention, which attempts to map a new trajectory for American foreign and security policy. But, to date, Obama has been constrained by the structural limits to change – material, institutional and cultural – internalizing the parameters of political possibility that they demarcate. While he never promised or intended wholesale reversal of American foreign and security policy, structural limitations have seen him both decline and at times fail to achieve more significant alterations to America's foreign policy.

Second Term, 2016, and Beyond

So what happens next? In analyzing Obama's first term, the contributors to this volume have identified certain trends in behavioural restraint; will those trends continue into Obama's second administration? Will they still influence and shape foreign policy? Second terms are often associated with something of a fresh start, or at least an opportunity to escape constraints of the previous administration. As John Lewis Gaddis (2005: 2) describes it: "Second terms in the White House open the way for second thoughts." These are seen as moments of reinvention, where a president can, to an extent, put aside pressures such as re-election, congressional relations and domestic expectations and is granted an increased freedom to pursue policies that would not have been feasible in a first term presidency. In taking this into account, will the ideas of restraint identified in this volume still apply after 2012? Or will Obama finally be able to break out of these dynamics and construct whatever form of foreign policy he desires?

Initial analysis has recognised this notion of the opportunities associated with second term presidencies, although the focus has been less on the idea that Obama is facing a new start and more on the impact of changing (or unchanging) events. It is the idea of punctured equilibria already discussed in the preceding section that had dominated predictive analysis of Obama's second term. Instead of viewing this as a time of potential reinvention, it would appear that most anticipate a foreign policy that reflects 'more of the same'; that Obama will continue in the same vein (of continuity) *unless* there is some major shift in events. This applies in terms of policies discussed in this volume, where, for example, it has been argued that Obama's proclivity for the use of drones will

likely remain a cornerstone of US policy, particularly in the AFPAK region (Dormandy 2013: 54). Moreover, not least where economic pressures at the domestic level are set to continue to take priority for some time, it is unlikely that Obama would attempt, or be able, to exact any transformation in foreign policy. Indeed, his second inaugural speech said little of foreign policy as an issue in itself (Obama 2013), let alone whether the current strategic trajectory was set to undergo any significant modification, either in terms of policy or rhetorical construction. While this speech still clearly drew on exceptionalist ideas of the assertion of American values, this was expressed in the abstract and was not connected to specific references to foreign policy. Similarly, his recent choice of appointments only serves to reinforce the idea that foreign policy will largely continue in its present form. As such, it is likely that things will proceed much as they have done.

In line with McCrisken, this would be a consequence of intention. The second term is unlikely to look different to the first, as this was what Obama desired his foreign policy to look like. Unless events change intention, this approach will persist. Yet this trend also appears to play well with the ideas of systemic restraint identified in this volume. The idea that people see opportunities for change less from Obama himself and more in terms of what the system will throw at him supports the notion that systemic pressures are key to his presidency. The influence of factors such as decline (Quinn) and geopolitical issues (Kitchen) will continue to shape foreign policy. Change will come externally, not from within. It also favours Aaronson's assertion that Obama will be bound by a need to pursue a less aggressive and unilateral approach.

Specifically where people have argued that this style will continue to shape US foreign policy going forward (e.g. Lehrke 2012), this would seem to suggest that the systemic pressures discussed within this volume will continue to impact on the scope of Obama's presidency. While events can exact shifts in systemic dynamics, in the absence of such punctuation, those existing dynamics are predicted to produce a very similar foreign policy during Obama's second term to that seen in the first.

Exogenous shock is also relevant when looking at the legacy of the 'war on terror'. In terms of this legacy, while analysts such as Bentley would argue that at least certain aspects of this narrative are not as strong as they were immediately after 9/11, this may still impact on a second term. Where a change in presidency in 2008 did not produce any major shift, particularly in the rhetorical construction of foreign policy, it is difficult to argue that re-election could. As Jackson has clearly stated, in the absence of punctuation, we should not expect anyone to be able to break out of that institutionalised, narrative-driven, structure of the 'war on terror'. A new administration is unlikely to be sufficient to underpin such a major effort. Indeed, it could be further argued that certain forms of exogenous shock – such as another large-scale terrorist attack – could only serve to engrain those structures even further. The type of upheaval envisaged by Jackson may actually encourage and cement the 'regime of truth' associated with the 'war on terror' by re-enlivening the fears that had initially been at its foundation. While it must also be accepted that all narratives and rhetorical constructs will be subject to contestation by the actors who use them, therefore, it is also difficult in this case to ascertain the basis on which

contestation would occur in the absence of some exogenous influence. Where Obama has been seen as unable to overcome these narratives in the past, there is little about his re-election to suggest this could change. Continuity looks set to continue.

Bibliography

- Archer, M. S. (1995) *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bacevich, A. (2005) *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War*, Oxford University Press: Oxford.
- Bacevich, A. (2004) *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of US Diplomacy*, Harvard University Press.
- Dormandy, X. (2013). 'Afghanistan and Pakistan.' In X. Dormandy (ed) *The Next Chapter: President Obama's Second-Term Foreign Policy*. London: Chatham House: 52-58.
- Gaddis, J. L. (2005). 'Grand Strategy in the Second Term.' *Foreign Affairs*, 84(10): 2-15.
- Giddens, A. (1984) *The Constitution of Society*, University of California Press.
- Hay, C. (1996) 'Narrating Crisis: The Discursive Construction of the 'Winter of Discontent'', *Sociology*, 30:(2): 253-277.
- Hay, C. (2002) *Political Analysis: A Critical Introduction*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Lerke, J.P. (2012). "Foreign Policy in Obama's Second Term: Between Continuity and Legacy", 3 November, *CAPerspectives*.
- Obama, B. (2013). Inaugural Address.
- Sztompka, P. (1991) *Society in Action: The Theory of Social Becoming*. Cambridge: Polity.