

2015

Realism in Action: Obama's Foreign Policy in Afghanistan

Timothy Hoffman

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.shu.edu/pa>



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hoffman, Timothy (2015) "Realism in Action: Obama's Foreign Policy in Afghanistan," *Political Analysis*: Vol. 16 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://scholarship.shu.edu/pa/vol16/iss1/6>

Realism in Action: Obama's Foreign Policy in Afghanistan

Timothy Hoffman

In 2008, the United States of America was captivated by a new presidential candidate who promised hope and change for all. He defeated an established Democrat in the primaries, and a national hero in the general election. On January 20, 2009, Barack Obama was sworn in as President of the United States – Commander in Chief of the greatest military force in the world. As he spoke at his inauguration, he declared that “America must play its role in ushering in a new era of peace” (Obama, January 20, 2009). This new president inherited two wars in the Middle East – Afghanistan and Iraq – and he was tasked with bringing each to a responsible close. Afghanistan had proven to be an enormous burden for the nation, and the responsibility placed upon the new Commander in Chief was to determine a course to confront the obstacles ahead. In this essay, I will argue that since Barack Obama assumed the presidency, his administration has taken a strong realist perspective towards Afghanistan and the issues facing the war-torn country.

The country of Afghanistan became a paramount national security concern on September 11, 2001. The United States of America endured an unparalleled attack on its soil at the hands of a terrorist organization: Al Qaeda. The administration of President George W. Bush faced a new world – a world of terror and uncertainty. The administration knew it had to act swiftly to bring justice to those who had committed such heinous attacks against the nation, and their attention quickly turned to Afghanistan, where the Taliban enabled Al Qaeda, and provided a safe haven to further develop the terrorist organization. At that moment, President Bush's foreign policy radically shifted towards counterterrorism, as it became not one of the administration's priorities, but the main one (Lindsay 766). Protecting the American people from the threat of terrorism became the main responsibility of the government.

When it was determined that Al Qaeda was responsible for the attacks on September 11, and that the Taliban had provided a safe haven for their training operations, the United States decided to take action. George W. Bush declared that “we will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them” (Bush, September 11, 2001). This statement provided the rationale to topple the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in response to the attack on the United States.

Bush’s administration consisted of many individuals from the neoconservative school of foreign policy. They believed that Americans had a unilateral responsibility to take the leading role in the world, and that the United States must play a central role in spreading democracy around the globe (Packer 20). This belief became paramount as President Bush pursued what is now known as the Freedom Agenda, which underscored the moral nature of politics, individualism, and the right and desire of freedom for humanity (Patterson 27). The influence of neoconservatives is evident in Bush’s policies in the War on Terrorism. This overarching war primarily relied upon five assumptions, in which neoconservative values shine through. The first is that the global and military dominance of the United States enabled the country to take the terrorist fight overseas. Secondly, the unwillingness to respond militarily to terrorist attacks in the past emboldened the enemy. Thirdly, deterrence is useless when dealing with terrorists, so the United States must act pre-emptively to eradicate threats. Fourthly, terrorists rely upon support from a state, which explains why George W. Bush pursued a hard line against the “Axis of Evil” of Iran, Iraq, and North Korea. And finally, alliances and multilateral organizations can help in the war effort, but they are not essential, as the United States must take the lead (Lindsay 767). These beliefs became the core of the Bush administration’s foreign policy, and ultimately served as motivations to invade Iraq in 2003.

The presidential election of 2008 consisted of a field of candidates with diverse foreign policy views. John McCain, Mitt Romney, Mike Huckabee, Hillary Clinton, Joseph Biden, and Barack Obama were the leading candidates. Barack Obama entered the world stage in 2004 at the Democratic National Convention, where he gave the keynote address for John Kerry's candidacy. Obama captured the heart of the country by explaining that there were not Red States and Blue States in America, but *United States*, and that "we are one people, all of us pledging allegiance to the stars and stripes, all of us defending the United States of America" (Obama, 2004). During the speech, Obama recited one sentence which gave a slight glimmer into his own foreign policy views: that we must "never ever go to war without enough troops to win the war, secure the peace, and earn the respect of the world" (Obama, 2004). This speech captivated Americans, and propelled him to the spotlight in the 2008 elections.

On the campaign trail, many viewed Obama's foreign policies as liberal and idealist. At an anti-war rally in October 2002, Obama condemned President Bush's march towards a "dumb war" in Iraq, and this argument boosted Obama in the 2008 Democratic primaries, as he was able to claim that he opposed the Iraq war from the start – however, the American people misinterpreted this to mean that Obama held anti-war views, while in fact, he "was an internationalist who favored a robust US role overseas. He was not a non-interventionist calling for a retreat to Fortress America" (Lindsay 771-772). Ultimately, Obama was calling for a reset in foreign policy. He campaigned on refocusing the military approach in the Middle East and focusing more on Afghanistan, as opposed to the "wrong war" in Iraq. He criticized Bush for "taking his eye of the ball" in Afghanistan, and in his book, the *Audacity of Hope*, Obama wrote of the need to put "boots on the ground in the ungoverned or hostile regions where terrorists thrive" (Holder and Josephson 101). If elected, Afghanistan would become the primary foreign

policy focus for the nation. His opposition to the war in Iraq from its onset was a stark contrast to Senator Clinton, who had voted for the authorization of force in Iraq. James Goldgeier explains that Obama further strengthened his credentials with independents by arguing that troops, resources, and attention had to be shifted to Afghanistan, and away from the ill-advised war in Iraq – he quotes Obama in saying that “Iraq is not the central front in the war on terrorism, and it never has been...As president, I would pursue a new strategy, and begin by providing at least two additional combat brigades to support our effort in Afghanistan” (Goldgeier 118). Obama desired further troops, intelligence, and assistance to take on terrorism in its initial theater.

As the campaign continued, it became evident that Barack Obama’s foreign policy stances were developed with a far more realist perspective than his Democratic opponents. Obama’s views stood in stark contrast as he was reluctant to embrace the notion of humanitarian intervention, and he demonstrated coolness towards the ideal of democracy promotion. Obama was truly “a rare bird—a Democratic foreign policy realist” (Lindsay 773). He championed ideas of meeting and negotiating with adversarial regimes such as Venezuela, North Korea, Cuba, and Iran, but he vowed that he would use military force if it made sense. Candidate Obama was determined to add troops to Afghanistan, and he also desired an increase in drone strokes and operations within Pakistan’s border. He declared in 2007, “If we have actionable intelligence about high-value terrorist targets and President Musharraf won’t act, we will” (Lindsay 772). Obama’s call for troops and more drone strikes was met with resistance on both sides of the aisle, as some saw this as a suggestion, or even a threat, to invade Pakistan (Lindsay 772).

Despite Obama’s foreign policy rhetoric, which often was centered on Afghanistan, audiences firmly believed that once in office, Obama would significantly draw back from Bush’s ‘war on terror’ Barack Obama repeatedly mentioned his intentions for bolstering efforts in

Afghanistan, but voters seemed to project his promises of withdrawal in Iraq to his larger foreign policy objectives. Obama gave a major foreign policy speech on July 15, 2008. In this speech, he outlined what the United States could have done in Afghanistan after 9/11 to fully combat Osama bin Laden, al Qaeda, and the Taliban. Instead he described that we “have lost thousands of American lives, spent nearly a trillion dollars, alienated allies and neglected emerging threats – all in the cause of fighting a war for well over five years in a country that had absolutely nothing to do with the 9/11 attacks” (Obama, July 15, 2008). Obama clearly viewed Iraq as a needless distraction, and explained that “our single-minded and open-ended focus on Iraq is not a sound strategy for keeping America safe” (Obama, July 15, 2008). Obama placed a premium on security, safety, and the interests of the United States in his speech. He did explain that he supported an approach of working with allies, but in the end, his realist perspective shined through as Obama asserted, “we cannot lose Afghanistan to a future of narco-terrorism. The Afghan people must know that our commitment to their future is enduring, because the security of Afghanistan and the United States is shared” (Obama, July 15, 2008). Barack Obama believed that the United States had a commitment, and a vital interest in stabilizing Afghanistan, and his realist view of the international system affirmed this belief.

After winning the election, the path was clear: Afghanistan would become a renewed foreign policy focus for the United States of America. A website was created to share the policy goals and ideas of the incoming forty fourth president: change.gov. The website outlined the manner in which all critical decisions would be handled by the incoming administration. On Afghanistan, the website promised to increase troop levels in Afghanistan – both US troops and NATO troops – and to dedicate further resources to build up the country. With realist diction, the plan explicitly stated that “Obama and Biden will refocus American resources on the greatest

threat to our security -- the resurgence of al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan” (Change.gov). The plan was clear – a reduction of force and materials in Iraq, but a major shift and increase in effort in Afghanistan. The ungoverned tribal regions along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border was now a primary focus as bin Laden, al Qaeda, and the Taliban had over 150 training camps and facilities in this region (Woodward 3). This area had to be addressed immediately in order to prevail in Afghanistan.

Upon Barack Obama’s inauguration, he immediately worked to fulfill his stated duty of ushering in a new era of peace in the world. Unfortunately, the reality he faced included two long Middle Eastern wars that were developing into quagmires with parallels to Vietnam. Admiral Mullen acknowledged that the Afghanistan War had been under-resourced for years, adding that there essentially “was no strategy” (Woodward 34). This was an indictment of the Bush administration’s failure to account for Afghanistan after Iraq diverted the American focus. It was also evident that despite tough rhetoric, the Bush administration had failed to prepare for some of the worst-case scenarios the country could face (Woodward 35). On February 17, less than a month after taking office, President Obama began to implement his foreign policy in the region to reverse this trend. He ordered an increase of 17,000 troops to Afghanistan “to meet urgent security needs” and to stabilize the pressing situation in Afghanistan which “has not received the strategic attention, direction and resources it urgently requires” (Press Release, February 17, 2009). Obama’s initial step in foreign policy demonstrated a commitment to realist ideas: addressing security concerns, and utilizing power. The troop increase served as an insurance policy, giving Obama flexibility to make greater decisions in the future (Woodward 97).

Obama was insistent on making Afghanistan the central focus in the Middle East, but he encountered obstacles to implementing his entire strategy. Devoting further assets to Afghanistan

was something that members of his party were hesitant on, as the war consumed immense resources over the span of almost a decade (Goldgeier 117). The war had expanded to more of a state building initiative, where failure had the potential to undercut all military success (Hunt). Many espoused the idea of turning management of Afghanistan over to regional powers who had a greater stake in the country – countries more likely to make sacrifices over the long haul to maintain influence in the fledging country (Hunt). Despite this, the president was compelled to ‘fix’ Afghanistan, even with the global reality that the United States would be virtually be alone in Afghanistan as European nations found the situation politically untenable, and nations such as Canada and the Netherlands had begun to establish withdrawal deadlines. The center of Obama’s foreign policy would be mainly reliant on the United States.

Afghanistan presented a diverse array of obstacles for the new president. The country truly developed into a quandary for the United States as the Taliban had a clear and strong presence along the Pakistani border in southern Afghan provinces, yet the United States had not dedicated the necessary resources to halt their advance (Woodward 42). The main issues facing the United States included corrupt and poor Afghan governance, an exploding opium trade, and safe havens in Pakistan (Woodward 43-44). Confronting these challenges became vital for reversing the decline in the Afghan predicament. However, the declining security situation in Afghanistan was also directly related to, and exacerbated by, the instability in Pakistan and along the border region. In Lieutenant General Douglas Lute’s report, he explained that Pakistan was much more of a “strategically troubling problem than Afghanistan, because the sanctuaries there for al Qaeda and other affiliate groups were more of a threat to the United States” (Woodward 43). As Barack Obama attempted to reshape American foreign policy, the fates of both Afghanistan and Pakistan became linked. This gave birth to the term “AfPak” as the United

States would now address the issues in both countries in conjunction with one another (Goldgeier 119). The Pakistan issue must be addressed simultaneously to Afghanistan to address the immediate security concerns and to promote stability in the region.

The new president charged Bruce Riedel to conduct a strategic review of Afghanistan. In his report, Riedel fully embraced the notion of shifting the focus to Pakistan as he observed a “self-destructive cycle” in which the extremists in Pakistan undermined the Afghan government, and the insecurity in Afghanistan “fed Pakistan’s instability” (Woodward 99). It was also determined that Osama bin Laden still was a threat as he had regular contact with his underlings and foot soldiers (Woodward 105). The problems went far beyond what many expected, as General McChrystal estimated that the Taliban now had over 25,000 fighters (Woodward 133). In the face of great uncertainty, Afghanistan continued to draw many parallels to both Vietnam and Iraq. However, President Obama believed that success was possible, and was determined to succeed. He felt that both Lyndon Johnson and George W. Bush “had failed to drill down into the reasoning, the alternatives and the full consequences” of their actions in Vietnam and Iraq (Woodward 158). If resources were allocated properly and everyone was on board, Obama firmly believed that his administration could lead the United States to success in Afghanistan.

With time to review the Riedel report, military commanders, diplomats, and the National Security Council sat down to chart a new course for Afghanistan. The new course consisted of the goal “to disrupt, dismantle and eventually defeat al Qaeda and its extremist allies, their support structures and their safe havens in Pakistan and to prevent their return to Pakistan or Afghanistan”, a goal that was haggled over repeatedly in the Situation Room (Woodward 99). In the face of rising Taliban and insurgent attacks, Obama felt that he had two years with public support on the issue and that “they’ll stand by us for two years” (Woodward 110). The new

strategy for Afghanistan must abide by this timeline to ensure a proper transition from American security forces to Afghan forces – then a responsible withdrawal could commence.

On March 27, 2009, President Obama gave a speech indicating the contents of Riedel's report and he highlighted the danger that Afghanistan *and* Pakistan posed to Americans. The influence of realism was omnipresent in this speech. He explained that “for the American people, this border region [between Afghanistan and Pakistan] has become the most dangerous place in the world” (Obama, March 27, 2009). He urged the American people that “We are in Afghanistan to confront a common enemy that threatens the United States, our friends and our allies...” which emphasized that the purpose of this war was to protect America and its interests (Obama, March 27, 2009). In dealing with Pakistan, where many terrorists found safe haven, the president declared “we will insist that action be taken – one way or another – when we have intelligence about high-level terrorist targets (Obama, March 27, 2009). This threat of force was aimed at the Pakistani government to stand up to extremists; otherwise the United States would be forced to act on its own in response to its findings. However, Obama did employ some liberal rhetoric in his address. He spoke of “shared responsibility”, and stated “my administration is committed to strengthening international organizations and collective action...as America does more, we will ask others to join us in doing their part” (Obama, March 27, 2009). In the end, the president urged the American people that “we will use all elements of our national power to defeat al Qaeda, and to defend America, our allies, and all who seek a better future” (Obama, March 27, 2009). This speech incorporated many realist ideals such as state interest, security, and power, yet Obama's slight overtures towards liberalism offered hope that the United States may have had a foreign policy liberal in the Oval Office.

President Obama's foreign policy often is viewed through a liberal lens due to his speeches, and the image his staff tries to create. One of the primary examples of liberal rhetoric from president Obama is his address to the United Nations General Assembly in 2009, where he spoke of a new world reality:

"In an era when our destiny is shared, power is no longer a zero-sum game. No one nation can or should try to dominate another nation. No world order that elevates one nation or group of people over another will succeed. No balance of power among nations will hold. The traditional divisions between nations of the South and the North make no sense in an interconnected world; nor do alignments of nations rooted in the cleavages of a long-gone Cold War" (Obama, September 23, 2009).

In this speech, it appears as though President Obama has entirely eschewed realism, and adopted a much more liberal line of thinking as he makes a declaration that "power is no longer a zero-sum game", an idea that is the bedrock of realism. This excerpt is showcased on the White House Foreign Policy page, possibly serving as an attempt to portray Obama as an idealist. However, as Bradley Thayer notes, "despite the rhetoric, the Obama administration is realist" (Thayer 3). The idealist rhetoric has served as a publicity tool for the administration but "far from idealism, the Obama administration knows that the United States could lose in Afghanistan and is taking steps to prevent such an outcome...the administration recognizes what is at stake and is acting as any good realist administration would" (Thayer 3). Ultimately, "the United States will act in concert with other nations to improve or defend the dignity and welfare of individuals and societies around the world when doing so is effective and consistent with its national safety, interests, and values" (Owens 106). The Obama administration has room for idealist views, but fully acknowledges they exist in a realist world.

The president may employ liberal language when addressing an audience, but his language behind the scenes depicts the true influence of realism on his decision making. Fierce debates were waged in the Situation Room among the National Security Council over the future

of Afghanistan. Obama's realist intentions were extremely evident based on the rhetoric he often utilized in these meetings. When discussing the issues in Afghanistan and the Taliban insurgency, Obama explicitly said "I think we have to focus on the threats to us and our allies and our interests" (Woodward 165). He did not want a war of significant scope that lost sight of our purpose in Afghanistan. The president further explained "I'm not doing 10 years. I'm not doing a long-term nation-building effort. I'm not spending a trillion dollars" on an open-ended war (Woodward 251). Barack Obama campaigned on focusing on Afghanistan, and then facilitating a responsible withdrawal – he would not waver from this focus.

President Obama's foreign policy approach towards Afghanistan has been firmly rooted in realism. He stated that "I really want to focus on the issue of the U.S. homeland" and that the key goals concerning the United States included "protecting the U.S. homeland, allies and U.S. interests abroad" and keeping Pakistan stable and its nuclear weapons secure (Woodward 187). He also argued that any option regarding the future of Afghanistan had to be affordable and executable. He refused to be boxed in by limiting factors such as costs and requests for increased manpower; going forward in Afghanistan required "a sustainable effort that the country can absorb" (Woodward 260). The realist maxims of protecting the homeland and national interests, securing dangerous materials, and sustainability were key goals for the Obama administration.

As the National Security Council weighed its options regarding an increase in troop levels in Afghanistan, there were diverging opinions and raging internal debate. As the military rank and file ardently lobbied for an increase of 40,000 troops, many members of the White House staff reacted with skepticism. They viewed a smaller number of soldiers as sufficient for the task at hand. Numbers from 10,000 to 20,000 to the entire 40,000 to potentially even more were hotly contested. The military viewed the 40,000 increase as necessary because

McChrystal's assessment depicted a grave reality that the United States could lose the entire war by September 2010 (Woodward 176). To combat this, the military insisted 40,000 troops could implement a full counterinsurgency effort and turn the tide of the war.

The frustration with the options on the table was due to the diverging viewpoints between the military ranks and the political strategists within the White House. The military was set on its 40,000 request, and was determined for the commander in chief to approve this amount. CIA Director Leon Panetta explained that "no Democratic president can go against military advice, especially if he asked for it" (Woodward 247). Despite this, Obama "seemed to like the word 'transfer'. He said there needed to be a focus on counterterrorism training and accountability, ultimately turning over the security elements to the Afghans" (Woodward 252). The president did not want to escalate the war to the scale that the Pentagon and military brass desired as he felt that would worsen the dependency issue that the Karzai regime had with the United States' presence, and he firmly believed that "a six-to-eight-year war at \$50 billion a year is not in the national interest of the United States" (Woodward 278). The president had a very realist approach throughout the entire process, and this sentiment extended to his security council. Although, Secretary Clinton argued for granting McChrystal his desired troop increase, she, and others believed that only three of the four brigades of troops should initially be deployed, because "on the civilian side...we need some realism" (Woodward 252). After hearing the myriad of views from the National Security Council, Obama would have to make a decision on the increase in troop levels.

After much deliberation, the president determined that he would add 30,000 additional troops to the war zone. He explained that:

"This needs to be a plan about how we're going to hand it off and get out of Afghanistan...everything that we're doing has to be focused on how we're going to get to

the point where we can reduce our footprint. It's in our national security interest. There cannot be any wiggle room. It has to be clear that this is what we're doing" (Woodward 301).

The goal of the troop increase was clear, it was finite: "target, train, transfer" (Woodward 302).

The new focus would take time, and the president urged that the United States was working against a cancer in Pakistan, and the military had to ensure that it did not spread to Afghanistan (Woodward 302-303). In explaining his decision to key staffers and members of the National Security Council, the president detailed that the efforts in the region had to be connected to the counterterrorism efforts back home (Woodward 303). The president stated, "The American people are idealists, but they also want their leaders to be realistic. The speech has to convey that" (Woodward 307).

On December 1, 2009, President Barack Obama addressed the nation from the Eisenhower Hall Theatre at the United States Military Academy at West Point. That night he declared to the American people that "as Commander-in-Chief, I have determined that it is in our vital national interest to send an additional 30,000 U.S. troops to Afghanistan" and that "if I did not think that the security of the United States and the safety of the American people were at stake in Afghanistan, I would gladly order every single one of our troops home tomorrow" (Obama, December 1, 2009). He also stated that "I make this decision because I am convinced that our security is at stake in Afghanistan and Pakistan" (Obama, December 1, 2009). Obama also noted that "as president, I refuse to set goals that go beyond our responsibility, our means, or our interests. And I must weigh all of the challenges that our nation faces" (Obama, December 1, 2009). The president addressed the challenging ahead in Afghanistan, and with each obstacle, he laid out a realist response. In his remarks, our security, and our interests were the primary subjects of his concern, as Afghanistan was approached from the realm of realism.

One of the primary realist platforms of Obama's foreign policy in Afghanistan has been the usage of drone strikes. The drone strikes demonstrate a strong commitment to realism as they show no regard for morality. Civilians are often killed as a result of these attacks on high value targets. Pakistani president Zardari urged the Americans to kill the senior operatives in al Qaeda and the Taliban by any means necessary as "collateral damage worries you Americans. It does not worry me" (Woodward 26). Since that point, the president has "fully endorsed the covert action program and made it clear he wanted more" to carry out complicated missions (Woodward 93). In Obama's first year in office, he approximately "quintupled the number of strikes by armed drones against suspected terrorist hideouts in Pakistan and elsewhere" (Drone Wars Pakistan). Obama's expansion of the drone program has demonstrated a major preference for a kill-not capture policy regarding suspected terrorists (McCracken 794). Utilizing "drone attacks raises all sorts of questions relating to legitimacy, morality, proportionality and accountability", but these questions are easily dismissed by a realist administration (McCracken 794).

Barack Obama is a realist. His historic campaign had liberal elements projected onto his true intentions, but as president, Obama's foreign policy in Afghanistan has been remarkably realist. The national security of the United States and our interests have proven to be the motivating factors behind any decision in the region, as his administration has taken a strong realist perspective towards Afghanistan, the issues facing the war-torn country, Pakistan, and the tumultuous Middle Eastern region.