

## **President Obama's Foreign Policy Vision: Defining the Obama Doctrine**

Based on:

*The Obama Doctrine: Hindering American Foreign Policy*, The Heritage Foundation's Lecture Event featuring Dr. Kim Holmes and Dr. Henry Nau, September 30, 2010.

*Defining the Obama Doctrine, Its Pitfalls, and How to Avoid Them* by Kim Holmes, Ph.D., and James Carafano, Ph.D., Published by The Heritage Foundation, September 1, 2010

*Obama's Foreign Policy* by Henry Nau, Published by Hoover Institution, Policy Review, Number 160, September 29, 2010

*What Are the Key Tenets of the Obama Doctrine?* By Kim Holmes, Ph.D. and James Carafano, Ph.D. Published online at The Heritage Foundation (no date provided)

Almost two years into his term, President Obama had hoped to improve America's standing in the world by crafting a foreign policy vastly different from his predecessor's. His statements and actions demonstrate a doctrine that sees America less as "the exceptional nation" than as an "equal partner," one nation among many. Characteristics of his policies include a heightened emphasis on multilateralism, an apologetic attitude toward the past, a more restrained role on the global stage, and an atmosphere of mutual respect toward oppressive autocracies.

Examining the principles and policies advanced thus far by the Obama Administration, Professor Henry Nau and former Assistant Secretary of State Kim R. Holmes analyzed whether the unfolding Obama Doctrine has in fact improved America's standing in the world and our national interests

According to Dr. Holmes and Dr. Nau, President Obama has "laid out in his public statements, the tenets of a doctrine that, if enacted, would enable his Administration to remake America as one nation among many, with no singular claim either to responsibility or exceptionalism. First, America will ratify more treaties and turn to international organizations more often to deal with global crises and security concerns like nuclear weapons, often before turning to our traditional friends and allies. Second, America will emphasize diplomacy and 'soft power' instruments such as summits and foreign aid to promote its aims and downplay military might. Third, America will play a more restrained role on the international stage. Finally, America will adopt a more humble attitude in state-to-state relations. While these tenets may be well intentioned, they will make America and the rest of the world less secure."

Dr. Holmes recently wrote that "President Obama may have coined the phrase that best characterizes this doctrine in a speech in Trinidad and Tobago in April 2009. He said that America would reach out to other countries as 'an equal partner' rather than as the 'exceptional' nation that many before him had embraced. During his first meeting with the Group of 20 economies in Europe, Obama went further, saying he does believe in American exceptionalism, but 'just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism.'"

## **Global Crises, Security Concerns and ‘Soft Power’**

In a recent article written by Dr. Holmes and Dr. Carafano, they state that “The Administration is pursuing an ambitious agenda on international treaties. An incomplete list includes: the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) with Russia; the U.N. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT); the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea (LOST); the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW); and the Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space (PAROS). The ideals behind many of these treaties are admirable. But in every case the onus is on the Administration to ensure that the treaty does not compromise America's security or the rights and freedoms established in the U.S. Constitution. International institutions work best when they manage affairs between nations; they falter and become harmful when they reach into the domestic affairs of nations.”

“But that is exactly what the Obama administration has been doing,” wrote Dr. Holmes and Dr. Carafano. “Recently, the White House submitted its ‘Report of the United States of America’ to the U.N. Human Rights Council (HRC), a body that includes such human rights exemplars as Cuba, Russia and Saudi Arabia. In the report, the Obama administration attacks Arizona's recent immigration enforcement law and portrays its lawsuit against it as a defense of human rights. Is there a better example of what little interest this Administration has in upholding American sovereignty? There is no universal right to violate a country's immigration laws with impunity. It is no violation of human rights to enforce border security and basic immigration requirements. When the Obama administration engages international institutions, it appears that E Pluribus Unum gets thrown under the bus.”

Additionally, Dr. Holmes wrote that “In his first inaugural address, President George Washington said that the ‘preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are justly considered as deeply, perhaps as finally, staked on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people.’ This form of government, based on the principles of liberty and government of and by the people had not been tried, and its future depended on every generation of Americans protecting and preserving it.”

“Since then, most Presidents in some fashion or another have acknowledged that America plays a special role in history. It is a view deeply ingrained in the American conscience that has been manifested in the foreign policies of America’s Presidents in traditional and even ‘progressive’ terms. But few if any of our leaders before President Obama expressed the view that the United States was merely a country just like any other.”

“The dominant characteristics of the Obama Doctrine are more like those of Woodrow Wilson than Washington, Monroe, Truman or Reagan. Obama has made it clear that he will rely more on the ‘international system’ and treaties to address critical problems; he will engage other nations as equals and with restraint; and he will elevate the use of soft power in his foreign policy toolkit. Obama has downplayed America’s military strength and has been reluctant to voice criticisms or consequences to countries that threaten U.S. interests, and he has shown an eagerness to apologize for America’s actions-past or present, real or perceived- to foreign audiences.”

President Obama's National Security Strategy states that "we must focus American engagement on strengthening international institutions and galvanizing the collective action that can serve public interests." While many Presidents before Obama have called on the United Nations to fulfill its mandate and play a leading role in achieving peace and security instead of leaving the task to the U.S. and the coalition it can muster, few Presidents have made it sound as though the leader of the free world did not want to play a leading role in achieving international security, wrote Dr. Holmes. Speaking at a news conference after his nuclear summit in Washington, Obama said that "whether we like it or not, we remain a dominant military superpower, and when conflict breaks out, one way or another we get pulled into them. And that ends up costing us significantly in terms of both blood and treasure."

Dr. Holmes stated that "it is one thing to ask the so-called international community to come together to solve crises, and the President is right, as a practical matter. We often get pulled into world conflicts. But it is another to suggest, no matter how subtly, that the United States is weary of or takes a jaundiced view of its global leadership role. Yet that is precisely what this statement implies. The President appears tired of America's 'dominant military superpower' role, which he qualifies with 'whether we like it or not.' This is not the clarion call to world leadership that most people expect of American Presidents. Rather, it expresses ambivalence, self-doubt, or even anxiety. It implies a view that America is potentially unwilling or even unable to continue its roles as a dominant military superpower."

Dr. Holmes explained how such a viewpoint meshes with the President's desire to engage the United Nations more fully, as if to fill the gap left by a lesser leadership role for the U.S. President Obama stated in his remarks to the United Nations that "We've also re-engaged the United Nations. We have paid our bills. We have joined the Human Rights Council. We have signed the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. We have fully embraced the Millennium Development Goals. And we address our priorities here, is this institution-for instance, through the Security Council meeting that I will chair tomorrow on nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament...The United States stands ready to begin a new chapter of international cooperation-one that recognizes the rights and responsibilities of all nations."

However, according to Dr. Holmes, this statement is more 'rhetorical flourish than hard policy.' "While it is true that the Obama Administration has used the U.N. Security Council to try to pressure Iran, it is not true that anything else of international strategic significance has happened at the United Nations since Obama took office. If anything, the rhetoric of U.N. engagement has vastly outstripped the limited reality of what can be achieved by the U.N."

Dr. Nau expanded on this point, stating "Obama has a coherent world view that highlights 'shared' interests defined by interconnected material problems such as climate, energy, and non-proliferation and deemphasizes 'sovereign' interests that separate countries along political and moral lines. He tacks away from topics that he believes divide nations-democracy, defense, markets, and unilateral leadership-and toward topics that he believes integrates them-stability, disarmament, regulations, and diplomacy. He has been called a president for the post-American world, but he may actually be a president for the post-sovereign world. He is a policy pragmatist in response to a worldview of shared community interests that transcend sovereign national interests."

James Carafano and Dr. Holmes wrote that “The belief that the United States over-utilized hard power in Iraq and Afghanistan has shaken President Obama's confidence in the application of hard power at all. Instead, the President intends to use soft power so as to appear more equal at the negotiating table. Shortly after taking office in January 2009, President Barack Obama said ‘[if] countries like Iran are willing to unclench their fist, they will find an extended hand from us.’ And how has this soft-power approach fared? French President Nicolas Sarkozy recently said: ‘We live in the real world, not a virtual one... President Obama himself has said that he dreams of a world without nuclear weapons. Before our very eyes, two countries are doing exactly the opposite at this very moment... I support America's 'extended hand.' But what have these proposals for dialogue produced for the international community? Nothing but more enriched uranium and more centrifuges.’”

Dr. Carafano wrote “The reality is that soft power only works as an adjunct to hard power. Saddam Hussein's removal from power eliminated any possibility of a major threat from Iraq for the foreseeable future. And while Afghanistan remains an open question, only the anti-war left believes the Taliban can be persuaded to lay down their arms with promises of aid and diplomacy. Any time an American leader believes soft power is a substitute for hard power, he is bound to fail.”

Additionally, Dr. Nau points out that President Obama has downsized America’s goals, stating that in every instance, security interests trump human rights and democracy promotion. “In his second inaugural address, President Bush declared that ‘it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny around the world.’ Now, Obama is clearly pulling back from this freedom agenda. The objective is no longer to transform domestic society and establish democratic states in unstable countries but to prevent al Qaeda or other extremist elements from regrouping in these countries to plot and carry out violence against the United States.”

“Obama put it bluntly in March 2009 when he announced his first new strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan: America has ‘a clear and focused goal; to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future.’ He narrowed this goal even further when he announced his second strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan in December 2009: ‘We must deny al-Qaeda a safe haven. We must reverse the Taliban’s momentum and deny it the ability to overthrow the government.’ The goal is no longer defeating al-Qaeda but denying it a safe haven and denying the Taliban the ability to overthrow the Afghan government.”

“In every instance,” continues Dr. Nau, “security interests trump human rights and democracy promotion. In major foreign policy speeches in 2009, Obama mentioned democracy either belatedly or abstractly. In Prague he declared that ‘freedom is a right of all people, no matter what side of a wall they live on, and no matter what they look like.’ But in Cairo, he mentioned democracy fourth in a list of seven issues and in Moscow fourth in a list of five issues. In both Cairo and Moscow he started his talks with apologies for American democracy. In Cairo: ‘I know there has been controversy about the promotion of democracy in recent years, and much of this controversy is connected to the Iraq war.’ In Moscow: ‘By no means is America perfect.’ In

Ghana: 'Each nation gives life to democracy in its own way, and in line with its own traditions...and America will not seek to impose any system of government on any other nation.'

### **Americas Restrained Role**

Dr. Nau acknowledges that the president has backtracked on some of his views on American exceptionalism, when President Obama said "Whatever mistakes we have made, the plain fact is this: The United States of America has helped underwrite global security for more than six decades with the blood of our citizens and the strength of our arms." While such words rekindle images of Reagan and Bush, Dr. Nau questions which message is the true Obama? "He did not pledge specific help for dissidents in Burma, Zimbabwe, Iran and elsewhere. And in none of these speeches did he mention, let alone confront, the oppressive policies of a new wave of authoritarian powers stalking the world-Russia in Europe, China in Asia, Iran in the Middle East, and Venezuela in Latin America. Instead he turned towards many of these new autocrats as principle partners to pursue shared global interests of disarmament, economic recovery, climate change, and non-proliferation."

"Consider the following: In Russia he seeks cooperation to reduce nuclear weapons, pressure Iran and North Korea to up their nuclear plans. Apologizing for American democracy, he says not a word about the far more egregious flaws of Russian democracy. He mentions Georgia and Ukraine only at the very end of the speech and then in the context of respecting sovereignty, not human rights or democratic processes."

"In China he seeks cooperation on economic recovery, non-proliferation, and climate change. He explicitly downplays human rights issues. He refuses to see the Dalai Lama before his November trip to China (seeing him later in February); accepts a scripted encounter with a Chinese youth in Shanghai, which is then censored by the Chinese media, and hails an open internet even as, according to the Washington Post, his State Department denies funds appropriated by Congress to circumvent the Chinese firewall. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton set the policy on her first trip to China: 'We already know what they are going to say about human rights because I've had those kinds of conversations for more than a decade with Chinese leaders. We have to continue to press them. But our pressing on those issues can't interfere with the global economic crisis, the global climate change crisis, and the security crisis.' This highlights Dr. Nau's point that for President Obama, "Shared interests take precedence over sovereign ones."

"In North Korea...Obama dispatches President Clinton to Pyongyang to free hostage American journalists. As Henry Kissinger asked in the New York Times, 'Is this the lesson of the episode that any ruthless group or government can demand a symbolic meeting with a prominent American by seizing hostages or threatening inhuman treatment for prisoners in their hands?' Iran may have been listening, because days after Clinton's visit, Tehran arrested three American students who wandered across the border from Iraq and now threatens to try two of them (as they have released one already) or exchange them for Iranians held in American prisons."

"Obama reacts defensively to the voting fraud and turmoil in Iran, more afraid to meddle in Iranian politics than to stand by Iranian protestors calling for greater freedom," wrote Dr. Nau.

“Amnesty International reports that Iranian security forces rape, torture, and increasingly execute dissidents to crush anti-government protests, creating a ‘climate of impunity’ that has plunged human rights in the country to their lowest point in 20 years.”

“The pattern is too persistent to be an accident. Ever the pragmatist, Obama deliberately mutes rhetoric of democracy and human rights in favor of fixing global problems....Security and democracy are not opposite ends of a pendulum; they depend on one another. Dialing down the decibels on democracy has costs. It undercuts democracy advocates around the world, creates a vacuum that autocrats fill, discourages democratic allies, and ultimately alienates the American people,” Dr. Nau stated.

“By downgrading democracy, America also discourages and distances itself from democratic allies,” said Dr. Nau. “Instead of nurturing allies to pressure autocrats, Obama extends an open hand to autocrats to pressure allies. Washington embraces Tehran as it throws democratic protestors in the streets under the bus; presses an Arab-Israeli agreement with a militantly divided Arab world as it alienates Tel Aviv over building settlements; and draws closer to Russia on arms control as it snubs Polish and Czech allies on missile defenses. A more subtle cost is weakening allies’ commitments to democracy. Germany’s support for the war in Afghanistan is lukewarm, to be sure. But as Eric Chauvistre writes in the Atlantic Times, ‘without the high moral ground (of democracy building), the (German) Bundeswehr mission in Afghanistan would never have started.’”

While Dr. Nau gives the point that President Obama could plan on talking less about promoting democracy but do more behind the scenes, he is nonetheless skeptical. “Maybe,” said Dr. Nau, “but his talk is revealing. He does not see the battle between democracy and despotism as the great struggle of our times. He sees the world in comprehensive, mechanistic terms, not in competitive, political terms. At the U.N. General Assembly in September, he discussed ‘four pillar’ of future engagement: non-proliferation and disarmament, the promotion of peace and security, the preservation of our planet, and a global economy that advance opportunity for all people. Democracy is missing. The reason apparently is that, in Obama’s mind, the spread of democracy is not a shared global interest or task. It is rather a task and struggle for each country.”

Dr. Nau asks the question, “Is this the Obama doctrine? The goals of foreign policy are mutual and material, not competitive and moral. Shared interests trump sovereign ones. Countries of any political persuasion can and must cooperate with one another to deal with problems of common interest. Those common interests include getting rid of arms, restoring economic growth, and saving the planet. While all nations tend to these tasks, individual nations cultivate their own political ideology. History takes over from there. In the Obama Doctrine there is no global struggle for freedom that parallels and limits the prospects for cooperation. Cooperation emerges from shared interests and not shared values.”

### **A More Humble America**

Dr. Holmes agrees and said that the basis of the Obama Doctrine is to raise American influence in the world by acting less as a leader and more as an equal. “Obama has been criticized for his

policy of extending an open hand to enemies while rebuffing friends and close allies,” wrote Dr. Holmes. “Consider why: He was the first President since 1991 who did not welcome the Dali Lama. He prominently posed in a now-famous hand shake with Venezuelan dictator Hugo Chavez and he chose to back Hugo Chavez’s ally in Honduras, who was seeking to extend his own presidency unconstitutionally, even as Chavez was mocking Obama for weakness and asking Russia for weapons.”

“He did not meet with Prime Minister Gordon Brown when Brown first came to Washington; in fact, the White House refused five requests from the U.K. before the President granted a meeting and after turning down Brown’s request for help in the Falklands dispute (and reversing years of U.S. policy by supporting Argentina in that dispute.) He cancelled his trip to Asia twice for domestic political reasons. To ‘reset’ relations with Russia, he essentially allowed Russia a veto over our missile defense plans with the Czech Republic and Poland, making no effort to criticize Moscow’s growing assault on its citizens’ political and civil rights. He further fed our allies’ concerns about his aims toward Russia when he failed to meet with the President of Georgia in Washington for his nuclear proliferation summit, and he did not even invite the President of Azerbaijan—a country important to his plans for Afghanistan and Iran—to the summit despite inviting all of its neighbors but Iran.”

Citing the National Security Strategy, Dr. Holmes explains how the Obama Administration sees its diplomatic role in the world: “Finally, we will pursue engagement among peoples—not just governments—around the world. The United States Government will make a sustained effort to engage civil society and citizens and facilitate increased connections among the American people and peoples around the world.”

Dr. Holmes describes this approach as problematic because the U.S. government has a responsibility to the people of America to act on its own and its allies’ best interests. “Apologizing for things that happened in the past may gain popularity abroad, but so far, it has done little to change minds about our policies. If anything, it has portrayed a weaker United States not only to our allies, but to adversaries striving to gain an advantage over us.”

Dr. Nau also shared similar remarks, stating that in the President’s world of shared interests, threats come from arms and other material sources, not from ideological adversaries “Obama emphasizes ‘diplomatic surges,’ seeking to exit militarily from Iraq, shift the focus from war to counterinsurgency in Afghanistan and perhaps counterterrorism in future interventions, and find regional diplomatic solutions for Pakistan, Iran, North Korea, and other trouble spots. Obama talks more about the limits of power than the uses of power. Obama subscribes to what political scientists call a constructivist view of threats. Threats do not stem from real differences which provoke armaments for self-defense but rather for constructions of our minds which we are free to shape in significant measure—deciding whether to see others as enemies of friends and having it be so. He shies away from differences and confrontation, and the armaments they provoke, because, in his worldview, these things create or exacerbate but do not resolve conflicts.”

## **A Better Vision**

The authors concluded that “There is a better foreign policy vision. It is a vision that is grounded in George Washington's first State of the Union address reminder that: ‘To be prepared for war is one of the most effectual means of preserving peace.’ It's a vision that is consistent with the Monroe Doctrine ideal that America is committed to the principles on which republican self-government is based. It's a vision that embodies the Truman Doctrine's support for peoples threatened with Communist aggression. And it's a vision that continues the Reagan Doctrine's ‘peace through strength’ strategy of revitalizing the U.S. military while promoting economic growth at home and increasing support for oppressed people around the world. What all these lines of thought have in common is that America is an indispensable nation in the defense of liberty around the world.”

“The Obama Doctrine points us in the opposite direction. It will force friendly nations to look elsewhere, not to Washington, for arrangements that bring them greater security. And that will make this a far more dangerous world indeed.”