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The election of Donald J. Trump jolted the Washington, D.C. foreign policy community. Though erratic and habitually self-contradictory, Trump seemed to be the first man elected president since World War II to explicitly question America's role in the world. Although Republicans and Democrats spend a lot of time criticizing each other, foreign policy leaders have generally agreed on the broad strokes of American strategy over the past 70 years. Both parties have supported the steady expansion of free trade, the promotion of regional stability through American military and diplomatic activism, and the maintenance of the "liberal world order" established in the wake of World War II. The consensus around this grand strategy, known loosely as primacy or liberal hegemony, accelerated after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, at which point political leaders used fears of terrorism to justify an even more interventionist and militaristic approach to foreign policy.

The extent to which Trump will actually depart from this expansive global role of foreign policy activism remains to be seen. Early signs suggest that the bureaucracy, institutional checks, and bipartisan consensus on this grand strategy are moderating Trump's fitful dissension, resulting in something that looks very close to traditional U.S. foreign policy.¹ As a result, Trump's bark may prove to be much worse than his bite.

In any case, Trump's convention-violating rhetoric on foreign policy has exacerbated an already ingrained frustration among many hawks that President Obama was too reluctant to intervene on the world stage. Indeed, one of the most widely believed myths in Washington foreign policy circles is that Obama betrayed the longstanding grand strategy of primacy in favor of withdrawal. Former CIA and NSA Director General Michael Hayden criticized "the Obama administration's retrenchment" on national television.² Richard Fontaine, president of the Center for a New American Security, wrote in January that Obama presided over "restraint and retrenchment" and "focused mostly on limiting the exercise of America's military power." Thanks to Obama's "inaction," he claimed, "vacuums emerged and were then filled in ways that damaged American interests."³

Kori Schake, a Research Fellow at the Hoover Institution, wrote in *Foreign Affairs* that Obama made America less safe "by retreating from the mission of advancing democracy and protecting individual rights elsewhere in the world."⁴ In an op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal*, former Vice President Dick Cheney, and his daughter Liz Cheney described Obama's "abandonment of Iraq" and refusal to intervene in Syria as ceding the Middle East to the Iranians and the Russians. They claimed that Obama's abdication of "American leadership around the world" merely prompted "the desperation of our allies and the glee of our enemies."⁵

Some in academia have also reinforced this criticism. Robert Lieber, of Georgetown University, made the case bluntly in his recent book *Retreat and Its Consequences*. Obama's foreign policy, he argued, led to "a far more dangerous and disordered world."⁶ Johns Hopkins professor Eliot Cohen comes to a similar conclusion and argues that not only was Obama's retrenchment a bad

idea but that the United States will have to once again to embrace and use “hard power” in the years ahead.⁷ Colin Dueck, Professor at George Mason University and a Senior Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, worried that under Obama the United States was “giv[ing] the impression of endless ambivalence or disengagement” and that this can “encourage violent conflict” abroad.⁸ Paul Miller, associate director of the Clements Center for National Security at The University of Texas at Austin, argued that Obama’s “instincts for restraint” had “damaging consequences for American security.” By over-learning the lessons of George W. Bush’s hyper-interventionism, Miller claimed Obama “retrenched when he should have engaged.”⁹

Hawkish critiques of Obama’s foreign policy, however, miss the mark. Obama’s foreign policy record was certainly far from perfect, but not for the reasons hawks provide. In fact, a close analysis suggests that Obama’s greatest foreign policy failures resulted from an embrace of the grand strategy of primacy, rather than from restraint.

Painting an accurate picture of Obama’s foreign policy legacy is important because understanding the causes of foreign policy failure is key to avoiding the same mistakes in the future. By mischaracterizing Obama’s shortcomings as a failure to engage deeply enough, hawkish critics provide faulty support for more confrontational and interventionist policies on Russia, China, and the war on terrorism.

In this working paper we provide an assessment of Obama’s foreign policy legacy with an eye to correcting the narrative and placing Obama more accurately on the grand strategic spectrum. We argue that although Obama occasionally talked a very different game from his predecessor, his

actions hewed far closer to the primacy playbook than they did to a strategy of restraint or retrenchment. With a few important exceptions, the differences between the foreign policies of Obama and George W. Bush were primarily differences in intensity, not in kind.

Our paper has four main sections. To provide a baseline for our analysis, we begin by defining grand strategy and contrasting restraint with primacy. The next section reviews and critiques the hawks' case that Obama followed a path of restraint. Section three illustrates the extent to which Obama's foreign policy was in fact far more traditionally internationalist and interventionist than the hawks acknowledge. We conclude with a discussion of why hawks are so convinced that Obama was a restrainer and why correcting this misapprehension matters.

What Is Grand Strategy? What Is Restraint?

Grand strategy is a nation's plan for achieving security and pursuing its vital interests. Grand strategies help nations prioritize and make choices among competing policy options. Grand strategies help determine which threats a nation should prepare for, what sort of military forces it should procure, and how it should blend diplomacy and the use of military force.¹⁰ The United States does not have an explicit grand strategy, but nonetheless a single strain of grand strategic thinking has dominated the conversation in Washington, D.C. since the end of the Cold War.

This grand strategy has several commonly used names: primacy, deep engagement or liberal hegemony.¹¹ Whatever name one uses, proponents of the strategy assert that the United States is most secure and benefits most in the role of global hegemon, characterized by preponderant military superiority over rivals, leadership of a far-flung network of alliances, and a significant

forward military presence in key regions around the world. As a 1992 Defense Department document explained, the goal of U.S. grand strategy should be “convincing potential competitors that they need not aspire to a greater role or pursue a more aggressive posture to protect their legitimate interests.”¹² With this approach, the United States can not only enhance regional stability and peace among great powers, but can also more effectively promote liberal values and ensure the healthy functioning of the liberal world order it helped create after World War II.

In contrast to primacy, a grand strategy of restraint begins with the observation that the United States enjoys an extraordinarily high level of security, thanks to its favorable geography, weak neighbors, size, wealth, and nuclear arsenal. In the words of Eric Nordlinger the United States enjoys “strategic immunity;” very few actors in the rest of world have the ability to threaten the United States.¹³

Advocates of restraint also challenge the causal logic of primacy. While primacy asserts that peace and stability require a global hegemon, restraint is more optimistic about regional balances of power, the self-organizing nature of the international market, and argues that peace instead is the result of the widespread realization among states that war does not pay.¹⁴ Though the United States certainly played a role in establishing liberal institutions after World War II, there is little evidence that the United States must play a unique role in maintaining them, or is required to persuade nations to find international trade desirable.

Finally, restraint breaks sharply with primacy over the role of military intervention. Restraint argues that using military force for reasons other than self-defense is unnecessary by definition,

and almost always causes more problems than it solves.¹⁵ Advocates of restraint argue that military force is a poor tool for hunting terrorists, and is a terrible tool for spreading democracy, liberal values, or remaking states' political systems. Military intervention also has a decided tendency to turn small conflicts into large ones, create new enemies, and as witnessed in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq, to drag the United States into long, costly, and counterproductive campaigns.

A grand strategy of primacy calls for a large military, extensive security commitments to allies, forward basing of U.S. military power, and the frequent threat and use of force in the pursuit of a wide range of national interests, not merely to ensure America's physical security. In contrast, a grand strategy of restraint calls for a much smaller military force housed primarily at home rather than abroad, for vastly reduced commitments to allies around the world, and for the very rare use of military force only in clear cases of self-defense.

By this standard, as we shall illustrate below, Obama's foreign policy hewed more closely to primacy than to restraint, with negative consequences for American interests. When Obama did manage to steer a course toward restraint, the outcomes tended to be more positive.

The Hawks' Case for Obama's Restraint

Four episodes of Obama foreign policy form the bulk of the argument that Obama pursued restraint.

Withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq

In 2008, the Bush administration negotiated a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with the government of Iraq, then led by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, mandating full withdrawal of all U.S. forces at the end of 2011. Obama's critics argue that given the unstable conditions in Iraq as the deadline drew nearer, the administration should have made more strenuous efforts to renegotiate the SOFA and keep American troops in place.¹⁶ They argue that the failure to do so resulted from the president's predilection for retreat and they blame the withdrawal for the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

However, the Obama administration pressured the Maliki government for months for a new SOFA that would grant permission for a residual force of up to 10,000 to remain well beyond December 2011, and perhaps indefinitely. The Maliki cabinet and the Iraqi parliament resisted that pressure, stalemating the talks until the final months, at which point Obama decided to withdraw in accordance with the 2008 SOFA.¹⁷ Fully withdrawing from Iraq, admittedly, violated the typical Washington playbook. But Obama would later prove that his Iraq policy was not one of restraint by redeploying thousands of U.S. ground forces to aid the Iraqi military in fighting ISIS, policies that fit neatly within the interventionist script.

Red Lines and Conflict in Syria

By far the most controversial element of Obama's Syria policy was the failure to enforce his "red line" forbidding the use of chemical weapons. In 2013, following reports that the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad killed more than 1,000 Syrians with sarin gas, many in Washington's foreign policy community pressured the administration to bomb the Assad regime in response. The credibility of the United States, critics argued, was at stake.¹⁸ To be fair, the Obama

administration was reluctant to escalate in Syria simply for the sake of credibility, but they did make an energetic public case for a bombing campaign. In an impassioned Senate testimony, then-Secretary of State John Kerry implored Congress to grant authority for military action, warning that the consequences of a failure to act would mean a loss of American credibility and signal that future war crimes would go unpunished.¹⁹ In the end, this attempt to expand direct U.S. military involvement in the conflict was stymied by public, Congressional, and allied opposition, not by some penchant for retreat on the part of President Obama.²⁰

But even though the Obama administration failed to enforce its red line, it followed a consistently interventionist approach from early on in the civil war. Obama authorized U.S. support for the Syrian rebel opposition in the form of arms, equipment, training, and resources.²¹ And later, with the rise of ISIS, the Obama administration supported opposition fighters on the ground, regularly bombing Syria and redeploying forces to Iraq to aid in the fight. Hawkish critics consistently complained about Obama's unwillingness to intervene more forcefully in Syria, but the charge that Obama followed the path of strategic restraint does not withstand scrutiny: the administration engaged in limited intervention throughout the conflict.

To the extent that President Obama resisted pressure from the national security bureaucracy and even members of his own cabinet to get more militarily involved in Syria, he avoided the inevitable pitfalls such action would have yielded for U.S. interests.²² Where he strayed from the impulse for restraint even his limited interventions produced poor results. Far from helping, limited intervention actually prolonged the conflict. As Eva Bellin and Peter Krause argued back in 2012, limited intervention "will not serve the moral impulse that animates it. To the contrary,

it is more likely to amplify the harm that it seeks to eliminate by prolonging a hurting stalemate.”²³ Dr. Florence Gaub, a researcher at the NATO Defense College, concurred in 2013, writing that, “A continuous supply of weapons to both sides—whether from Russia, Iran or the Gulf States—only maintains the parties’ perception that fighting is a better option than negotiating. This explains why, in terms of statistical probability, an external supply of weapons lengthens a civil war.”²⁴ These predictions corresponded with later reports toward the end of Obama’s tenure that the external meddling that characterized Syria’s civil war from the beginning helped produce the stalemate that continues to this day.²⁵

Responding to Russian Incursions in Ukraine

A similar story of partial interventionism played out in Ukraine. Following the ouster of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014 and subsequent Russian annexation of Crimea and extended military actions in the eastern part of the country, President Obama did indeed resist calls to rush Ukraine into the NATO alliance, provide arms to local Ukrainians to fight off Russian-backed secessionists, or even respond with direct U.S. military intervention.²⁶ But a leaked phone call recording between Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and U.S. ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt, in the words of the *Washington Post*, “[laid] bare a deep degree of U.S. involvement in affairs that Washington officially says are Ukraine’s to resolve.”²⁷ As a candidate Obama supported Ukraine’s inclusion in NATO, and in response to Russian actions in 2014, his administration provided hundreds of millions of dollars’ worth of non-lethal aid.²⁸ Obama’s European Reassurance Initiative pledged “to help shore up the defenses of NATO members, as well as other non-NATO partners in the region, that feel most threatened by Russia’s actions against Ukraine.”²⁹ The administration also coordinated a harsh economic

sanctions regime against Moscow as punishment. While it's true Obama's interventions were not as substantial as those the hawks supported, it can hardly be argued that America sat out the fight.

Though not a policy of restraint, Obama's limited response to the Ukraine crisis avoided a host of negative consequences that would have likely followed from the more aggressive response many called for at the time. A major U.S. military intervention would have pitted the United States against Russia in Russia's own front yard in a situation that represented a vital national interest for Moscow, but which had negligible importance for U.S. interests. Not only would this have risked inadvertent escalation with a nuclear-armed adversary, but it would have undermined any hope for U.S.-Russian cooperation on other areas of importance, like counter-terrorism and bringing the Iran nuclear agreement to fruition.³⁰ Like in Syria, the external meddling the Obama administration settled on simply incentivized the belligerents to dig in their heels, stalemating the conflict to the detriment of regional security. Western aid didn't tip the balance of power inside Ukraine, sanctions didn't reverse Russian policies, and successive diplomatic agreements and ceasefires failed to produce a political settlement.

Iran and the Nuclear Deal

Pressure for U.S. military action against Iran seemed to reach a fever pitch in the middle of President Obama's tenure. As the Republican Party presidential nominee in 2012, Mitt Romney railed against Obama's carrot and stick approach to Iran's nuclear enrichment program, saying the president should instead have made "very clear" America's willingness "to take military action to keep Iran from having a nuclear weapon."³¹ That same year, Matthew Kroenig,

professor at Georgetown University and senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, bluntly urged the president to attack Iran.³² The Israeli government, led by right-wing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, reportedly came very close to bombing Iranian nuclear facilities, knowing the United States would be obligated to come to Israel's defense in case of Iranian retaliation.³³ In 2015, American Enterprise Institute scholar and former United Nations ambassador John Bolton penned a *New York Times* op-ed arguing it was long past time to “bomb Iran.”³⁴

Instead of taking military action, Obama pursued diplomacy, which finally resulted in an agreement to roll back Tehran's nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief. The deal immediately prompted hawkish voices in Washington to pillory the administration for naïveté, appeasement, and an excessive aversion to the military option.³⁵

But Obama's approach to Iran, which came closest to restraint, again proved his interventionist credentials. Obama put to use all of the tools of American leadership embedded in the doctrine of primacy *except* military action. And even then, Obama argued while running for office that “all options were on the table” to prevent Iran from getting nuclear weapons. Early on, Obama ordered cyber-attacks on the computer systems that powered Iran's nuclear enrichment equipment, culminating in the Stuxnet virus, perhaps the most successful and devastating use of cyber-warfare in history.³⁶ The aggressive nature of cyberwarfare should not be underestimated; after all, the Pentagon considers cyberattacks against the United States acts of war.³⁷ Following that, the administration sought international cooperation on an economic sanctions regime, leading multi-party negotiations with the P5+1, and leveraging American power to satiate Sunni

Arab and Israeli concerns about the agreement. It was, if anything, a “deeply engaged” approach, albeit one that skirted war as a first resort. It was by no means indicative of a restraint strategy.

The Persistence of Primacy under Obama

As our analysis has shown thus far, the hawks’ case that Obama retrenched is weak, even when focusing on the examples they typically used to make the case. Their case falls apart entirely as we paint a more complete picture of Obama’s foreign policy over his eight years in office.

In contrast to the approach called for by restraint, Obama pursued a deeply internationalist and interventionist strategy throughout his presidency, preserving and in many cases deepening America’s expansive grand strategic commitments. Under Obama, the United States continued to guarantee the defense of almost 60 nations in Europe, Asia, and the Americas in formal security arrangements, along with several other tacit agreements with non-treaty allies in the Middle East and Asia.³⁸ The United States also continued to maintain a forward-deployed military presence all over the world, with over 250,000 troops stationed at 800 military bases and installations in some 70 countries. Throughout Obama’s tenure, military spending was structured roughly in order to fulfill these global commitments and to retain the ability to wage two major war contingencies in two separate theaters simultaneously, with U.S. military budgets making up approximately 40 percent of global defense expenditures.³⁹ And though, unlike Bush, Obama did not invade two countries, he did preside over a massive expansion of the war on terror, authorizing drone strikes in at least seven different nations while in office.

These policies are not consistent with retrenchment or restraint. Nor did Obama follow the path of restraint in several critical instances that hawks tend to ignore when discussing Obama's foreign policy legacy.

The Expanding War on Terror

Obama came into office sounding like a president committed to restraint. He was determined to end the war in Iraq and bring the war on terror to a close, but instead Obama found himself pursuing a very similar strategy to the one launched by the Bush administration.⁴⁰ Despite officially retiring the phrase "global war on terror," the Obama administration nonetheless committed itself to the same core objectives: destroying Al Qaeda and terrorist groups of global reach and working to diminish the root conditions that lead to terrorism. This strategic choice, in turn, ensured that Obama would pursue an expansive and heavily militarized campaign against first Al Qaeda and then the Islamic State.

Unlike Bush, Obama did not invade and subsequently occupy two nations, opting instead for what the administration called a "light footprint" emphasizing Special Forces and airpower.⁴¹ Obama did, however, preside over a massive expansion of the American drone campaign, authorizing over 500 drone strikes in Pakistan, Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Somalia, and Yemen - more than ten times as many strikes as Bush ordered.⁴² Throughout his administration, Obama also approved record levels of arms sales to Middle East nations like Saudi Arabia and Bahrain and to other partners to build further capacity in the war on terror.⁴³ And though Obama withdrew American troops from Iraq, he did so in part as a means of escalating U.S. efforts in Afghanistan, where he added tens of thousands of troops to prevent the reemergence of terrorism

and the Taliban. Moreover, Obama continued to provide nation-building support in both Iraq and Afghanistan through police and military training efforts, arms transfers, and USAID-sponsored development programs.

In September 2014, after the group's shocking rise and capture of large swaths of Iraq and Syria, Obama pledged to "degrade, and ultimately destroy" the Islamic State. Though Obama's efforts never satisfied his hawkish critics, many of whom called for the reinsertion of U.S. ground forces, over the next two years Obama ramped up the pace of airstrikes against ISIS and eventually sent thousands of U.S. troops to provide support to Iraqi forces and Syrian rebels fighting to take back the territory ISIS had captured.⁴⁴

In short, Obama's legacy regarding the war on terror is one of consistent and energetic interventionism. Contrary to the hawks' claims, though Obama encouraged other nations to press the fight against Al Qaeda and ISIS, he never sought to pass the buck or share the burden. The United States maintained leadership in the fight against Al Qaeda and ISIS throughout his tenure. At no point did Obama indicate that the United States should abandon the war on terror, or pull back from its interventions and occupations in Afghanistan, the Middle East, or North Africa.

Afghanistan and the Obama Surge

Obama's lack of restraint was near total when it came to Afghanistan. Indeed, he came into office promising to recommit American military forces to "finish the job in Afghanistan."⁴⁵ After a lengthy review, Obama surged in Afghanistan, deploying an additional 30,000 U.S. troops, bringing the total to 97,000, to fight the Taliban-led insurgency and shore up the regime in Kabul

by training Afghan security forces.⁴⁶ Despite some marginal and ephemeral improvements in the training mission, the surge strategy turned out to be an utter failure. More than 1,700 additional U.S. troops were killed since the start of the surge in December 2009 to February 2017, the annual number of civilian casualties increased by thousands, the Afghan government persisted in its corruption and rights abuses, and the Taliban and other jihadist groups gained more control and influence.⁴⁷

Following the surge, some commentators criticized the president for broadcasting troop reduction timelines, thus signaling to the Taliban and the Afghan government an eventual American abandonment. But by and large the Obama administration pursued its policy in Afghanistan according to the interventionist playbook. Despite the failure of the strategy, President Obama nevertheless decided in October 2015 to halt the scheduled phased withdrawal and leave up to 9,800 troops there beyond his own tenure in office, extending America's longest war indefinitely into the future.⁴⁸

Libya Intervention and Regime Change

The American intervention in Libya represented another clear break with the strategy of restraint. In 2011, with the authorization of the United Nations Security Council but without Congressional approval, the Obama administration and its NATO allies bombed Libya. The primary rationale for intervening militarily in Libya was the claim that the Muammar Gadhafi regime was on the cusp of violently crushing mass protests; the only way to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe, the argument went, was to use force.⁴⁹ Secondary justifications

included supporting America's NATO allies and demonstrating U.S. support for the broader Arab Spring protest movement.

Eventually, however, the mission grew and transformed into full-scale regime change, resulting in Gadhafi's fall and murder in the streets. In the end, Libya illustrated not only the Obama administration's lack of restraint, but also the inevitability of unintended consequences that follow intervention. In the end, the war probably did not improve the lot of the average Libyan or America's image in the Arab world. Instead, years of low-level civil conflict and rampant corruption undermined the regime that replaced Gadhafi's, while jihadist militants - including members of ISIS - flooded into the country's ungoverned spaces, at one point attacking the U.S. consulate and killing the U.S. ambassador and three other Americans.⁵⁰ Obama would later lament the lack of positive results produced by the Libya intervention, calling it "a mess."⁵¹

The Pivot to Asia

The Asia-Pivot was essentially a strategy to contain China's rise, and it followed the foreign policy activism of the primacy playbook to the letter.⁵² The approach involved three core elements: (1) maintaining and strengthening U.S. treaty alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, Thailand, and others; (2) increasing the overall U.S. military presence in the region; and (3) further integrating U.S. economic engagement in a way that marginalized and in some ways excluded China. Not only does this double down on the core elements of primacy, like extensive alliance networks and military preponderance, it also emphasized derailing the rise of a peer competitor, a fundamental objective of primacy.

As with other policies in the primacy playbook, this approach to China generates more problems than it solves. First, it risks antagonizing Beijing by provoking feelings of encirclement, leading to a more aggressive Chinese foreign policy. Second, this strategy can exacerbate tensions between China and its U.S.-allied rivals along the East Asian littoral, increasing the risk of entanglement or inadvertent escalation. Finally, this approach devotes precious resources to staving off a problem that may not need solving in the first place. East Asian states are likely to balance against a rising China even without U.S. backing, and, in any case, maintaining U.S. military predominance in the Asia Pacific is not critical for America's core security and economic interests. The United States remains insulated from major security threats from East Asia, which are unlikely to materialize in the first place.

Why Are the Hawks So Wrong about Obama (And Why Does It Matter)?

If the evidence that Obama followed the path of primacy is so clear, why are so many hawks confused about Obama's foreign policy legacy?

The most obvious possibility is that the hawks took Obama at his word. Obama often talked like the restrainer he never was. He repeatedly expressed restraint-oriented sentiments in interviews, only to contradict them in his policies. In 2007 and 2008, while running for office, Obama called Iraq a "stupid war" and called for U.S. withdrawal.⁵³ In a 2013 speech at the National Defense University, he cited James Madison's warning that, "No nation could preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare." He added, "We cannot use force everywhere that a radical ideology takes root...a perpetual war — through drones or Special Forces or troop deployments — will prove self-defeating, and alter our country in troubling ways."⁵⁴ In 2014, he emphasized the

unintended consequences of U.S. wars when he blamed the rise of ISIS on the U.S. invasion of Iraq: “ISIL is a direct outgrowth of Al-Qaeda in Iraq which grew out of our invasion which is an example of unintended consequences which is why we should generally aim before we shoot.”⁵⁵

In a 2016 interview with *The Atlantic*, President Obama criticized the “playbook in Washington...that comes out of the foreign policy establishment” that tends to “prescribe...militarized responses” to problems the United States faces. “What I think is not smart is the idea that every time there is a problem, we send in our military to impose order,” he added. “We just can’t do that.” Obama also criticized free-riding allies not “carry[ing] their weight.”⁵⁶

But the fact is that Obama said a lot of things during his eight years in office, and by no means were all of them restraint-oriented. Even as a candidate running for the White House Obama consistently invoked the need for American leadership in the world, the importance of alliances, the need to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, and the need to defeat Al Qaeda.⁵⁷ In the same National Defense University speech in which he warned against perpetual war, he also warned against retrenchment, insisting, “any retreat from challenging regions will only increase the dangers that we face in the long run.”⁵⁸

A second possibility is that hawks have misread Obama’s foreign policy because their worldview has become increasingly pessimistic and militaristic over time. During the 1980s conservatives embraced the notion of “Peace through Strength,” but in the wake of 9/11 hawks appear to find that approach to be insufficiently aggressive. Despite the fact that the United States now stands without peer competitors and enjoys an incredible level of fundamental security, hawks see

threats in every nook and cranny. Terrorism, despite its very modest toll on Americans, motivates hawks to call for vastly increased defense budgets and military intervention worldwide. Moreover, many hawks seem to have become so deeply convinced of the effectiveness of military force in international affairs that they now see any reluctance to intervene as a sign of weakness. To hawks, Obama's more measured military responses (compared to Bush) and occasional resort to diplomacy thus seemed feckless and unacceptably risky.

Conclusion

Getting it wrong on Obama's foreign policy legacy is a problem for at least two reasons. Most importantly, the misunderstanding obscures the real lesson of the past twenty-five years of U.S. foreign policy: the consensus on primacy has been the main driver of poor decisions and foreign policy failures. Obama's record was strongest when he took a more restrained approach, as he did with the Iran nuclear deal. Second, by repeatedly equating prudence and diplomacy with weakness, hawks make it more difficult for political leaders to stake out more restrained policies that would in fact benefit the United States.

At the end of the day, Obama only seemed like a restrainer compared to the first term of George W. Bush, whose foreign policy was an iteration of primacy and interventionism sent into hyper-drive by the 9/11 attacks. In reality, Obama also pursued a grand strategy of primacy and maintained a remarkable level continuity with past administrations. Obama did not implement restraint, although given the circumstances America finds itself in, he should have.

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