

Is there an Obama Doctrine?

Analyzing Jeffrey Goldberg's "*The Obama Doctrine*" by key strategic areas

Anthony H. Cordesman
March 10, 2016

An [article](#) in today's *New York Times* flags a Presidential interview in the *Atlantic* in ways that are certain to draw global attention, particularly in the countries whose leaders are criticized, the Middle East, Russia, China, and Asia. The *Times* article and headline seem almost designed to provoke an international reaction. The article states that President Obama singled out Saudi Arabia as an ally that failed to support the United States. The text also states that he felt that Britain and France had failed to support the United States in its campaign against Qaddafi in Libya and that the Ukraine was a natural Russian sphere of influence. It implies that the President sees our allies as a key reason for the inability of the United States to have a decisive impact on current crises.

It is important to note that Jeffrey Goldberg's [actual article](#) is more nuanced and balanced than the *Times* report suggests. His article offers a fascinating set of quotes, mixed with commentary and criticism—although it still does so in ways that are likely to be a source of serious tension with our allies.

Goldberg introduces his article rather bluntly, and keeps up these themes throughout text. He starts by referring to the decision to not launch cruise missiles against Syria as follows:

Friday, August 30, 2013, the day the feckless Barack Obama brought to a premature end America's reign as the world's sole indispensable superpower—or, alternatively, the day the sagacious Barack Obama peered into the Middle Eastern abyss and stepped back from the consuming void—began with a thundering speech given on Obama's behalf by his secretary of state, John Kerry, in Washington, D.C. The subject of Kerry's uncharacteristically Churchillian remarks, delivered in the Treaty Room at the State Department, was the gassing of civilians by the president of Syria, Bashar al-Assad.

The overall tone often is critical, as might be expected from the *Atlantic*, but Goldberg does keep a consistent degree of balance:

Obama believes that the Manichaeism, and eloquently rendered bellicosity, commonly associated with Churchill were justified by Hitler's rise, and were at times defensible in the struggle against the Soviet Union. But he also thinks rhetoric should be weaponized sparingly, if at all, in today's more ambiguous and complicated international arena. The president believes that Churchillian rhetoric and, more to the point, Churchillian habits of thought, helped bring his predecessor, George W. Bush, to ruinous war in Iraq. Obama entered the White House bent on getting out of Iraq and Afghanistan; he was not seeking new dragons to slay. And he was particularly mindful of promising victory in conflicts he believed to be unwinnable. "If you were to say, for instance, that we're going to rid Afghanistan of the Taliban and build a prosperous democracy instead, the president is

aware that someone, seven years later, is going to hold you to that promise,

...A year earlier, when the administration suspected that the Assad regime was contemplating the use of chemical weapons, Obama had declared: “We have been very clear to the Assad regime ... that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus. That would change my equation.” Despite this threat, Obama seemed to many critics to be coldly detached from the suffering of innocent Syrians.

It is the substance of the article, however, that outside nations and critics will focus on. It is always somewhat misleading and unfair to take key Presidential quotes out of context—although Goldberg does this throughout the text of his article in an effort to describe and critique the evolution of Obama's thinking. Ideally, this should be a case where anyone interested in U.S. policy will read the full article. However, the *New York Times* article has flagged selected parts in ways that imply that Obama blames our allies in ways the full article does not really present. Furthermore, every country and media source in the world is almost certainly going to take his statements out of context and focus on the portions that apply to their country, region, or interests.

It also seems necessary to assemble a wide range of key points and quotes by subject, as many subjects are spread out in diverse ways throughout the article as it focuses on Obama's overall record and the history of policy throughout his Administration:

- **America's role in the world:** “I want a president who has the sense that you can't fix everything,” he said. But on the other hand, “if we don't set the agenda, it doesn't happen.” He explained what he meant. “The fact is, there is not a summit I've attended since I've been president where we are not setting the agenda, where we are not responsible for the key results,” he said. “That's true whether you're talking about nuclear security, whether you're talking about saving the world financial system, whether you're talking about climate.”

...He started by describing for me a four-box grid representing the main schools of American foreign-policy thought. One box he called isolationism, which he dismissed out of hand. “The world is ever-shrinking,” he said. “Withdrawal is untenable.” The other boxes he labeled realism, liberal interventionism, and internationalism. “I suppose you could call me a realist in believing we can't, at any given moment, relieve all the world's misery,” he said. “We have to choose where we can make a real impact.” He also noted that he was quite obviously an internationalist, devoted as he is to strengthening multilateral organizations and international norms.

“For all of our warts, the United States has clearly been a force for good in the world,” he said. “If you compare us to previous superpowers, we act less on the basis of naked self-interest, and have been interested in establishing norms that benefit everyone. If it is possible to do good at a bearable cost, to save lives, we will do it.”

...“I am very much the internationalist,” Obama said in a later conversation. “And I am also an idealist insofar as I believe that we should be promoting values, like democracy

and human rights and norms and values, because not only do they serve our interests the more people adopt values that we share—in the same way that, economically, if people adopt rule of law and property rights and so forth, that is to our advantage—but because it makes the world a better place. And I'm willing to say that in a very corny way, and in a way that probably Brent Scowcroft would not say.

“Having said that,” he continued, “I also believe that the world is a tough, complicated, messy, mean place, and full of hardship and tragedy. And in order to advance both our security interests and those ideals and values that we care about, we've got to be hardheaded at the same time as we're bighearted, and pick and choose our spots, and recognize that there are going to be times where the best that we can do is to shine a spotlight on something that's terrible, but not believe that we can automatically solve it. There are going to be times where our security interests conflict with our concerns about human rights. There are going to be times where we can do something about innocent people being killed, but there are going to be times where we can't.”

...Obama appears to be a classic retrenchment president in the manner of Dwight D. Eisenhower and Richard Nixon. Retrenchment, in this context, is defined as “pulling back, spending less, cutting risk, and shifting burdens to allies...Almost every great world power has succumbed” to overextension, he said. “What I think is not smart is the idea that every time there is a problem, we send in our military to impose order. We just can't do that.”

...“I believe that we have to avoid being simplistic. I think we have to build resilience and make sure that our political debates are grounded in reality. It's not that I don't appreciate the value of theater in political communications; it's that the habits we—the media, politicians—have gotten into, and how we talk about these issues, are so detached so often from what we need to be doing that for me to satisfy the cable news hype-fest would lead to us making worse and worse decisions over time.”

- **Key advisors:** The message Obama telegraphed in speeches and interviews was clear: He would not end up like the second President Bush—a president who became tragically overextended in the Middle East, whose decisions filled the wards of Walter Reed with grievously wounded soldiers, who was helpless to stop the obliteration of his reputation, even when he recalibrated his policies in his second term. Obama would say privately that the first task of an American president in the post-Bush international arena was “Don't do stupid shit.”

Obama's reticence frustrated Power and others on his national-security team who had a preference for action. Hillary Clinton, when she was Obama's secretary of state, argued for an early and assertive response to Assad's violence. In 2014, after she left office, Clinton told me that “the failure to help build up a credible fighting force of the people who were the originators of the protests against Assad ... left a big vacuum, which the jihadists have now filled.”

- **Partnership as a break on U.S. excess and overreaction:** “One of the reasons I am so focused on taking action multilaterally where our direct interests are not at stake is that

multilateralism regulates hubris,” he explained. He consistently invokes what he understands to be America’s past failures overseas as a means of checking American self-righteousness. “We have history,” he said. “We have history in Iran, we have history in Indonesia and Central America. So we have to be mindful of our history when we start talking about intervening, and understand the source of other people’s suspicions.”

- **The Middle East in General:** When I asked Obama recently what he had hoped to accomplish with his Cairo reset speech, he said that he had been trying—unsuccessfully, he acknowledged—to persuade Muslims to more closely examine the roots of their unhappiness.

“My argument was this: Let’s all stop pretending that the cause of the Middle East’s problems is Israel,” he told me. “We want to work to help achieve statehood and dignity for the Palestinians, but I was hoping that my speech could trigger a discussion, could create space for Muslims to address the real problems they are confronting—problems of governance, and the fact that some currents of Islam have not gone through a reformation that would help people adapt their religious doctrines to modernity. My thought was, I would communicate that the U.S. is not standing in the way of this progress, that we would help, in whatever way possible, to advance the goals of a practical, successful Arab agenda that provided a better life for ordinary people.” Through the first flush of the Arab Spring, in 2011, Obama continued to speak optimistically about the Middle East’s future, coming as close as he British

...I told Obama that the Middle East is to his presidency what the Mob is to Corleone, and I started to quote the Al Pacino line: “Just when I thought I was out—”
“It pulls you back in,” Obama said, completing the thought.

...“Right now, I don’t think that anybody can be feeling good about the situation in the Middle East,” he said. “You have countries that are failing to provide prosperity and opportunity for their people. You’ve got a violent, extremist ideology, or ideologies, that are turbocharged through social media. You’ve got countries that have very few civic traditions, so that as autocratic regimes start fraying, the only organizing principles are sectarian.”

He went on, “Contrast that with Southeast Asia, which still has huge problems—enormous poverty, corruption—but is filled with striving, ambitious, energetic people who are every single day scratching and clawing to build businesses and get education and find jobs and build infrastructure. The contrast is pretty stark.”

...He then made an observation that I came to realize was representative of his bleakest, most visceral understanding of the Middle East today—not the sort of understanding that a White House still oriented around themes of hope and change might choose to advertise. “If we’re not talking to them,” he said, referring to young Asians and Africans and Latin Americans, “because the only thing we’re doing is figuring out how to destroy or cordon off or control the malicious, nihilistic, violent parts of humanity, then we’re missing the boat.”

- **Syria and chemical weapons:** Obama reinforced Kerry's message in a public statement: "It's important for us to recognize that when over 1,000 people are killed, including hundreds of innocent children, through the use of a weapon that 98 or 99 percent of humanity says should not be used even in war, and there is no action, then we're sending a signal that that international norm doesn't mean much. And that is a danger to our national security."

It appeared as though Obama had drawn the conclusion that damage to American credibility in one region of the world would bleed into others, and that U.S. deterrent credibility was indeed at stake in Syria. Assad, it seemed, had succeeded in pushing the president to a place he never thought he would have to go. Obama generally believes that the Washington foreign-policy establishment, which he secretly disdains, makes a fetish of "credibility".

—particularly the sort of credibility purchased with force. The preservation of credibility, he says, led to Vietnam. Within the White House, Obama would argue that "dropping bombs on someone to prove that you're willing to drop bombs on someone is just about the worst reason to use force."

...Obama had already ordered the Pentagon to develop target lists. Five Arleigh Burke-class destroyers were in the Mediterranean, ready to fire cruise missiles at regime targets. French President François Hollande, the most enthusiastically pro-intervention among Europe's leaders, was preparing to strike as well. All week, White House officials had publicly built the case that Assad had committed a crime against humanity. Kerry's speech would mark the culmination of this campaign.

...Late on Friday afternoon, Obama determined that he was simply not prepared to authorize a strike. He asked McDonough, his chief of staff, to take a walk with him on the South Lawn of the White House. Obama did not choose McDonough randomly: He is the Obama aide most averse to U.S. military intervention, and someone who, in the words of one of his colleagues, "thinks in terms of traps." Obama, ordinarily a preternaturally confident man, was looking for validation, and trying to devise ways to explain his change of heart, both to his own aides and to the public. He and McDonough stayed outside for an hour. Obama told him he was worried that Assad would place civilians as "human shields" around obvious targets. He also pointed out an underlying flaw in the proposed strike: U.S. missiles would not be fired at chemical-weapons depots, for fear of sending plumes of poison into the air. A strike would target military units that had delivered these weapons, but not the weapons themselves.

...(Obama, normally) a confident man, was looking for validation, and trying to devise ways to explain his change of heart, both to his own aides and to the public. He and McDonough stayed outside for an hour. Obama told him he was worried that Assad would place civilians as "human shields" around obvious targets. He also pointed out an underlying flaw in the proposed strike: U.S. missiles would not be fired at chemical weapons depots, for fear of sending plumes of poison into the air. A strike would target military units that had delivered these weapons, but not the weapons themselves.

Obama also shared with McDonough a long-standing resentment: He was tired of watching Washington unthinkingly drift toward war in Muslim countries. Four years earlier, the president believed, the Pentagon had “jammed” him on a troop surge for Afghanistan. Now, on Syria, he was beginning to feel jammed again.

Not long ago, I asked Obama to describe his thinking on that day. He listed the practical worries that had preoccupied him. “We had UN inspectors on the ground who were completing their work, and we could not risk taking a shot while they were there. A second major factor was the failure of Cameron to obtain the consent of his parliament.”

...The third, and most important, factor, he told me, was “our assessment that while we could inflict some damage on Assad, we could not, through a missile strike, eliminate the chemical weapons themselves, and what I would then face was the prospect of Assad having survived the strike and claiming he had successfully defied the United States, that the United States had acted unlawfully in the absence of a UN mandate, and that that would have potentially strengthened his hand rather than weakened it.” The fourth factor, he said, was of deeper philosophical importance. “This falls in the category of something that I had been brooding on for some time,” he said. “I had come into office with the strong belief that the scope of executive power in national-security issues is very broad, but not limitless.”

...Obama knew his decision not to bomb Syria would likely upset America’s allies. It did. The prime minister of France, Manuel Valls, told me that his government was already worried about the consequences of earlier inaction in Syria when word came of the stand-down. “By not intervening early, we have created a monster,” Valls told me. “We were absolutely certain that the U.S. administration would say yes. Working with the Americans, we had already seen the targets. It was a great surprise. If we had bombed as was planned, I think things would be different today.”

The crown prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, who was already upset with Obama for “abandoning” Hosni Mubarak, the former president of Egypt, fumed to American visitors that the U.S. was led by an “untrustworthy” president. The king of Jordan, Abdullah II—already dismayed by what he saw as Obama’s illogical desire to distance the U.S. from its traditional Sunni Arab allies and create a new alliance with Iran, Assad’s Shia sponsor—complained privately, “I think I believe in American power more than Obama does.” The Saudis, too, were infuriated. They had never trusted Obama—he had, long before he became president, referred to them as a “so-called ally” of the U.S. “Iran is the new great power of the Middle East, and the U.S. is the old,” Jubair, the Saudi ambassador in Washington, told his superiors in Riyadh.

...Obama understands that the decision he made to step back from air strikes, and to allow the violation of a red line he himself had drawn to go unpunished, will be interrogated mercilessly by historians. But today that decision is a source of deep satisfaction for him.

“I’m very proud of this moment,” he told me. “The overwhelming weight of conventional wisdom and the machinery of our national-security apparatus had gone

fairly far. The perception was that my credibility was at stake, that America's credibility was at stake. And so for me to press the pause button at that moment, I knew, would cost me politically. And the fact that I was able to pull back from the immediate pressures and think through in my own mind what was in America's interest, not only with respect to Syria but also with respect to our democracy, was as tough a decision as I've made—and I believe ultimately it was the right decision to make.” This was the moment the president believes he finally broke with what he calls, derisively, the “Washington playbook.”

“Where am I controversial? When it comes to the use of military power,” he said. “That is the source of the controversy. There's a playbook in Washington that presidents are supposed to follow. It's a playbook that comes out of the foreign-policy establishment. And the playbook prescribes responses to different events, and these responses tend to be militarized responses. Where America is directly threatened, the playbook works. But the playbook can also be a trap that can lead to bad decisions. In the midst of an international challenge like Syria, you get judged harshly if you don't follow the playbook, even if there are good reasons why it does not apply.”

- **Syria crisis, foreign policy establishment and think tanks:** I have come to believe that, in Obama's mind, August 30, 2013, was his liberation day, the day he defied not only the foreign-policy establishment and its cruise-missile playbook, but also the demands of America's frustrating, high-maintenance allies in the Middle East—countries, he complains privately to friends and advisers, that seek to exploit American “muscle” for their own narrow and sectarian ends. By 2013, Obama's resentments were well developed. He resented military leaders who believed they could fix any problem if the commander in chief would simply give them what they wanted, and he resented the foreign-policy think-tank complex. A widely held sentiment inside the White House is that many of the most prominent foreign-policy think tanks in Washington are doing the bidding of their Arab and pro-Israel funders. I've heard one administration official refer to Massachusetts Avenue, the home of many of these think tanks, as “Arab-occupied territory.”
- **Middle Eastern Leaders: Israel, Turkey, and Jordan by name, but not Saudi Arabia:**...over the next three years, as the Arab Spring gave up its early promise, and brutality and dysfunction overwhelmed the Middle East, the president grew disillusioned. Some of his deepest disappointments concern Middle Eastern leaders themselves.

Benjamin Netanyahu is in his own category: Obama has long believed that Netanyahu could bring about a two-state solution that would protect Israel's status as a Jewish-majority democracy, but is too fearful and politically paralyzed to do so. Obama has also not had much patience for Netanyahu and other Middle Eastern leaders who question his understanding of the region. In one of Netanyahu's meetings with the president, the Israeli prime minister launched into something of a lecture about the dangers of the brutal region in which he lives, and Obama felt that Netanyahu was behaving in a condescending fashion, and was also avoiding the subject at hand: peace negotiations. Finally, the president interrupted the prime minister: “Bibi, you have to understand something,” he said. “I'm the African American son of a single mother, and I live here, in

this house. I live in the White House. I managed to get elected president of the United States. You think I don't understand what you're talking about, but I do." Other leaders also frustrate him immensely.

Early on, Obama saw Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the president of Turkey, as the sort of moderate Muslim leader who would bridge the divide between East and West—but Obama now considers him a failure and an authoritarian, one who refuses to use his enormous army to bring stability to Syria.

And on the sidelines of a NATO summit in Wales in 2014, Obama pulled aside King Abdullah II of Jordan. Obama said he had heard that Abdullah had complained to friends in the U.S. Congress about his leadership, and told the king that if he had complaints, he should raise them directly. The king denied that he had spoken ill of him. In recent days, the president has taken to joking privately, "All I need in the Middle East is a few smart autocrats." Obama has always had a fondness for pragmatic, emotionally contained technocrats, telling aides, "If only everyone could be like the Scandinavians, this would all be easy."

- **Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Iran:** Because, Obama answered, the Saudis and other Gulf Arabs have funneled money, and large numbers of imams and teachers, into the country. In the 1990s, the Saudis heavily funded Wahhabist madrassas, seminaries that teach the fundamentalist version of Islam favored by the Saudi ruling family, Obama told Turnbull. Today, Islam in Indonesia is much more Arab in orientation than it was when he lived there, he said. "Aren't the Saudis your friends?" Turnbull asked. Obama smiled. "It's complicated," he said.

Obama's patience with Saudi Arabia has always been limited. In his first foreign-policy commentary of note, that 2002 speech at the antiwar rally in Chicago, he said, "You want a fight, President Bush? Let's fight to make sure our so-called allies in the Middle East—the Saudis and the Egyptians—stop oppressing their own people, and suppressing dissent, and tolerating corruption and inequality." In the White House these days, one occasionally hears Obama's National Security Council officials pointedly reminding visitors that the large majority of 9/11 hijackers were not Iranian, but Saudi—and Obama himself rails against Saudi Arabia's state-sanctioned misogyny, arguing in private that "a country cannot function in the modern world when it is repressing half of its population." In meetings with foreign leaders, Obama has said, "You can gauge the success of a society by how it treats its women."

His frustration with the Saudis informs his analysis of Middle Eastern power politics. At one point I observed to him that he is less likely than previous presidents to axiomatically side with Saudi Arabia in its dispute with its archrival, Iran. He didn't disagree.

"Iran, since 1979, has been an enemy of the United States, and has engaged in state-sponsored terrorism, is a genuine threat to Israel and many of our allies, and engages in all kinds of destructive behavior," the president said. "And my view has never been that we should throw our traditional allies"—the Saudis—"overboard in favor of Iran."

But he went on to say that the Saudis need to “share” the Middle East with their Iranian foes. “The competition between the Saudis and the Iranians—which has helped to feed proxy wars and chaos in Syria and Iraq and Yemen—requires us to say to our friends as well as to the Iranians that they need to find an effective way to share the neighborhood and institute some sort of cold peace,” he said. “An approach that said to our friends ‘You are right, Iran is the source of all problems, and we will support you in dealing with Iran’ would essentially mean that as these sectarian conflicts continue to rage and our Gulf partners, our traditional friends, do not have the ability to put out the flames on their own or decisively win on their own, and would mean that we have to start coming in and using our military power to settle scores. And that would be in the interest neither of the United States nor of the Middle East.”

- **The invasion of Iraq - 2006 quote:** “I suffer no illusions about Saddam Hussein,” he said. “He is a brutal man. A ruthless man ... But I also know that Saddam poses no imminent and direct threat to the United States or to his neighbors.” He added, “I know that an invasion of Iraq without a clear rationale and without strong international support will only fan the flames of the Middle East, and encourage the worst, rather than best, impulses of the Arab world, and strengthen the recruitment arm of al-Qaeda.”
- **ISIS and Islamic Extremism:** “ISIS is not an existential threat to the United States,” he told me in one of these conversations. “Climate change is a potential existential threat to the entire world if we don’t do something about it.” Obama explained that climate change worries him in particular because “it is a political problem perfectly designed to repel government intervention. It involves every single country, and it is a comparatively slow moving emergency, so there is always something seemingly more urgent on the agenda.”

...It is not oil but another of the Middle East’s exports, terrorism, that shapes Obama’s understanding of his responsibilities there. Early in 2014, Obama’s intelligence advisers told him that ISIS was of marginal importance. According to administration officials, General Lloyd Austin, then the commander of Central Command, which oversees U.S. military operations in the Middle East, told the White House that the Islamic State was “a flash in the pan.” This analysis led Obama, in an interview with *The New Yorker*, to describe the constellation of jihadist groups in Iraq and Syria as terrorism’s “jayvee team.” (A spokesman for Austin told me, “At no time has General Austin ever considered ISIL a ‘flash in the pan’ phenomenon.”)

...After ISIS beheaded three American civilians in Syria, it became obvious to Obama that defeating the group was of more immediate urgency to the U.S. than overthrowing Bashar al-Assad. Advisers recall that Obama would cite a pivotal moment in *The Dark Knight*, the 2008 Batman movie, to help explain not only how he understood the role of ISIS, but how he understood the larger ecosystem in which it grew. “There’s a scene in the beginning in which the gang leaders of Gotham are meeting,” the president would say. “These are men who had the city divided up. They were thugs, but there was a kind of order. Everyone had his turf. And then the Joker comes in and lights the whole city on fire.

ISIL is the Joker. It has the capacity to set the whole region on fire. That's why we have to fight it."

...“Hollande and Cameron have used phrases, like radical Islam, that we have not used on a regular basis as our way of targeting terrorism. But I've never had a conversation when they said, ‘Man, how come you're not using this phrase the way you hear Republicans say it?’” Obama says he has demanded that Muslim leaders do more to eliminate the threat of violent fundamentalism. “It is very clear what I mean,” he told me, “which is that there is a violent, radical, fanatical, nihilistic interpretation of Islam by a faction—a tiny faction within the Muslim community that is our enemy, and that has to be defeated.”

“There is also the need for Islam as a whole to challenge that interpretation of Islam, to isolate it, and to undergo a vigorous discussion within their community about how Islam works as part of a peaceful, modern society,” he said. But he added, “I do not persuade peaceful, tolerant Muslims to engage in that debate if I'm not sensitive to their concern that they are being tagged with a broad brush.”

...“There is also the need for Islam as a whole to challenge that interpretation of Islam, to isolate it, and to undergo a vigorous discussion within their community about how Islam works as part of a peaceful, modern society,” he said. But he added, “I do not persuade peaceful, tolerant Muslims to engage in that debate if I'm not sensitive to their concern that they are being tagged with a broad brush.”

- **Syria:** At the moment, of course, the most urgent of the “seemingly more urgent” issues is Syria. But at any given moment, Obama's entire presidency could be upended by North Korean aggression, or an assault by Russia on a member of NATO, or an ISIS-planned attack on U.S. soil.

...“Oftentimes when you get critics of our Syria policy, one of the things that they'll point out is ‘You called for Assad to go, but you didn't force him to go. You did not invade.’ And the notion is that if you weren't going to overthrow the regime, you shouldn't have said anything. That's a weird argument to me, the notion that if we use our moral authority to say ‘This is a brutal regime, and this is not how a leader should treat his people,’ once you do that, you are obliged to invade the country and install a government you prefer.”

...“When I hear folks say that, well, maybe we should just admit the Christians but not the Muslims; when I hear political leaders suggesting that there would be a religious test for which person who's fleeing from a war-torn country is admitted,” Obama told the assembled reporters, “that's not American. That's not who we are. We don't have religious tests to our compassion.”

...Obama modulates his discussion of terrorism for several reasons: He is, by nature, Spockian. And he believes that a misplaced word, or a frightened look, or an ill-considered hyperbolic claim, could tip the country into panic. The sort of panic he worries about most is the type that would manifest itself in anti-Muslim xenophobia or in

a challenge to American openness and to the constitutional order

“Right now, across the globe, you’re seeing places that are undergoing severe stress because of globalization, because of the collision of cultures brought about by the Internet and social media, because of scarcities—some of which will be attributable to climate change over the next several decades—because of population growth. And in those places, the Middle East being Exhibit A, the default position for a lot of folks is to organize tightly in the tribe and to push back or strike out against those who are different.

“A group like ISIL is the distillation of every worst impulse along these lines. The notion that we are a small group that defines ourselves primarily by the degree to which we can kill others who are not like us, and attempting to impose a rigid orthodoxy that produces nothing, that celebrates nothing, that really is contrary to every bit of human progress—it indicates the degree to which that kind of mentality can still take root and gain adherents in the 21st century.”

So your appreciation for tribalism’s power makes you want to stay away?, I asked. “In other words, when people say ‘Why don’t you just go get the bastards?’ you step back?” “We have to determine the best tools to roll back those kinds of attitudes,” he said. “There are going to be times where either because it’s not a direct threat to us or because we just don’t have the tools in our toolkit to have a huge impact that, tragically, we have to refrain from jumping in with both feet.”

...John Kerry has visited the White House regularly to ask Obama to violate Syria’s sovereignty. On several occasions, Kerry has asked Obama to launch missiles at specific regime targets, under cover of night, to “send a message” to the regime. The goal, Kerry has said, is not to overthrow Assad but to encourage him, and Iran and Russia, to negotiate peace.

Obama has steadfastly resisted Kerry’s requests, and seems to have grown impatient with his lobbying. Recently, when Kerry handed Obama a written outline of new steps to bring more pressure to bear on Assad, Obama said, “Oh, another proposal?” Administration officials have told me that Vice President Biden, too, has become frustrated with Kerry’s demands for action. He has said privately to the secretary of state, “John, remember Vietnam? Remember how that started?” At a National Security Council meeting held at the Pentagon in December, Obama announced that no one except the secretary of defense should bring him proposals for military action. Pentagon officials understood Obama’s announcement to be a brushback pitch directed at Kerry.

...In recent National Security Council meetings, Obama’s strategy was occasionally referred to as the “Tom Sawyer approach.” Obama’s view was that if Putin wanted to expend his regime’s resources by painting the fence in Syria, the U.S. should let him. By late winter, though, when it appeared that Russia was making advances in its campaign to solidify Assad’s rule, the White House began discussing ways to deepen support for the rebels, though the president’s ambivalence about more-extensive engagement remained. In conversations I had with National Security Council officials

over the past couple of months, I sensed a foreboding that an event—another San Bernardino-style attack, for instance—would compel the United States to take new and direct action in Syria. For Obama, this would be a nightmare.

If there had been no Iraq, no Afghanistan, and no Libya, Obama told me, he might be more apt to take risks in Syria. “A president does not make decisions in a vacuum. He does not have a blank slate. Any president who was thoughtful, I believe, would recognize that after over a decade of war, with obligations that are still to this day requiring great amounts of resources and attention in Afghanistan, with the experience of Iraq, with the strains that it’s placed on our military—any thoughtful president would hesitate about making a renewed commitment in the exact same region of the world with some of the exact same dynamics and the same probability of an unsatisfactory outcome.”

Are you too cautious?, I asked.

“No,” he said. “Do I think that had we not invaded Iraq and were we not still involved in sending billions of dollars and a number of military trainers and advisers into Afghanistan, would I potentially have thought about taking on some additional risk to help try to shape the Syria situation? I don’t know.” What has struck me is that, even as his secretary of state warns about a dire, Syria-fueled European apocalypse, Obama has not recategorized the country’s civil war as a top-tier security threat.

...“Nobody remembers bin Laden anymore,” he says. “Nobody talks about me ordering 30,000 more troops into Afghanistan.” The red-line crisis, he said, “is the point of the inverted pyramid upon which all other theories rest.”

- **Iran:** Shortly after that interview four years ago, Ehud Barak, who was then the defense minister of Israel, asked me whether I thought Obama’s no-bluff promise was itself a bluff. I answered that I found it difficult to imagine that the leader of the United States would bluff about something so consequential. But Barak’s question had stayed with me. So as I stood in the doorway with the president, I asked: “Was it a bluff?” I told him that few people now believe he actually would have attacked Iran to keep it from getting a nuclear weapon.

“That’s interesting,” he said, noncommittally. I started to talk: “Do you—” He interrupted. “I actually would have,” he said, meaning that he would have struck Iran’s nuclear facilities. “If I saw them break out.” He added, “Now, the argument that can’t be resolved, because it’s entirely situational, was what constitutes them getting” the bomb. “This was the argument I was having with Bibi Netanyahu.” Netanyahu wanted Obama to prevent Iran from being capable of building a bomb, not merely from possessing a bomb.

“You were right to believe it,” the president said. And then he made his key point. “This was in the category of an American interest.” I was reminded then of something Derek

Chollet, a former National Security Council official, told me: “Obama is a gambler, not a bluffer.”

- **Libya crisis and Europeans: France:** ... the controversy surrounding the assertion—made by an anonymous administration official to *The New Yorker* during the Libya crisis of 2011—that his policy consisted of “leading from behind” perturbed him. “We don’t have to always be the ones who are up front,” he told me. “Sometimes we’re going to get what we want precisely because we are sharing in the agenda. The irony is that it was precisely in order to prevent the Europeans and the Arab states from holding our coats while we did all the fighting that we, by design, insisted” that they lead during the mission to remove Muammar Qaddafi from power in Libya. It was part of the anti-free rider campaign.”

...“The social order in Libya has broken down,” Obama said, explaining his thinking at the time. “You have massive protests against Qaddafi. You’ve got tribal divisions inside of Libya. Benghazi is a focal point for the opposition regime. And Qaddafi is marching his army toward Benghazi, and he has said, ‘We will kill them like rats.’”

“Now, option one would be to do nothing, and there were some in my administration who said, as tragic as the Libyan situation may be, it’s not our problem. The way I looked at it was that it would be our problem if, in fact, complete chaos and civil war broke out in Libya. But this is not so at the core of U.S. interests that it makes sense for us to unilaterally strike against the Qaddafi regime. At that point, you’ve got Europe and a number of Gulf countries who despise Qaddafi, or are concerned on a humanitarian basis, who are calling for action. But what has been a habit over the last several decades in these circumstances is people pushing us to act but then showing an unwillingness to put any skin in the game.”

...“So we actually executed this plan as well as I could have expected: We got a UN mandate, we built a coalition, it cost us \$1 billion—which, when it comes to military operations, is very cheap. We averted large-scale civilian casualties, we prevented what almost surely would have been a prolonged and bloody civil conflict. And despite all that, Libya is a mess.” Mess is the president’s diplomatic term; privately, he calls Libya a “shit show,” in part because it’s subsequently become an ISIS haven—one that he has already targeted with air strikes. It became a shit show, Obama believes, for reasons that had less to do with American incompetence than with the passivity of America’s allies and with the obdurate power of tribalism.

“When I go back and I ask myself what went wrong,” Obama said, “there’s room for criticism, because I had more faith in the Europeans, given Libya’s proximity, being invested in the follow-up,” he said. He noted that Nicolas Sarkozy, the French president, lost his job the following year. And he said that British Prime Minister David Cameron soon stopped paying attention, becoming “distracted by a range of other things.” Of France, he said, “Sarkozy wanted to trumpet the flights he was taking in the air campaign, despite the fact that we had wiped out all the air defenses and essentially set up the entire infrastructure” for the intervention. This sort of bragging was fine, Obama said, because it

allowed the U.S. to “purchase France’s involvement in a way that made it less expensive for us and less risky for us.”

In other words, giving France extra credit in exchange for less risk and cost to the United States was a useful trade-off—except that “from the perspective of a lot of the folks in the foreign-policy establishment, well, that was terrible. If we’re going to do something, obviously we’ve got to be up front, and nobody else is sharing in the spotlight.”

Obama also blamed internal Libyan dynamics. “The degree of tribal division in Libya was greater than our analysts had expected. And our ability to have any kind of structure there that we could interact with and start training and start providing resources broke down very quickly.” Libya proved to him that the Middle East was best avoided. “There is no way we should commit to governing the Middle East and North Africa,” he recently told a former colleague from the Senate. “That would be a basic, fundamental mistake.”

- **Britain:** Recently, Obama warned that Great Britain would no longer be able to claim a “special relationship” with the United States if it did not commit to spending at least 2 percent of its GDP on defense. “You have to pay your fair share,” Obama told David Cameron, who subsequently met the 2 percent threshold.
- **Use of Force:** Obama flipped this plea on its head. “When you have a professional army,” he once told me, “that is well armed and sponsored by two large states”—Iran and Russia—“who have huge stakes in this, and they are fighting against a farmer, a carpenter, an engineer who started out as protesters and suddenly now see themselves in the midst of a civil conflict ...” He paused. “The notion that we could have—in a clean way that didn’t commit U.S. military forces—changed the equation on the ground there was never true.”
- **Pivot to Asia:** For years, the “pivot to Asia” has been a paramount priority of his. America’s economic future lies in Asia, he believes, and the challenge posed by China’s rise requires constant attention. From his earliest days in office, Obama has been focused on rebuilding the sometimes-threadbare ties between the U.S. and its Asian treaty partners, and he is perpetually on the hunt for opportunities to draw other Asian nations into the U.S. orbit. His dramatic opening to Burma was one such opportunity; Vietnam and the entire constellation of Southeast Asian countries fearful of Chinese domination presented others.

Obama’s secretary of defense, Ashton Carter, told me not long ago that Obama has maintained his focus on Asia even as Syria and other Middle Eastern conflicts continue to flare. Obama believes, Carter said, that Asia “is the part of the world of greatest consequence to the American future, and that no president can take his eye off of this.” He added, “He consistently asks, even in the midst of everything else that’s going on, ‘Where are we in the Asia-Pacific rebalance? Where are we in terms of resources?’ He’s been extremely consistent about that, even in times of Middle East tension.”

...The resurgent popularity of America throughout Southeast Asia means that “we can do really big, important stuff—which, by the way, then has ramifications across the board,”

he said, “because when Malaysia joins the anti-ISIL campaign, that helps us leverage resources and credibility in our fight against terrorism. When we have strong relations with Indonesia, that helps us when we are going to Paris and trying to negotiate a climate treaty, where the temptation of a Russia or some of these other countries may be to skew the deal in a way that is unhelpful.”

- **Russia: Putin vs. Nixon and the Ukraine:** The president’s unwillingness to counter the baiting by American adversaries can feel emotionally unsatisfying, I said, and I told him that every so often, I’d like to see him give Vladimir Putin the finger. It’s atavistic, I said, understanding my audience.

“It is,” the president responded coolly. “This is what they’re looking for.” He described a relationship with Putin that doesn’t quite conform to common perceptions. I had been under the impression that Obama viewed Putin as nasty, brutish, and short. But, Obama told me, Putin is not particularly nasty two hours like he does a bunch of these other folks.” Obama said that Putin believes his relationship with the U.S. is more important than Americans tend to think. “He’s constantly interested in being seen as our peer and as working with us, because he’s not completely stupid. He understands that Russia’s overall position in the world is significantly diminished. And the fact that he invades Crimea or is trying to prop up Assad doesn’t suddenly make him a player. You don’t see him in any of these meetings out here helping to shape the agenda. For that matter, there’s not a G20 meeting where the Russians set the agenda around any of the issues that are important.” “The truth is, actually, Putin, in all of our meetings, is scrupulously polite, very frank. Our meetings are very businesslike. He never keeps me waiting

...“The argument is made,” I said, “that Vladimir Putin watched you in Syria and thought, He’s too logical, he’s too rational, he’s too into retrenchment. I’m going to push him a little bit further in Ukraine.”

Obama didn’t much like my line of inquiry. “Look, this theory is so easily disposed of that I’m always puzzled by how people make the argument. I don’t think anybody thought that George W. Bush was overly rational or cautious in his use of military force. And as I recall, because apparently nobody in this town does, Putin went into Georgia on Bush’s watch, right smack dab in the middle of us having over 100,000 troops deployed in Iraq.” Obama was referring to Putin’s 2008 invasion of Georgia, a former Soviet republic, which was undertaken for many of the same reasons Putin later invaded Ukraine—to keep an ex-Soviet republic in Russia’s sphere of influence.

“Putin acted in Ukraine in response to a client state that was about to slip out of his grasp. And he improvised in a way to hang on to his control there,” he said. “He’s done the exact same thing in Syria, at enormous cost to the well-being of his own country. And the notion that somehow Russia is in a stronger position now, in Syria or in Ukraine, than they were before they invaded Ukraine or before he had to deploy military forces to Syria is to fundamentally misunderstand the nature of power in foreign affairs or in the world generally. Real power means you can get what you want without having to exert

violence. Russia was much more powerful when Ukraine looked like an independent country but was a kleptocracy that he could pull the strings on.”

Obama’s theory here is simple: Ukraine is a core Russian interest but not an American one, so Russia will always be able to maintain escalatory dominance there.

“The fact is that Ukraine, which is a non-NATO country, is going to be vulnerable to military domination by Russia no matter what we do,” he said. I asked Obama whether his position on Ukraine was realistic or fatalistic. “It’s realistic,” he said. “But this is an example of where we have to be very clear about what our core interests are and what we are willing to go to war for. And at the end of the day, there’s always going to be some ambiguity.” He then offered up a critique he had heard directed against him, in order to knock it down. “I think that the best argument you can make on the side of those who are critics of my foreign policy is that the president doesn’t exploit ambiguity enough. He doesn’t maybe react in ways that might cause people to think, Wow, this guy might be a little crazy.”

“The ‘crazy Nixon’ approach,” I said: Confuse and frighten your enemies by making them think you’re capable of committing irrational acts. “But let’s examine the Nixon theory,” he said. “So we dropped more ordnance on Cambodia and Laos than on Europe in World War II, and yet, ultimately, Nixon withdrew, Kissinger went to Paris, and all we left behind was chaos, slaughter, and authoritarian governments that finally, over time, have emerged from that hell. When I go to visit those countries, I’m going to be trying to figure out how we can, today, help them remove bombs that are still blowing off the legs of little kids. In what way did that strategy promote our interests?”

But what if Putin were threatening to move against, say, Moldova—another vulnerable post-Soviet state? Wouldn’t it be helpful for Putin to believe that Obama might get angry and irrational about that?

“There is no evidence in modern American foreign policy that that’s how people respond. People respond based on what their imperatives are, and if it’s really important to somebody, and it’s not that important to us, they know that, and we know that,” he said. “There are ways to deter, but it requires you to be very clear ahead of time about what is worth going to war for and what is not. Now, if there is somebody in this town that would claim that we would consider going to war with Russia over Crimea and eastern Ukraine, they should speak up and be very clear about it. The idea that talking tough or engaging in some military action that is tangential to that particular area is somehow going to influence the decision making of Russia or China is contrary to all the evidence we have seen over the last 50 years.”

A weak, flailing Russia constitutes a threat as well, though not quite a top-tier threat. “Unlike China, they have demographic problems, economic structural problems, that would require not only vision but a generation to overcome,” Obama said. “The path that Putin is taking is not going to help them overcome those challenges. But in that

environment, the temptation to project military force to show greatness is strong, and that's what Putin's inclination is. So I don't underestimate the dangers there."

Obama returned to a point he had made repeatedly to me, one that he hopes the country, and the next president, absorbs: "You know, the notion that diplomacy and technocrats and bureaucrats somehow are helping to keep America safe and secure, most people think, Eh, that's nonsense. But it's true. And by the way, it's the element of American power that the rest of the world appreciates unambiguously. When we deploy troops, there's always a sense on the part of other countries that, even where necessary, sovereignty is being violated."

- **China:** What country does he consider the greatest challenge to America in the coming decades? "In terms of traditional great-state relations, I do believe that the relationship between the United States and China is going to be the most critical," he said. "If we get that right and China continues on a peaceful rise, then we have a partner that is growing in capability and sharing with us the burdens and responsibilities of maintaining an international order.

If China fails; if it is not able to maintain a trajectory that satisfies its population and has to resort to nationalism as an organizing principle; if it feels so overwhelmed that it never takes on the responsibilities of a country its size in maintaining the international order; if it views the world only in terms of regional spheres of influence—then not only do we see the potential for conflict with China, but we will find ourselves having more difficulty dealing with these other challenges that are going to come." Many people, I noted, want the president to be more forceful in confronting China, especially in the South China Sea. Hillary Clinton, for one, has been heard to say in private settings, "I don't want my grandchildren to live in a world dominated by the Chinese."

"I've been very explicit in saying that we have more to fear from a weakened, threatened China than a successful, rising China," Obama said. "I think we have to be firm where China's actions are undermining international interests, and if you look at how we've operated in the South China Sea, we have been able to mobilize most of Asia to isolate China in ways that have surprised China, frankly, and have very much served our interest in strengthening our alliances."

Many will disagree with the President's statements, world view, strategy, and "doctrine." But, it should be clear from both these summaries—by issue and the full article—that his views are both nuanced and do provide a more realistic and coherent view of policy than many of his critics admit. This makes Goldberg's work required reading. It also makes outside efforts to focus on what the article actually says—and to keep the article in context—absolutely essential.

Commentary is produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).