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DEFINITELY MAYBE: WHAT'S THE REAL OBAMA SIGNATURE ON US DEFENCE POLICIES?

Andrea Carati e Andrea Nasti

Several challenges that Obama faced in his first four years in office remain at the top of his agenda. Yet, the circumstances in which they are to be met are considerably changed. Obama's second term foreign policy is suffering from a number of domestic and international constraints: The American public is tired of war, the economic slow-down leads to severe cuts on defense budget, austerity in Europe is negatively affecting NATO international commitment and Obama's support abroad and at home is lessened.

This paper explores how the Obama administration is coping with these constraints. It focuses on elements of evolution and continuity in U.S. foreign and security policies in four policy area: (a) strategic planning; (b) the strategic shift toward Asia; (c) mission in Afghanistan; and (d) war on terrorism and the use of drones.

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Introduction

President Obama's re-election in November 2012 seemed to suggest that the U.S. foreign policy will follow the same patterns of his first term. However, the international environment has changed considerably in the last few years. Although several challenges that Obama faced at the beginning of his presidency remain at the top of his agenda they have changed or the circumstances in which they are to be met are different.

Obama's foreign and security policies in his second term rely on both new opportunities and constraints. After four years in office Barack Obama is far more experienced. The 2012 election results, with his clear and unexpected victory, gave him a renewed and stronger mandate on foreign policy. As he will not face another presidential campaign he gained more freedom in pursuing contentious policies. Although it is unlikely that he will cause problems for the new Democratic candidate, Obama benefits from a higher degree of autonomy. In other terms, Obama is now in a position to craft a more affirmative agenda.

On the other hand, in his second term Obama is suffering from several domestic and external constraints. The American public is tired of war and the economic slowdown is leading to severe cuts to the defence budget. Both will limit his decisions about the use of force in the near future. Austerity is affecting American allies as well, particularly in Europe, and this will limit NATO's international engagement. Obama's support abroad has dramatically diminished compared with his first years in office and that has a negative effect on international perceptions of American leadership. Most of the challenges he faced in his first mandate are still unresolved: North Korea's nuclear intent; the Iranian nuclear program; the peace process in Palestine; the problematic disengagement from Afghanistan. Meanwhile, new challenges have emerged in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, with a worsening Syrian crisis calling for an international solution with a clear U.S. commitment.

This paper explores elements of evolution and continuity in U.S. foreign and security policies during Obama's presidency looking at four policy areas: (a) strategic planning; (b) the strategic shift toward Asia; (c) the mission in Afghanistan; and (d) the war on terrorism and the use of drones¹.

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¹ Other important issues, such as the Obama approach to the Iranian nuclear program and U.S. reactions to the Arab Spring, are addressed in other papers of this ISPI Study. See, respectively, C. CASTIGLIONI, *Obama's Policy toward Iran: Comparing First and Second Term* and G. RANGWALA, *Returning to the Middle East: The Second Term Amidst the Arab Uprisings*.

US strategic planning in budget restriction times

The main challenges on which the Obama administration has had to concentrate major efforts in its strategic planning were basically two. First, managing the end of the two wars inherited from the Bush administration, at the same time continuing a strong fight against global terrorism; second, responding to an evolved international environment, dealing with budgetary constraints and fiscal uncertainties not comparable to those of any other previous presidency, at least not since the end of the Cold War. If the former has been a commitment forced by past choices and characterized by the administration's pragmatic will to win the peace and bring the troops home, the latter has been an effort more future-oriented and for this reason it has more closely involved strategic planning. In fact, to minimize security risks – always present in whatever operations of cutting the defence-budget – the Pentagon has had to engage in a huge job of prioritizing the present and future global challenges to the safety of the US, determining the size and the missions of the armed forces in a way coherent with budget reductions. To evaluate the extent of this operation, we can analyse the Defence Strategic Guidance (DSG), that is, the main document that the DoD, in January of 2012, issued specifically for this purpose².

More than other important strategic documents released by the Pentagon since 2008 (such as the QDR 2010), this guidance represented the heart of Obama's strategic planning. In fact it was “a presidentially-endorsed, mid-term defence review”³ that accounted not only for the budgetary cuts (487 billion for the next ten years) mandated by the Budget Control Act of 2011, but also for all the latest major developments in security environments, from the Arab Spring to the killing of Osama Bin Laden. For all these reasons, the new QDR scheduled for next year “should utilize the 2012 DSG as a point of departure”, probably without “undertak(ing) a comprehensive reassessment of defence priorities or the strategic landscape”⁴. From the analysis of this document, there are at least four main strategic highlights that we have to point out⁵.

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² US DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE, *Sustaining U.S. Global leadership. Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, Washington DC January 2012, available at http://www.defense.gov/news/Defense_Strategic_Guidance.pdf.

³ See the report by C.A. MURDOCK - K. SAYLER, *Preparing for the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review*, CSIS, March 2013, p. 5, available at http://csis.org/files/publication/130319_Murdock_Preparing2014QDR_Web.pdf.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ For a more detailed list of priorities derived from the DSG, see the other document released by the Pentagon the same month of the guidance: U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE, *Defense Budget Priorities and Choices*, Washington DC, January 2012, available at http://www.defense.gov/news/Defense_Budget_Priorities.pdf.

1. As evidenced even from the title of the guidance, **renewing American global leadership** remains the first fundamental objective stated. A primacy based firstly on an indisputable military superiority and on a network of alliances and partnerships all over the world: both must be maintained. This point clearly is not new; rather it has been a constant feature in grand US strategies since the end of the Cold War. But it's a useful remark to understand where Obama is positioned within the broad debate on the demise of uni-polarity (usually confused with the end of the US' unilateral season). Put differently, the guidance is very clear in indicating that Obama's rhetorical emphasis on multilateralism and his call for a prioritization of America's global commitments doesn't mean that Washington has given up on the role of global leader. Conversely, they indicate that now the US is looking more closely at sharing and making it costs more effective.
2. The second highlight concerns the size and the main **missions of the US armed forces**: at least three recommendations deserve to be mentioned.
 - Accommodating the defence budget cuts, the US armed forces must become "smaller and leaner", but at the same time more "agile, flexible, ready and technologically advanced"⁶. If the main reductions set out in the document will regard the Army and the Marine ground forces, the size of the Navy will not have to be affected: improving or at least maintaining unchanged capabilities in projecting power abroad, in fact, remains a top priority for US armed forces. The same exemption concerns the Special Operation Forces.
 - The US armed forces have to be planned and sized in order to "be capable of deterring and defeating aggression by an opportunistic adversary in one region even when our forces are committed to a large-scale operation elsewhere"⁷. Through this fundamental statement the Pentagon definitively goes beyond the traditional two war force-sizing approach that has characterized the American defence planning since the end of the Cold War.
 - Finally, with the sentence "the US forces will no longer be sized to conduct large-scale, prolonged stability operations"⁸, the DoD explicitly signalled the end of the season of nation-building missions.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 1.

⁷ See the DSG, p. 4.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

3. The third complements the previous, setting the **shifts in military-technological priorities** consistently with the changes in US defence posture. The main claim is for “protecting key investments in the technologically advanced capabilities most needed for the future, including countering anti-access threats”⁹. Here the first reference is to the need to improve capabilities to defeat what planners, explicitly mentioning the cases of China and Iran, indicated as A2/AD (Area Denial/Anti-Access). More generally, the point regards the need to secure full freedom of access and maneuver throughout the global commons described as ever more contested - the free flow of goods shipped by air or sea; the cyber-sphere; the space environment¹⁰.
4. The last, but absolutely not the least is the so-called **Pivot towards the Asia-Pacific** region. In the framework of this strategic shift the US will intensify its role in this ever-more strategic region, strengthening its traditional alliances and expanding its network of partnerships to other emerging regional actors. As Obama publicly stated: “the U.S. presence and mission in the Asia Pacific is a top priority [...] and reductions in U.S. defence spending will not come at the expense of the Asia Pacific”¹¹.

Strategic shift to Asia-Pacific

The launch of the Pacific Pivot was immediately accompanied by a large international debate. Such strong centrality given to rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific region has, in fact, not only attracted the attention of US partners and rivals in Asia, but also alarmed US allies in other regions (above all Europe and the Middle-East), worried that the Pivot could mean a disengagement of Washington. Especially considering that it had been announced in a framework of budget cuts, which heightens the risk that the deployment of US troops abroad and related investments could become a zero-sum game between regions.

If it is too early to say whether these concerns were well placed or not¹², it's already possible try to figure out what kind of strategic change the

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⁹ US DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE, *Defense Budget Priorities and Choices*, p. 4.

¹⁰ On the close link between American hegemony and control of the global commons, see the classic article of Barry POSEN, *Command of the commons. The military foundation of U.S. hegemony*, «International Security», vol. 28, no. 1, 2003, pp. 5-46.

¹¹ Texts of remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament, November 17, 2011, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>.

¹² It is dutiful to point out that Obama, starting exactly from the DSG, has always reconfirmed that the Pivot will not affect the fulfillment of American commitments in all other regions.

Pivot has represented and how this change is linked with broader US hegemonic grand strategy.

So, first we have to mention at least the following initiatives, all taken by the Obama Administration since the launch of the Pivot at the end of 2011¹³: the announcement of new troop deployments to Australia and new naval deployments to Singapore; the start of talks with the Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand and New Zealand for incrementing the areas of security-cooperation; a proposal for expanding the military-presence at and the functions of the Guam base; the signing of a new military-agreement with Japan¹⁴; the U.S.' access to the East-Asia Summit; an acceleration in negotiations for the Trans-Pacific Partnership; the definitive conclusion of a free trade agreement with South Korea.

As can be seen from this list, the rebalance strategy is composed of a strong military pillar, but it also includes a diplomatic and economic dimension. According to a scheme described by Hillary Clinton, "One of the most important tasks of American statecraft over the next decade will therefore be to lock in a substantially increased investment – diplomatic, economic, strategic, and otherwise – in the Asia-Pacific region"¹⁵.

Underlining the multidimensional nature of the rebalance is particularly important to understanding its connection with the US global hegemonic strategy and in particular with rising competition in the region with China. But before analysing this connection, still to be noted is another basic feature of the Pivot: in many aspects it represents an expansion rather than a transformation of US policy in the region¹⁶. The military presence and the economical and political commitment of the US in this region are, in fact, some of the most constant features in American foreign policy since the end of the Second World War: Washington has been engaged in Asia-Pacific for sixty years.

So, what has really changed in the last few years is the geopolitical centrality of this region within the new American strategic horizon. Especially if compared to the paradigm of the global war on terror, which strongly focused on the so-called Greater Middle East. Furthermore, compared to the strategic planning of the past decade (until the QDR 2010), the Pivot also represents a remarkable return to a more traditional

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¹³ For a more detailed list see CONGRESSIONAL RESEARCH SERVICE, *op cit.* pp. 1-5.

¹⁴ The agreement, signed on 3 October 2013, is basically on the positioning of surveillance drones in Japan. See this article: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/04/world/asia/japan-and-us-agree-to-broaden-military-alliance.html>

¹⁵ See H. CLINTON, *America's Pacific Century*, in «Foreign Policy», November 2011.

¹⁶ For deepening the new and old aspects in the Pivot see CONGRESSIONAL RESEARCH SERVICE, *op. cit.*

vision of international dynamics, where the most important challenges and the most dangerous causes of international instability arise from the changes in power of states and regions, rather than from the threatening activity of non-state actors or from the weakness of failed states.

From this perspective we can read the Pivot as a US response to three major underlying dynamics that Washington has recognized as potential sources of destabilization for its own international hegemony.

1. The first dynamic is about the rising **power imbalance between world regions** and so, in the framework of US hegemonic strategy, this commits the United States to the Asia-Pacific as a whole: a process to which the IR literature usually refers in speaking about the transition of power from West to East. In this sense, Washington has just acknowledged that the new economic centrality of Asia-Pacific needs a consequent shift of its power investment toward it. And considering the unbreakable link between economic and security interests of a capitalistic power like the US, if Americans want to remain at the top of the international hierarchy of power and prestige, they will have to concentrate their main efforts on this ever-more crucial region. Said in one sentence: given the increasing value of Asia-Pacific, US hegemony must become less Atlantic and more Pacific.
2. The second dynamic, hardly stated publicly and despite Clinton's call for an increased US-China cooperation¹⁷, concerns the potential for **conflict between a global hegemon like the United States**, basically interested in maintaining the status quo, **and a rising regional power like China**, that in the near future could pursue a revisionist agenda¹⁸. From this point of view, the military dimension of the Pivot responds to a typical hegemonic strategy to prevent the emergence of a potential regional rival.
3. For the last source of instability, we have to look at the political dynamics within the Asia-Pacific region. The remarkable rise of China's economy on the one hand, and the traditionally strong military presence of U.S. on the other is, in fact, creating a **progressive disjunction in this region between the economic centre of gravity and its strategic one**. This trend deeply impacts on all other regional actors, creating a divergence between their economic interests that converge on Beijing and their military choices that remain in the American orbit. It's enough to note that China in the

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ For a theoretical framework of the dialectic between status-quo and revisionist powers, see R. GILPIN, *War and Change in International Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1981.

last years has become the first trading partner of Japan, Australia and South Korea, which have been the three key-partners in the Asian security strategy of the US since the fifties. And it's exactly to reduce this new trade-off that Washington has focused its efforts not only on the military dimension but also on renewing its economic initiative.

Afghanistan: Obama's war

While labelling the war in Iraq as unnecessary, President Obama has made the military intervention in Afghanistan his central front in the war on terror. Accordingly, he has invested enormously in a new strategic approach fostering a new phase of international intervention. The path from his first term to the second has marked a huge shift starting from a *surge* of troops to a planned withdrawal.

During his first term there were a number of reviews of policy in Afghanistan. Immediately after he took office, in March 2009, Obama adopted the so-called Af-Pak Strategy. The first sharpest break from his predecessor was the idea of including Pakistan in the overall strategic approach to Afghanistan. Obama, in his speech presenting the new strategy, argued that “the ability of extremists in Pakistan to undermine Afghanistan is proven, while insurgency in Afghanistan feeds instability in Pakistan”¹⁹. The distancing from the previous understanding of the U.S. alliance with Pakistan was consistent with a more general approach to the war on terror in Central Asia. In fact, President **Obama opted for a more targeted and less ideological strategy in Afghanistan** focusing chiefly on two core goals: defeating al-Qaeda and preventing safe havens in Afghanistan and Pakistan²⁰.

In December 2009 Obama announced a troop surge, which took place in 2010, but he also announced that the troops would draw down starting from July 2011. At the same time Obama prompted a huge revision in U.S. strategy, adopting a counter-insurgency approach. In November 2010, at the NATO Lisbon Summit, the U.S. and its European allies adopted a plan of gradual withdrawal to be concluded by the end of 2014. In Lisbon and in the following NATO Chicago Summit (May 2012), NATO allies and the Afghan government agreed on a process called *Transition*, a progressive shift of the responsibility for security from international

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¹⁹ *Obama's Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan*, March 2009 http://www.cfr.org/pakistan/obamas-strategy-afghanistan-pakistan-march2009/p18952?breadcrumb=%2Fpublication%2Fby_type%2Fessential_document.

²⁰ See the *White Paper of the Interagency Policy Group's Report on U.S. Policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan*, march 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/assets/documents/Afghanistan-Pakistan_White_Paper.pdf.

troops to the *Afghan National Security Forces* (ANSF). The surge peak of 100,000 U.S. troops was reached in mid 2011, while in June President Obama announced a decrease of 10,000 by the end of the year and a further pull-out of 23,000 by the end of 2012. Finally, in February 2013, he stated that the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan would decrease by another 34,000 troops, leaving about 33,000 troops by February 2014²¹.

To put it briefly, if Obama's first mandate was the term of the surge, the second is going to be that of the withdrawal. The first was the time of renewed engagement, the second will be that of departure. The U.S. role in Afghanistan after 2015 will remain considerable: the two countries signed the *U.S.-Afghan Strategic Partnership Agreement* in May 2012, they are negotiating the terms of U.S. military presence after 2015, and NATO is setting up its post-2014 mission *Resolute Support* in Afghanistan²². Beyond the civilian mission, the key element of the U.S. and NATO presence will be training, advising and assisting the ANSF. However, the withdrawal of international combat troops will ultimately leave the responsibility for security in Afghan hands and the challenge for the Obama Administration is to accurately cope with the risks of international disengagement.

The results of President Obama's policy in Afghanistan are mixed. The situation slightly improved in 2011 and 2012, the surge of troops and the extensive use of drones put the Taliban on the defensive. International troop casualties due to enemy attacks have constantly declined since 2011, although that was not just an effect of the surge but mainly a consequence of the troop decrease and the leading role that ANSF are taking in combat operations²³. The very fact that ANSF casualties are constantly increasing is an indication that the *Transition* process is on track but also that the insurgency's strength remains considerable.

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²¹ For Obama's decisions about U.S. policy in Afghanistan see CATHERINE DALE, *War in Afghanistan: Campaign Progress, Political Strategy, and Issues for Congress*, Congressional Research Service, CRS Report for Congress, August 29, 2013, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R43196.pdf>.

²² *NATO Allies and partners stress support for Afghan Security Forces*, 23 October, 2013, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_104252.htm.

²³ U.S. Department of Defense, *Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, Report to Congress, July 2013, http://www.defense.gov/pubs/Section_1230_Report_July_2013.pdf.

Although the ANSF are now in the lead in conducting military operations against the insurgents – thanks to a relatively successful process of transition – they are not entirely autonomous yet. They lack intelligence and airpower capabilities and ethnic divisions within the military still limit cohesion and coordination²⁴. Thus, it's still hard to predict how they will cope with the Taliban insurgency after the international military departure. Since the prospect of stability in Afghanistan after 2014 will dramatically depend on ANSF's capacity to contain the Taliban, the successfulness of Obama's policy for the time being is a matter of probability. Stephen Biddle summarized the point as follows: "the surge made important progress, but the tight deadlines for a U.S. withdrawal and the Taliban's resilience have left insurgents in control of enough territory to remain military viable well after 2014. Afghan government forces will thus inherit a more demanding job than expected"²⁵.

In short, Obama's policy toward Afghanistan, in his first years in office, initiated a considerable strategic change but one that has not brought about the expected outcomes. In 2009 he promised a withdrawal from Afghanistan as a corollary to new engagement. The surge of troops would not be an open-ended policy but a temporary venture. That was all that Americans could accept. To a certain extent he designed his second term policy in Afghanistan during his first year at the White House, even though the effects of his new strategy were hardly predictable in 2009.

Terrorism and the war of drones

From the outset President Obama set up a new course in the war on terror. His approach in fighting terrorism has been both more focused and more ethical. From a strategic perspective he has stressed the idea of fighting only the *necessary* wars, avoiding a disproportionate use of force at a global level. He considered the war in Iraq an unnecessary war and at the same time he declared the war in Afghanistan the top priority on which the U.S. should invest more. Barack Obama also promised greater ethical integrity than his predecessor. He vowed to end the use of torture and close the detention facility in Guantanamo. Throughout his presidency, Obama maintained that in protecting U.S. citizens, domestically and abroad, America must respect its core values.

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²⁴ See A. CARATI, *Il futuro dell'Afghanistan. La gestione della sicurezza nelle mani delle forze di sicurezza afgane*, ISPI Analysis no. 58, luglio 2011 and C. DALE, *War in Afghanistan...*, cit.

²⁵ S. BIDDLE, *Ending the War in Afghanistan*, in «Foreign Affairs», September/October 2013.

Most notably, the point at which effectiveness and moral standards collided has been the use of drones. The targeted killing of suspected terrorists by unmanned drones turned out to be a particularly effective tool but, on the other hand, elicited a number of ethical and juridical controversies. If Obama's approach in fighting terrorism has really been different from his predecessor's and constant throughout his presidency, the war of drones marked the most significant evolution in his policy decisions.

George W. Bush oversaw 45 drone strikes – all carried out in Pakistan – while Obama is estimated to have overseen a further 308 in Pakistan and a number of other strikes in Yemen, Somalia, Afghanistan and in Libya during NATO's intervention²⁶. The increasing use of drones between administrations and during the Obama presidency is not just the effect of technological improvements. Obama has made one of the U.S.' counter-terrorism capabilities a predominant method in his war against al-Qaeda. In other words, in Obama's use of drones **“there has been a clear policy shift towards reliance on target killing”**²⁷.

The evolution from a cautious reliance on drones to a clear commitment to their implementation as a central tool against terrorism is proven by the initial reluctance to talk openly about the use of drones. During his first three years in office President Obama did little to publicly admit his policy on targeted killing in Pakistan and other countries²⁸. Only in early 2012 did he publicly claim the effectiveness of that policy. Thereafter the administration showed an increasing willingness to reveal details about drone attacks against suspected terrorist.

The more the use of drones has become public knowledge the more it has fed the debate over the ethical, legal and political implications of targeted killing. Many contend the moral legitimacy of the targeted killing of suspected individuals: there is a grey zone about how the “black list” is compiled and how the necessary information required to decide to kill a *suspected* terrorist is acquired; unmanned drones have caused a number of civilian casualties; and the use of drones is devoid of transparency and public support.

Also from a legal standpoint the use of drones is controversial. Targeted killing not always responds to an imminent threat to U.S. citizens or

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²⁶ P. BERGEN - K. TIEDEMANN, *The Year of the Drone*, Counterterrorism Strategy Initiative Policy Paper – New America Foundation, 24 February 2010. For recent data over drone strikes in Pakistan see the New American Foundation dataset: <http://natsec.newamerica.net/drones/pakistan/analysis> (latest access on 18 November 2013).

²⁷ T. McCRISKEN, *Obama's Drone War*, in «Survival», vol. 55, no. 2, pp. 97-122, p. 97.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 98.

soldiers. It violates the sovereignty of countries that are not at war with the U.S. – i.e. Pakistan. Several jurists consider the Department of Justice *White Paper* about the administration’s current policy on the use of drones contradictory and unsatisfactory²⁹.

From a political point of view, the Obama administration is still not clear about the decision-making behind the targeted killing. Recently the role of the Pentagon was better clarified but the CIA’s involvement is still ambiguous. We know that the White House has given a trigger role to CIA officials over drone strikes in Pakistan, but, as Trevor McKrisken noted, “it is unclear who was involved in targeting decisions, what criteria were being applied and whether the discussions considered the merits of killing rather than capturing targets”³⁰.

Despite its assumed efficacy the use of drones has met some criticism from a strategic perspective too. Some argue that the usefulness of drones from a tactical viewpoint is outweighed by the detrimental consequences on public opinion and popular support for international troops, particularly in Afghanistan and Pakistan³¹. In addition, as Daniel Byman pointed out, killing rather than capturing limits intelligence gathering since deprives the counterterrorism forces of information resulting from interrogations³².

Notwithstanding these objections Obama has strongly defended his programme, as proven by the appointment as CIA director of John Brennan, one of the most influential advocates of the expansion of drone policy. The first and foremost reason to retain such a controversial policy is effectiveness. Unmanned drones are accurate, their remote nature keeps U.S. officers away from risk, they can avoid risky ground military campaigns and, to a certain extent, they minimize civilian casualties. But efficacy is not all and cannot overshadow ethical, legal and political considerations.

Obama in his speech at the National Defence University in May 2013, defended his drone policy even in the face of ethical and legal criticism³³. From an ethical point of view, considering the collateral civilian

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²⁹ See the debate about the Department of Justice “White Paper” on the *US News* website: <http://www.usnews.com/debate-club/has-obama-gone-too-far-with-his-drone-policies>.

³⁰ T. McCRISKEN, *Obama’s Drone War...*, cit., p. 101.

³¹ D. KILCULLEN – A.M. EXUM, *Death from above, Outrage down below*, in «The New York Times», 16 May 2009.

³² D. BYMAN, *Do Targeted Killings Work?*, Brookings Institute, 13 July 2009, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2009/07/14-targeted-killings-byman>.

³³ *Obama’s Speech on Drone Policy*, transcript of President Obama’s speech on U.S. drone and counter-terror policy, in «The New York Times», 23 May 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/24/us/politics/transcript-of-obamas-speech-on-drone-policy.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1. The following quotations are part of this transcript.

casualties, he stressed the increasing precision of targeted killings. He argued that, although regrettable, civilian casualties are part of every war and, most important, since terrorist plots have been disrupted “these strikes saved lives” both where U.S. troops are combating and at home.

From a legal standpoint, Obama contended that “America’s actions are legal [...]. Under domestic law, and international law, the United States is at war with al Qaeda, the Taliban, and their associated forces. We are at war with an organization that right now would kill as many Americans as they could if we did not stop them first. So this is a just war – a war waged proportionally, in last resort, and in self-defence”.

Whether President Obama has been convincing in rejecting criticism of the use of drones is still not clear. What is clear now is that he set up a policy that has become a centrepiece of U.S. counterterrorism strategy and that his successors can hardly dismiss.

Conclusions

President Obama’s second term seems to be moving along the path of his first term. The four policy areas examined in the paper reveal both continuity and change. The former, to a certain degree, outweighs the second. Preservation of America’s international leadership, defence of the global commons and a strategic interest in the Asia-Pacific region are not new themes for his second mandate – as they are not new in U.S. foreign policy history. The Obama administration has basically reframed them in the light of two new structural constraints: limitation of the defence budget and the redistribution of international power toward Asia.

Yet Obama’s second term is showing some changes in Afghanistan and, particularly, in the use of drones. Most likely, after a renewed engagement in his first four years in office, his second term will be denoted by the U.S. departure from Afghanistan. And even more strikingly, Obama’s approach to the war on terror, which was initially marked by a high moral stance, will be remembered for his tough policy shift toward reliance on drones.