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**Obama Administration’s Middle East Policy**

**——Strategic Adjustment and Intentions**

**探析奥巴马政府的中东政策**

**——战略调整和战略意图**

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# Abstract

The Middle East has always been the hotspot area in the world due to its strategic importance, abundant energy reserves and complicated ethnic, religious and territorial conflicts, attracting the attention of the U.S. successive governments since the Second World War. When Obama took office, he initially planned to implement the so-called “Rebalancing Strategy” by diverting the U.S. strategic priority to the Asia Pacific region. But the outbreak of the Arab Spring forced Obama to refocus on the Middle East on which still lies the U.S. foreign policy priority.

The thesis begins with the background of Obama administration’s Middle East policy, namely, the global financial crisis, the legacy of the Bush administration, the widespread anti-Americanism, the global power shift and U.S. pivot to Asia. Then it dilates on the strategic adjustments the Obama administration makes accordingly such as improving relations with the Islamic World, rebuilding alliances, adopting balance-of-power strategy and maintaining regional stability, and further discussing the framework of the policy covering the retrenchment from Iraq and Afghanistan, Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, Iran nuclear issue and the Arab Spring. In the final part, the thesis sums up the features and substances of the Obama administration’s Middle East policy which are pragmatic realism, inconsistency and double standards, and more continuity than real change and then probes into the real intentions of this policy from the aspects of the U.S. core interests, balance of power and the U.S. national identity crisis and finally makes a deep analysis of the influencing factors of this policy in terms of the U.S. domestic politics, the Middle East and other foreign players.

In a word, the Obama administration reduces the deep involvement of the Middle East affairs and adopts a more flexible and pragmatic approach, but it does not lift the shackles of the domestic politics or reverse its fundamental position. Therefore, Obama’s Middle East policy shows more continuity than real change. As the United States will continuously spare no efforts in preserving its dominance in this region, it would be very difficult for the Middle East to achieve the final peace and stability.

**Keywords:** U.S. Foreign Policy; Middle East Policy; Obama Administration

# 摘 要

中东因其复杂的民族、宗教、领土等方面的矛盾、重要的战略地位和丰富的能源资源，长期成为世界上矛盾和争夺最激烈、局部冲突和战争最多的热点地区，是二战以来美国历届政府高度关注的重点区域。奥巴马上任之初，本想将战略重心逐渐从中东转向亚太地区，实施所谓的“亚太再平衡”战略，但“阿拉伯之春”的爆发迫使

奥巴马再度聚焦中东，中东地区仍然是美国外交的重要方向。

本文分三章对奥巴马政府的中东政策进行分析。第一章主要就奥巴马中东政策作背景方面的解读。本章首先分析了奥巴马上任之初美国在中东面临的困境，从金融危机对美国控制中东的影响、布什政府中东政策的成效、伊斯兰反美主义的蔓延、世界权力转移四个方面展开论述。基于第一章的背景分析，第二章从中东热点问题出发详细分析了奥巴马政府的中东政策。首先从奥巴马中东政策的战略调整入手，然后从伊拉克、阿富汗问题、巴以和谈问题、伊朗问题、“阿拉伯之春”等方面详尽论述了奥巴马中东政策的框架内容。第三章在前两章的基础上，总结出了奥巴马政府中东政策的特征和实质，进而从美国核心利益、力量均势和国民特性危机三方面深入分析了该政策的真正意图，最后从美国国内政治、中东地区、其他外部势力三个方面分析了奥巴马中东政策的制约因素。

本文认为，虽然奥巴马政府减少了对中东事务的深度介入，采取了更加灵活务实的战术手段，但在战略上更多的是对过去的一种延续。由于没有摆脱国内政治的束缚，其根本立场并没有发生真正的改变，美国主导下的中东乱局不会有真正的好转。

**关键词：**美国外交；中东政策；奥巴马

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# Introduction

The Middle East sits at the junction of three continents---Africa, Asia and Europe and borders five seas---the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea, the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea, and the Arabian Sea. It controls key international trade routes such as the Persian Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz and the Suez Canal. Its strategic geographical location combined with rich abundance of oil reserves transforms its political and economic culture and makes it an arena of competition among great powers. Originally, the term “Middle East” first coined in 1902 referred to “the Asian region south of the Black Sea between the Mediterranean Sea to the west and India to the east.”[[1]](#footnote-1)But in modern times, an even more broad definition would “cover a region from Ethiopia in the south, Turkey in the north, Afghanistan and Pakistan in the east to Morocco in the west.”[[2]](#footnote-2) The concept “Middle East” in this thesis is used in its broad sense.

Due to complicated ethnic and religious contradictions and territorial disputes, the Middle East is plagued by incessant and protracted conflicts, which is intensified by the intervention of external powers into the internal affairs of the Middle East to pursue the regional dominance. Thus, the Middle East has become a political pivot of contemporary international security issues.

The United States has a long history of military involvement in the Middle East with ever increasing intensity after the Cold War. From the Gulf War, the Kosovo War, to the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. government became more and more inclined to solve the regional issues through the use of force. However, its active military interventions have not brought peace, security or stability to this region, but instead the ever growing anti-Americanism and even more serious terrorist attacks. After 9/11, the Bush administration launched the decade-long “war on terror”, which not only encumbered the U.S. economically with great cost, but also kept the U.S. mired in the mess of the Middle East. Moreover, the outbreak of the global financial crisis of 2008 inflicted heavy losses on the U.S. economy resulting in stagnant growth, high unemployment rate and massive federal debts.

The world was different when Barack Obama took office as American President in 2009. Against the backdrop of “two wars and one crisis” plus the rising powers in the Asia Pacific region which have curtailed the U.S. freedom of maneuver in the world, the Obama administration had an acute awareness of the U.S. relative decline and sought to make strategic adjustments from the outset: on the one hand, shifting the priority of his agenda to the home front with its focus on putting the U.S. fiscal house in order and renewing its long-term economic strength; on the other hand, pursuing pivot or rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific region from the Middle East. Although Obama initially wanted to lower the U.S. profile in the Middle East, the 2011 “Arab Spring” calling for reform and democratization broke up all of a sudden and forced him to refocus on the region and struggle to strike a balance between maintaining the regional stability and supporting democratic reforms in that region.

From the outset, Obama administration’s Middle East policy received intense academic attention. Some researches concentrated on analyzing the framework of the new administration’s Middle East policy, discussing the difficulties and challenges the Obama administration meets in the Middle East, predicting the future direction of Obama administration’s Middle East policy and even prescribing policy recommendations. For example, Niu Xinchun analyzed the difficult situation faced by Obama and predicted that the U.S. would adopt selective intervention policy in the future in his two articles “American Middle East Policy: Contradiction and Dilemma” and “Selective Intervention: the Adjustment of American Middle East Policy”. Liu Baolai expounded “Mutability and Immutability of Obama’s New Deal in the Middle East” and held that Obama administration did not change its bias towards Israel and its dominant policy, so the fundamental contradiction between the U.S. and Islamic world was unsolvable. Shahram Akbarzadeh evaluated the implications of Obama’s Middle East policy and believed a clearer and more consistent policy was in the making in his book *America’s Challenges in the Greater Middle East: The Obama Administration’s Policies*. Dennis B. Ross and James F. Jeffrey proposed the guidelines for the Obama administration about how to deal with big issues in the Middle East in their report “Obama II and the Middle East: Strategic Objectives for U.S. Policy.” Other studies involved Obama’s Middle East policy on specific issues such as Iran’s nuclear program, Israeli-Palestinian peace process and counter-terrorism operations, the Arab Spring, civil war in Syria and etc. For instance, Liu Zhongmin focused on the evolvement, adjustment and effects of Obama’s counter-terrorism policy in the article “Review of Obama Administration’s Counter-Terrorism Policy.” Sun Degang explored the “Obama Doctrine” in terms of military, politics, diplomacy, economy and culture in his article “U.S. Response to Arab Revolt: The ‘Obama Doctrine’.” Josh Ruebner’s book *Shattered Hopes: The Failure Of Obama’s Middle East Peace Process* offered an informed history of the Obama administration’s policies towards Israeli-Palestinian conflict and held that the reason why Obama could not make peace in Israel-Palestine lay in Obama’s failure to recognize the asymmetry of power between Israel and Palestine, which was exacerbated by his provision of “unconditional military and diplomatic support” to Israel. Trita Parsi exposed the full details of the diplomatic encounters between Washington and Tehran during Obama’s early presidency and argued that there was still a chance for diplomacy to allow the United States and Iran to break out of their “institutionalized enmity” in his book *A Single Roll of the Dice: Obama’s Diplomacy with Iran*.

Most of the scholarships and studies on Obama Administration’s Middle East Policy were either conducted in a micro-analysis way, unable to provide a big picture, or influenced by the U.S. official perspectives on the issues or no longer tally with the current situation. Therefore, this thesis attempts to make up for these defects by conducting a systematic and comprehensive analysis based on the new tendency of the U.S. foreign policy and the forefront research on this subject. Moreover, this thesis also believes that addressing the U.S. national identity crisis is one of the calculations in the U.S. constant intervention in the Middle East, thus adding a new dimension to the analysis and providing a valuable model for further study in this field.

The analysis of the thesis develops along the following two questions: First, why has the United States always been so keen on advocating interventions in the Middle East with outstretched hand even at great cost of their own blood and treasure? Second, in response to the shifting geopolitical realities, has the Obama administration taken a totally different strategy from his predecessor or just new tactics towards the region? The aim of the thesis is to figure out the real strategic intentions and the influencing factors of Obama Administration’s Middle East Policy beyond his articulation of lofty rhetoric by exploring and evaluating evolving U.S. policy in the Middle East and its potential implications.

Obama Administration’s Middle East Policy is a mirror in which the United States projects its hopes and fears. How to see through individual cases to grasp the real strategic consideration and the hidden reasons behind American intervention is the key to avoiding getting blinded by the lip service and ostensible motive of the United States and make correct judgment and response against it. In this sense, this thesis can have some reference value for predicting or studying the U.S. further movement in the Middle East.

This thesis starts from the environment where the Obama Administration made its Middle East Policy which served as the variable factors in the study. Chapter 2 probes into the objective orientation and further what policies Obama adopted accordingly, and then evaluates the effects of those policies. Surely, this part would not deal with every issue or challenge the president faces in the region but only those that will have the highest stakes and implications for the U.S. interests in the region. Proceeding from the exterior to the interior, Chapter 3 emphasizes on in-depth analysis from three aspects: the features and the substance of Obama Administration’s Middle East policy, the real intentions behind the U.S. actions there, and the influencing factors of policy formation and action. The conclusion part returns to the central question that is raised at the beginning of the thesis with a clear and reasonable answer.

# Chapter 1 The Background of Obama Administration’s Middle East Policy

On January 20th, 2009, when Barack Obama was sworn in as President of the United States, what awaited him were severe economic recession at home and enormous diplomatic challenges from outside. In terms of foreign affairs, President Obama inherited a rotten legacy from his predecessor with the situation deteriorating in the Middle East, anti-American resentment spreading in the Islamic world and rising new powers in the Asia-Pacific region posing a potential challenge to the U.S. global preeminence, ushering in a “post-American world”. [[3]](#footnote-3)

## 1.1 Rotten legacy left by Bush administration’s Middle East policy

The current situation in the Middle East is far worse off for the United States than it was before 9/11. As the 44th President of the United States, Obama “inherited a long, bitter, and baleful legacy in the Middle East”[[4]](#footnote-4): two unpopular and procrastinated wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; Abu Ghraib abuse and torture scandal leaving the U.S. reputation in tatters; evaporation of traditional alliances; widespread anti-American sentiment of the local people; rising Islamist extremism and expanding danger of terrorism; and continued threat of Iran’s nuclear program.

Beyond those obvious legacies, there are some noteworthy hidden ones. The Bush administration based much of the Middle Eastern policy on protecting the U.S. interests through the active and coercive promotion of democracy.[[5]](#footnote-5) However, it was this national transformation strategy aiming at remaking the Middle East in the U.S. image[[6]](#footnote-6) that unconsciously opened Pandora’s Box in the Arab world, unleashing the forces of extremists, terrorists and religious fundamentalism, which brought the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas to power in the elections. To the United States, the ascendance of the political Islam who is not as pliant and accommodating as autocrats makes it harder to maintain the U.S. interests in the region.

Moreover, Bush’s Middle East policy also had the effect of unifying diverse groups to seek confrontation with the U.S. rather than dividing or neutralizing them. This tendency to aggregate opponents was evidenced when President Bush linked Iran, Iraq and North Korea as “axis of evil,” when he glued together Sunni Islamic radical groups as a single menace like Al-Qaeda, Hamas, Shiite fundamentalists, the Iranian regime, and Hezbollah.[[7]](#footnote-7) What the Bush administration cared was how many enemies killed rather than how many partnerships built. As Bush viewed Muslims only through the narrow prism of terrorism and hostility without sparing efforts to have a good knowledge of them, no wonder anti-American alliance would be formed in the Islamic world.

In addition, Bush’s unilateralist, “go-it-alone” world-view and the Iraq debacle has not only undermined its moral standing and credibility in the world[[8]](#footnote-8), but also disrupted the balance of power among the regional rivalries like Iran and Iraq. With the actual effect of helping Iran weaken its enemy, Iran became even more unyielding and relatively much stronger. By the time Bush left the White House, relations between the United States and Muslim countries had reached the lowest point in the sixty years of engagement in the area.

## 1.2 The spread of anti-American resentment in the Islamic world

Anti-Americanism spread like wildfire across the Islamic world --- a sentiment expressed all too clearly by massive demonstrators burning American flags and chanting anti-American slogans in violent and furious protests, as well as the growing prominence of Islamist extremists and terrorist groups who murdered American soldiers and civilians. As a case in point, about 2,000 Pakistanis shouted “Death to America!” and torched an effigy of President Bush as they rallied in Islamabad to protest against Danish cartoons that had caricatured the Prophet Muhammad, sparking violent demonstrations in Muslim countries.

There are four sources of anti-American resentments. First, local people protested against the two prolonged and devastating wars launched by the United States in their homeland, which instead of bringing the expected peace and stability to them, caused millions of casualties and refugees, precipitated social turbulence, ruined the countries’ economy and destroyed the governance institutions. Second, the contradiction between the US hegemonic strategy and Islamist ideology aroused a fierce confrontation. Since many young men believed that “the West was waging a crusade against their religion and identity,”[[9]](#footnote-9)calls for armed resistance resounded through Muslim lands. Third, the unconditional support of Washington to Israel and Israelis expanding settlement in the West Bank fed the flood of anti-American sentiment in the Muslim societies. Fourth, the US long-time military presence in the Gulf region and its alliance with autocrats while advocating democracy also stirred such deep hostility.[[10]](#footnote-10)

By the end of the Bush presidency, the attitudes of many Muslims toward the U.S. foreign policy had hardened into open hostility. A 2007 poll showed that an average of 79 percent of respondents in Egypt, Morocco, Pakistan, and Indonesia agreed that the United States had sought to “weaken and divide the Islamic world”; a similar percentage believed that America wanted “control over the oil resources of the Middle East.” An average of 64 percent contended that Washington wanted to spread Christianity in Muslim lands. Three-fourths of the respondents in the four countries supported the goal of getting American troops and bases out of the region.[[11]](#footnote-11)

## 1.3 Economic recession due to the global financial crisis

The 2007-09 financial crisis was originated in the U.S. housing markets. Indicators of the emerging problems came in early 2007 when, first, the Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corporation announced it would no longer purchase high-risk mortgages and then, New Century Financial Corporation[[12]](#footnote-12) filed for bankruptcy. The bursting of the housing bubble triggered systemic risks in the financial system, spreading contagion to a wide range of financial institutions and associated spillovers on the real economy. In September and October 2008 the crisis reached a new level and hit the broader banking industry with a number of prominent US-based financial institutions including AIG and Lehman Brothers collapsed.

The financial crisis caused a complete catastrophe to the United States, exerting negative impacts on both domestic development and international influence. At home, the U.S. witnessed the worst economic recession featured by a huge slice out of the U.S. financial wealth, the biggest percentage of unemployment, and dramatically soaring fiscal deficit. Across the world, due to the spill-over effect, many countries, rich or poor, suffered badly from this crisis, raising profound questions about the long-term viability of the Washington Consensus and the international liberal order the United States has advocated since the Second World War, particularly when compared with the great success of China’s economy. That was “a devastating blow to U.S. credibility and legitimacy”[[13]](#footnote-13), as the free-market capitalism it vigorously promoted worldwide failed to function as it promised but caused considerable damages.

This crisis indeed had left President Obama few options but to refocus on the home front and intensify efforts to arrest the economy’s free fall, stimulate growth and restore the world’s confidence in American economic leadership. To that end, Obama signed $787 billion stimulus package into law which gave tax cuts, extended unemployment benefits and expedited funds for public works projects. Moreover, the Budget Control Act of 2011 mandated reductions in defense spending. With attentions and money occupied, the independence of the US overseas operation was strictly limited, making multilateral engagement with other powerful economies essential.

## 1.4 Shift in global geopolitical dynamism and the U.S. pivot to Asia

With Russia’s resurgence and the rise of emerging countries especially China and India, the world’s geopolitical and economic center is shifting from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The U.S. strategists and decision-makers are convinced that the lion’s share of the political and economic history of the 21st century will be written in the Asia-Pacific region. As early as 2004, the former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger recognized that “the rise of China as a potential superpower is of even greater historical significance, marking as it does a shift in the center of gravity of world affairs from the Atlantic to the Pacific.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Similarly, Condoleezza Rice proposed to shift more diplomatic resources to the Asia-Pacific in her speech on the “transformation diplomacy” in 2006. In his campaign speech of 2008, Obama also emphasized that the U.S. future prosperity and security were closely related with the development of Asia.

Additionally, given the region’s vital importance, the Asia-Pacific could not only serve as an important support to help boost the U.S. economic recovery during the financial crisis but also as the base where the greater development of the U.S. economy lies. In 1960, the value of trade between the U.S. and Asia was only half of that with the Western Europe, but now the number has far exceeded. According to the statistics of the U.S. Department of Commerce, the trade volume with the whole Asia-Pacific reached 1.6129 trillion dollars in contrast with 589,275 billion dollars with Europe. One assignment of Obama’s two trips to Asia is to find ways out for the U.S. economic recovery as soon as possible and lay a good foundation for the development of the future. Although the total volume of the U.S. investment in the Western Europe is far more than that in Asia, but the share of the U.S. investment in Asia is on the rise.

Besides, from the perspective of power transition, China, emerging as the second biggest economy in the world today, with the prospect of overtaking the United States in terms of GDP by 2035 and becoming the leading nation in the international system by 2075, has great potential to achieve parity with the dominant power and thus constitutes the No.1 adversary and challenger of the U.S. global leadership. Under conditions of parity, peace is achieved when both parties are satisfied. But if the challenger is dissatisfied, the probability of war increases dramatically. In fact, a peaceful, stable and economically prosperous Asia Pacific region is in the interest of the United States. Therefore, for fear of a rising dissatisfied China, the United States reoriented significant sources towards the Asia Pacific region and urged other nations of the region to stir up trouble with a purpose of containing its challenger and keeping its preponderance. No wonder the United States is so eager to strengthen its military presence in the Asia-Pacific and intervene in the regional conflicts and territorial disputes between China and other regions and countries like Taiwan, Vietnam, Japan, the Philippines among others.

To benefit from this shift in global geopolitical dynamism, sustainably grow its economy and safeguard its security and dominance, President Obama early in his administration made the important strategic decision to “pivot” or “rebalance” foreign policy to the Asia-Pacific region as large troop deployments in the Middle East and South Asia were responsibly ending. By carrying out “forward-deployed diplomacy”, as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called it, the United States increased its engagement in the Asia-Pacific and was committed to building extensive diplomatic, economic, development, people-to-people and security ties with the region.

# Chapter 2 The Content of Obama Administration’s Middle East Policy

Faced with both domestic and foreign challenges, President Obama made a series of strategic adjustments of the U.S. Middle East policy in order to optimize its resources allocation and maximize its global interests. How Obama deals with the hotspot issues of the region constitutes the framework of the U.S. Middle East policy, which not only has a bearing on its own interests but also the peace and prosperity of the Middle East.

## 2.1 The strategic adjustment

Given the adverse realities, lessons learnt from Bush’s mistakes and the need to devote more strategic attention to Asia, Obama has readjusted the Middle East Policy to avoid having events in the Middle East swallow the U.S. overall domestic and foreign policy agenda. Specifically, Obama is committed to improving relations with the Islamic world and maintaining the regional stability by rebuilding alliances, pursuing multilateral engagement and adopting balance-of-power strategy.

### 2.1.1 Improving relations with the Islamic world

In the first few months of his presidency, Obama reiterated his commitment to reaching out to Muslims and refurbishing the U.S. damaged public image. Time and again, the new President stressed, “The United States is not, and will never be, at war with Islam.” In an early effort to overture goodwill to Arabs and Muslims immediately after his inauguration, Obama gave his first interview to the Al Arabiya television station. Then, in his speech to the Turkish Parliament in April, he sent a clear and historic message to the Islamic world, “we will listen carefully, we will bridge misunderstandings, and we will seek common ground.”[[15]](#footnote-15) The new tone of humility and partnership was further intensified in his Cairo speech in June, which raised high expectations that he would bring a real change in the U.S. Middle East policy:

I’ve come here to Cairo to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based on mutual interest and mutual respect, and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive, and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles—principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings…America is not, and will never be, at war with Islam.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Apart from the change of the tone, Obama’s resolution to improve relations with the Islamic world was also translated into concrete policies. Obama stressed that the engagement policy was the key to reinforcing and restoring the U.S. diplomacy. Distanced himself from his predecessor’s prism of “axis of evil,” Obama attempted to engage with some traditional enemies of the U.S. like Iran and Syria with a view to seeking cooperation to promote the Middle East peace process.

### 2.1.2 Rebuilding alliances and multilateral engagement

The Bush administration pursued unilateralism, based on the notion that “America’s allies and adversaries alike are passive actors. Once the U.S. position is clear, the logic continues, others will fall into line.”[[17]](#footnote-17) In the decision to invade Iraq, Bush acted unilaterally despite many NATO countries’ disagreement and without the UN approval. He also dismissed France’s warning about the emergence of multiple centers of power. This arrogant and contemptuous way of behavior, however, alienated its allies who lost confidence in cooperation with the United States.

Faced with the relative decline of the U.S. power and global economic crisis, the new President Obama changed from his predecessor’s unilateralism to multilateralism and set out to renew the U.S. alliances. Speaking on the eve of NATO’s 60th Anniversary Summit, Obama stressed the importance of alliance, “America is changing, but it cannot be America alone that changes…Together, we must forge common solutions to our common problems.”[[18]](#footnote-18) The same message was also delivered at the United States Military Academy at West Point, “We’ll have to use diplomacy, because no one nation can meet the challenges of an interconnected world acting alone. I’ve spent this year renewing our alliances and forging new partnerships.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

Apart from allies, President Obama also sought to strengthen cooperation with other powers like China and Russia and attach greater importance to multilateral mechanisms like the UN and G20 on the Middle East issue. Obama was increasingly aware of the importance of multilateral cooperation in raising the legitimacy and effectiveness of the U.S. operations. His attempt to use engagement, diplomacy and dialogue in place of military strike and deterrence was a great departure from his predecessor.

### 2.1.3 Adopting balance-of-power strategy

During the Bush administration, the United States pushed a hegemonic strategy fully in the Middle East featured by military interference and political reconstruction. Such strategy, however, brought more harm than good, as it impelled widespread anti-American resentment and created great chaos in the Middle East. Also, the hegemonic strategy in the Middle East would not meet the development need of reality against the backdrop of the U.S. “Pivot to Asia”.

Given the Middle East dilemma and the U.S. higher-stakes in Asia, the Obama administration replaced military hegemony with an offshore balancing policy. As an offshore balancer, the U.S. lowered its politico-military profile in the Middle East, reshaped its regional interests, and adopted a diplomatic posture with emphasis on soft power. It sought to avoid deep involvement in the regional conflicts, transfer the burden of maintaining the regional security to its allies and at the same time reduced US military presence in this region. Different from Bush’s “glue strategy”, the offshore balancing, similar to the wedge strategy, can stop a potential alliance against the United States in the region.[[20]](#footnote-20) As the US military exits, US potential enemies will lose their common interest to fight together against the United States, but instead focus on their own internal security conflicts. It is helpful to avoid antagonism of the Islamic world toward the U.S. and seek its interests in a much smarter way.

Among others, the concrete application of this strategic thinking is manifested in the US withdrawal of all the ground forces from Iraq by the end of 2011, quelling rampant anti-Americanism in the Islamic world by eagerly promoting the Middle East Peace Process, “leading from behind” in response to the Libya crisis, reluctance to launch military strike against Syria and resorting to a diplomatic accommodation rather than a military confrontation on the Iran nuclear issue.

### 2.1.4 Maintaining regional stability and promoting democracy

The security situation in Middle East has always been complex and volatile. Compared to chaos and turbulence, a stable Middle East better serves the U.S. interests, as it can reduce the U.S. intervention costs.Beset by severe economic problems, Obama put his priority on the home front, cutting down the U.S. overseas commitment. With“two wars” inherited, Obama hoped to withdraw from Iraq as soon as possible so as to decrease the burden of the U.S. in the Middle East, with no willing at all to launch another war there. But the 2011 Arab uprisings forced Obama to reconsider his engagement with the region.

For decades, the United States (except the Bush administration) has generally ignored or marginalized democracy promotion in the Arab world and supported autocratic Arab regimes to ensure regional stability and economic self-interest. The initial stage of the Obama administration is no exception. But the momentum of 2011 Arab uprisings was so strong that the United States could not afford to turn a blind eye to it but support the trend of democratic transformation. Although Obama did not continue his predecessor’s “Greater Middle East Initiative (GMEI)”, he did want to make use of this opportunity to change situations in some hostile countries in the U.S, favor. In a speech of May 2011 laying out his approach towards the Arab revolts, Obama sought to realign the U.S. foreign policy in the Arab region by saying that the United States had “a stake not just in the stability of nations, but in the self-determination of individuals.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Speaking of the guiding principles, Obama said that America would promote a set of universal rights, substantive political and economic reform and transitions to democracy across the region.

Obama’s approach to seek change while maintaining stability in the Middle East reflects his endeavor to strike a balance between values and interests. But as always, values also serve for interests, and if necessary, the former will give way to the latter.

## 2.2 The policy framework

Unlike his predecessor, Obama has shown a reluctance to entangle the U.S. militarily in the Middle East, as evidenced in the efforts to withdraw from Iraq, shift the priority of anti-terrorism back to Afghanistan, try to solve the Iran nuclear issue within multilateral mechanisms and avoid military intervention in the Arab uprisings.

### 2.2.1 Retrenchment from Iraq and refocus on Afghanistan

From the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003 to the complete withdraw of American troops in December 2011, the United States paid an enormous price in Iraq: 4,500 American lives and 2.2 trillion dollars. Besides, the Iraq war had become a burden for the U.S. in the Middle East and a catalyst that fueled anti-Americanism, serving “as al-Qaeda’s best recruiting tool”[[22]](#footnote-22) and the reason for Iran to develop nuclear weapons.

While running for the U.S. presidency in 2008, Senator Obama fully supported the Afghanistan War against al-Qaida and the Taliban as the “right war” of necessity in contrast to the “wrong war” of choice waged in Iraq and argued that an orderly withdrawal was in America’s interest. His campaign team had even made the withdrawal plan, namely, “Blueprint for Change: Obama and Biden’s Plan for America.” According to this plan, the U.S. would “redeploy combat brigades from Iraq at a pace of 1 to 2 brigades a month that would remove them in 16 months”[[23]](#footnote-23) and finish the drawdown in the summer of 2010. Soon after taking office, Obama immediately announced ending the war in Iraq at Camp Lejeune,

America can no longer afford to see Iraq in isolation from other priorities: we face the challenge of refocusing on Afghanistan and Pakistan; of relieving the burden on our military; and of rebuilding our struggling economy…the United States will pursue a new strategy to end the war in Iraq through a transition to full Iraqi responsibility.[[24]](#footnote-24)

From above we can see that putting an end to the Iraq war and shifting the anti-terrorism priority back to Afghanistan and Pakistan is a strategic adjustment made by the Obama administration based on the domestic consideration and the security development situation in the Middle East. Under the new withdrawal plan, American combat mission in Iraq would end by August 31, 2010 and all U.S. troops would be withdrawn from Iraq by the end of 2011. Still, residual force will remain in Iraq to protect American diplomatic and civilian personnel. On December 18th, 2011, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta “approved the order officially ending the Iraq war,” which marked by President Obama as “a historic moment.” By relieving the burden of the Iraq war, Obama could inject more attention and resources to the mission in Afghanistan.

After the collapse of Taliban, al Qaeda and its extremist allies moved across the border to the Pakistani frontier. The “forgotten war” in Afghanistan left space for Taliban to resurge and al Qaeda to regroup, train and plan for more attacks. The situation there was increasingly perilous with 2008 “the deadliest year of the war for American forces”. After taking office, the Obama administration proposed a new strategy to use all elements of U.S. national power to “disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

To this end, the Obama administration increased its financial and manpower investments. Between 2009 and 2010, defense funding for Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan doubled: from $52 billion to $100 billion[[26]](#footnote-26). Furthermore, the Obama administration ordered 30,000 additional troops in Afghanistan in December 2009, which coupled with previous surge of 17,000 deployments in February, brought US troop levels in the country to 100,000. Those resources quickly seized the initiative and reversed the Taliban’s momentum. On May 1st 2011, together with Pakistan, the U.S. killed Osama bin Laden and achieved a great victory in anti-terrorism.

“Our commitment would not be open-ended, and the U.S. would begin to draw down forces this July”. According to the timetable given by the Obama administration, 10,000 American troops would be removed from Afghanistan by the end of 2011, and another 33,000 troops by the end of summer 2012, a return to pre-surge levels. After the initial reduction, American troops would continue coming home at a steady pace with the mission changing from combat to support. By 2014, this process of transition would be complete when the Afghan people would be responsible for their own security.[[27]](#footnote-27)

In 2014 State of the Union Address, Obama confirmed to complete military mission in Afghanistan by the end of this year, ending the longest war in American history. Regarding whether to retain force there after 2014, Obama said, “If the Afghan government signs a security agreement that we have negotiated, a small force of Americans could remain in Afghanistan with NATO allies to carry out two narrow missions: training and assisting Afghan forces, and counterterrorism operations to pursue any remnants of al Qaeda.”[[28]](#footnote-28) But as things stand, Afghan president Hamid Karzai does not want to sign the BSA agreement with the United States without the launch of the peace process.

### 2.2.2 Promotion of peace talks between Palestine and Israel

For decades, the conflict between Israelis and Arabs has cast a shadow over the Middle East. Whether the Obama administration can make a major breakthrough in resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict has a direct bearing on US relations with Arab countries as well as US national security in the region.

Obama began his presidency amid the Gaza war[[29]](#footnote-29) which quickly engaged his transition team in Arab-Israeli diplomacy. From the start, Obama invested important political capital in his effort to broker an Israeli–Palestinian peace settlement. One of his first calls as president was to the Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas, to whom he promised that he would pursue an Israeli–Palestinian peace settlement and help build a Palestinian state. On the part of Israel, Obama initially insisted that Israel freeze the construction of Jewish settlements on occupied Palestinian lands. He even confronted Netanyahu and pushed him hard to discuss final status issues with the Palestinians. But Netanyahu refused adamantly. Therefore, no significant progress had been made in the first two years.

The status quo for Israel is unsustainable in spite of its relative strong military force. At the AIPAC[[30]](#footnote-30) Policy Conference 2011, Obama warned that the number of Palestinians living west of the Jordan River is growing rapidly and fundamentally reshaping the demographic realities of both Israel and the Palestinian Territories; technology will make it harder for Israel to defend itself in the absence of a genuine peace; a new generation of Arabs is reshaping the region.[[31]](#footnote-31)He urged Israel to take actions to advance a lasting peace. As for solution, Obama insisted that conflicts between the two sides must be resolved through negotiation under the framework of “two states” based on the 1967 lines with mutually agreed swaps. Although it seemed that Obama was fairer than his predecessors, his bias towards Israel did not change. He denounced the agreement between Fatah and Hamas on the establishment of a transitional government in Palestine and strongly opposed its entry into the United Nations. On Israeli demand, he also required Palestine to recognize Israel’s legitimacy as a Jewish state in the Middle East and disarm itself to be non-militarized as the price for Israeli military withdrawal. Although good sign loomed in January 2012 with the effort of Quartet, neither Israel nor Palestine made concessions and no result had been achieved in resuming the peace talks.

In November 2012 stepped-up violence broke out between Israel and Gaza. Thanks to Egypt and the U.S. mediation, this violence did not evolve into another war and a ceasefire was worked out. President Obama made Israel the destination for the first foreign trip of his second term (March 2013). The goals were to get off to a better start with the Netanyahu government and connect more to the Israeli public.[[32]](#footnote-32) The following month major new arms sales to Israel were announced. Besides President Obama, Secretary of State John Kerry also made trips to the Middle East before and after as the “peacemaker.” In July 2013 with the active mediation of Kerry, Israel and the Palestinians agreed to resume direct peace talks for the first time in three years. Despite this major breakthrough, the prospect of a peace deal is still not optimistic because the U.S. approach “land for peace” does not work so well in today’s Middle East as the past.

It is time to show the Israeli and Palestinian publics that something is possible other than stalemate. Otherwise, disbelief and failure will become a self-fulfilling prophecy and even the prospect of two states is likely to disappear.

### 2.2.3 Iran: carrot and stick policy

Through “war on terror”, the United States toppled two of Iran’s most bitter enemies—Saddam Hussein and the Taliban, feeding Iran’s assertiveness. Now Iran, branding itself as the leader of anti-U.S./Israeli dominance in the Arab world, provided arms and money to Hamas and Hezbollah and meanwhile continuously advanced its nuclear program. Iran thus represents a significant challenge to the U.S. vital interests in the Middle East and also a great danger to the regional stability. In front of Obama is a stronger Iran more difficult to deal with.

President Obama set the Iranian nuclear program as one of his top priorities. Considering Bush’s Manichaean foreign policy ineffective in changing Tehran’s behavior, Obama took an all-options-on-the-table position, indicating a mix of economic sanctions, military strikes and other pressures (e.g. the Stuxnet virus) combined with multilateral diplomacy. Such “carrot and stick” approach provides Iran with incentives for making a deal while also imposing costs for not doing so.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Obama tried at first to engage Iran in hope of resolving this issue peacefully. For the five months after his inauguration, Obama made great efforts to persuade Iran to abandon its nuclear ambitions. But when those efforts bore little fruit, he moved to exert pressure on Tehran instead. His efforts first to engage Iran gave him greater credibility when he sought broad support for sanctions: hence, the passage of a UN Security Council resolution in June 2010, with China and Russia voting in favor, mandating tougher sanctions against Iran for its violations of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

In December 2011 Congress passed a defense authorization bill that included bilateral sanctions on the Central Bank of Iran. The United States and its European allies were waging all-out economic war against the Tehran government and imposing punishing sanctions against its oil and banking sectors, including the Central Bank. Iran increasingly struggled to do business as the costs of transactions went up dramatically and the production and export of oil—which provides 85 percent of the regime’s revenues—fell significantly. Iranians are suffering, and streets were permeated with economic pain in soaring prices for state-subsidized goods and a collapse of the currency: the rial lost 40 percent of its value against the dollar between November and December 2011. A new round of sanctions against Iran’s financial and banking sector in early 2013 delivered a further blow to the country’s economy. [[34]](#footnote-34)

In August, 2013, Hassan Rouhani took office as the new president of Iran. Unlike hardline former president Ahmadinejad, Rouhani is relatively moderate and centrist. The door of diplomacy between the U.S. and Iran opened again. American President Obama spoke personally with President Rouhani of Iran on September 27, 2013, the first communication between an American and Iranian President since 1979. “Iran’s Supreme Leader has issued a fatwa against the development of nuclear weapons. President Rouhani has indicated that Iran will never develop nuclear weapons.” Based on that, bilateral diplomacy was carried out together with P5+1[[35]](#footnote-35) negotiations with Iran. On November 24, 2013, “The Joint Plan of Action” was agreed to by the P5+1 and Iran in Geneva, the first step toward a comprehensive solution, halting the progress of Iran’s nuclear program and rolling it back in key respects.[[36]](#footnote-36)According to the agreement, Iran has been committed to eliminating its stockpile of higher levels of enriched uranium, stopping installing advanced centrifuges and allowing new inspections to have extensive access to Iran’s nuclear facilities. In State of the Union 2014, Obama said, “For the sake of our national security, we must give diplomacy a chance to succeed.” On March 18th this year, talks on a permanent nuclear agreement with Iran were resumed by the P5+1 countries in Vienna. Whether the U.S.-led group can solve Iran nuclear issue without the risks of war remains to be seen, which may become Obama’s greatest foreign policy achievement.

### 2.2.4 Prudent intervention in Arab Spring

The bottom-up social uprisings that are collectively known as the “Arab Spring” started with a vegetable vendor’s desperate action against Tunisian government, and then sparked broad movements for democratic change across the Middle East. This wave of democratization came as a surprise to President Obama, overthrowing many pro-American autocratic rulers, which required Obama to take a prudent approach to handle this issue.

The Arab Spring has posed major tests and challenges to the United States. Obama initially pursued a subtle and non-interventionist approach towards democracy promotion in the region, because he needed the pro-American autocratic rulers, like Hosni Mubarak in Egypt to help preserve America’s core national interests in the Middle East. Nevertheless, as swelling protests spread and forced Mubarak to step down, Obama shifted gears, voiced his preference for open governments and finally abandoned one of America’s longest-surviving allies in the Middle East. He did not want his administration to be seen as protecting a dictator against the wishes of the majority of his people.

From the start of disturbance in Libya, the United States clearly announced its support to the opposition forces. As anti-government protest in Libya evolved into a civil war in February, the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution to impose sanctions against Libya, including an arms embargo, asset freeze and travel bans for Gadhafi and several of his key associates. Rendered discreet by the lessons of Iraq and an economic downturn at home, the President refused to get involved militarily in the Libyan mission and insisted that his European and Arab allies take charge. His preference was ‘leading from behind’, as opposed to the Bush model of leading alone.[[37]](#footnote-37)As situation escalated, the UN passed Resolution 1973 to impose no-fly zone over Libya in March 17th. However, this resolution did not stop Gadhafi from attacking the opposition. On the edge of a humanitarian catastrophe in Benghazi, Obama commenced operations to assist NATO’s military intervention in Libya. But these strikes were limited in their nature, duration, and scope, as he said in the letter to Congress. Still, he did not deploy ground forces into Libya in fear of getting bogged down in Libya.

Unlike Libya, Syria as an important country for the peace of the Middle East is closely linked with the Middle East hot spot issues such as Israeli and Arab relations, Iran nuclear program and counter-terrorism. Besides, the Syrian situation also profoundly influences the politics of the United States and Russia. Therefore, Obama chooses to deal with Syria in a more cautious and prudent way. In March 2011, a large-scale protest and demonstration broke out in Syria. In response, the Obama administration denounced the regime’s violent measures, intensified existing U.S. sanctions on Syria and pressured President Bashar al-Assad to step down. But Assad continued to violently suppress oppositions. U.S. officials attempted to work multilaterally through the United Nations to sanction the regime, reach a cease-fire, and endorse a political transition plan, but no consensus was reached due to Russian and Chinese rejections. In August 2012, reports of alleged Assad regime preparation of munitions with chemical agents led President Obama to remark that the movement or utilization of such agents would constitute a “red line” and cause him to change his calculus. The situation profoundly changed, on August 21th, 2013, when Syrian government carried out a chemical weapons attack in the Damascus suburbs, which crossed President Obama’s “red line.” Although Obama said that he would respond with limited military strikes, he eventually decided to pursue a diplomatic solution with Russia’s initiative to bring Syria’s chemical weapons under international control.[[38]](#footnote-38) The United States also worked jointly with the international community to push forward peace talks between Syrian government and opposition, but the recent Geneva talks ended in failure with no progress.

Just as Condoleezza Rice said, “For sixty years, my country, the United States, pursued stability at the expense of democracy in this region here in the Middle East—and we achieved neither.”[[39]](#footnote-39) After over three years of revolution, the (Arab) spring of hope turned into the (Arab) winter of despair.

# **Chapter 3 The Analysis of Obama Administration’s Middle East Policy**

From Chapter 2 we can see that Obama has adopted a series of targeted approaches to handle various challenges in the Middle East. How to understand those policies, why they were made in this way rather than that, and what constitutes Obama’s calculations when he made them, a battery of questions need us to have a deep analysis of the Obama Administration’s Middle East Policy.

## 3.1 The features and substance of the policy

Obama took the oath of office as U.S. President with the slogan of “change.” In terms of his foreign policy in the Middle East, he did demonstrate different styles and features from his predecessor. But those changes and adjustments are largely at the tactic level with the U.S. traditional strategic objectives untouched.[[40]](#footnote-40) Thus, Obama’s Middle East policy shows more continuity with the past than real change.

### 3.1.1 Pragmatic realism

On the whole, Obama is a realist, not an idealist like his predecessor. Building on the basic realist tenets of American foreign policy, Obama adopted a pragmatic approach significantly different from Bush’s doctrine of preaching on democracy and the liberal deployment of force all over the world. From the start of his administration, “Obama stresses bureaucratic efficiency, modesty and humility over assertion of America’s power and its exceptionalism.”[[41]](#footnote-41) This feature can be seen from Obama’s efforts to vigorously improve relationship with the Islamic world, lead from behind in the Libya crisis and avoid massive military intervention in the Arab Spring.

Similar to Bill Clinton’s internationalist approach, “common security interests, partnership, and multilateralism in international relations became the principles of Obama’s pragmatic and realistic foreign policy.”[[42]](#footnote-42)Obama believed that these principles would extract America from its commitment to the Middle East and move its attention towards the rising challenges of Asia where he believes that America’s future lies. For example, in the case of Iran, America did not take ownership but strengthen international cooperation with other countries like P5+1 to jointly tackle this global threat.

Obama’s pragmatic realism is also embodied in his “anti-doctrinal doctrine that it insists on the recognition of differences in a way that Bush’s fixed ideas did not.”[[43]](#footnote-43) Obama stated in 2011, “When you start applying blanket policies on the complexities of the current world situation, you’re going to get yourself into trouble.”[[44]](#footnote-44) He made his policy based on the development of the situation and also case-by-case. If conditions change, he will reconsider decisions if the shift serves American national interests. For example, Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi had been a thorn in the U.S. side for decades due to his disobedience and also despised in the Arab world without friends. The removal of him on the one hand can easily get supports from all quarters without inviting retaliations; on the other can also show America’s support of the rights of the Arab people. Thus, Obama was willing to launch military strikes to topple Gaddafi. On the contrary, from a pragmatic perspective, the fall of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s regime will not only increase Iran’s sense of vulnerability and accelerate its quest for nuclear weapons but also worsen the U.S.-Russian relationship. Therefore, in the face of the similar massacre as in Libya, Obama took a largely hands-off policy on Syria.

Moreover, Obama’s pragmatism is also reflected in its abandoning Bush’s “friend or foe” theory. In the case of Iran, he did not treat Iran as America’s old foe but extend the hand of diplomacy. When Israel, one of American allies, was prepared to launch a pre-emptive strike against Iran’s nuclear facilities, Obama did not provide military supports but instead stopped its operation in fear that Israel’s attack would trigger another big war which did not serve the America’s interests.

### 3.1.2 Inconsistency and double standards

Obama administration’s Middle East policy was called into question for its inconsistency and contradiction. As Aaron Miller criticized in *Foreign Policy*, “The only thing that’s really clear about U.S. Middle East policy these days is its stunning lack of clarity.”[[45]](#footnote-45) Such kind of saying-is-one-thing-and-doing-another attitude is embodied in the following three aspects:

First, mismatch between rhetoric and action. Obama has set the bar too high to reach. Once confronted with complicated political realities, the greatest talker turned out to be the least doer. At the beginning of his first term, Obama’s optimistic overtures towards the Middle East, especially when he said “to seek a new beginning” in the 2009 Cairo address with his promise to reorient U.S. policy in the region, just raised hopes too high and then failed to deliver. In the face of rising cry for democratic transition, the U.S. has taken a step back, leaving all the grand gestures and lofty rhetoric reduced to hesitancy, ambiguity and leading from behind. In his May 2011 speech, he stated that the U.S. would support democratic principles with “all of the diplomatic, economic and strategic tools at our disposal.”[[46]](#footnote-46) However, subsequent action has hardly lived up to expectations. According to the Project on Middle East Democracy’s report on “The Federal Budget and Appropriations for Fiscal 2013”, the funding and foreign assistance to the “Arab awakening” has decreased due to severe budgetary constraints. Even Zbigniew Brzezinski, a former National Security Advisor to President Jimmy Carter, noted the disconnection between the transformative nature of Obama’s rhetoric and his passive response, “I greatly admire his insights and understanding. I don’t think he really has a policy that’s implementing those insights and understandings.” Brzezinski added, “He doesn’t strategize. He sermonizes.”[[47]](#footnote-47)

Second, different responses to the same issue at different time. In 2009 in Cairo, the newly inaugurated president presented an inclusive future for Israeli–Palestinian peace and security; on the contrary, in September 2011 at the UN General Assembly, Obama set forth the dominant Israeli security perspective, which, in his new opinion, overrides Palestinian security and even self-determination. The Cairo speech was the acme of an impartial approach to the Arab–Israeli conflict while the UN remark stood for a victory for the “Israel first” school who represented by AIPAC, a very influential and powerful pro-Israel lobby, invariably support Israel’s policies over those of the United States. The list of such inconsistency goes on and on. In the case of Syria, President Obama was constantly changing his position --- saying he would order military strikes once Syria crossed the “red line” on chemical weapons, then saying he would seek approval from Congress, then switching to diplomacy instead. At the beginning of the Arab Spring, Obama called for a change toward democracy. Millions rose up in a cry for democracy, but when a democratically elected government really took power in Egypt, Obama became inconsistent in his support of democracy. Certainly the elected government in Egypt was not what the United States would have preferred, but the U.S. President cannot be consistent only when things go their way. His different attitudes revealed the hypocrisy of the U.S., lost trust of the people of the Middle East and raised doubts whether he was fully committed to democracy in the region.

Third, inconsistencies in support for democracy and alliances with authoritarian governments. As Juan Cole puts it, on the one hand, “as a world power, you don’t want to lose your allies.” But, “as a democratic world power, you don’t want to be opposed to democratizing. So Obama is between a rock and a hard place.”[[48]](#footnote-48) When Obama cannot strike a good balance between values and interests, without doubt he will secure the latter at the sacrifice of the former. The Obama administration was selective and discriminatory, treating each country differently and separately. The hypocritical and double-standard nature of Obama’s policy can be seen from many cases. For example, the United States imposed a no-fly zone to support the opposition as a part of intervention in Libya, but failed to do so when faced with a similar conflict in Syria. Democratic transitions in Egypt and Tunisia have been supported, but a blind eye has been turned to the revolution in Bahrain (home to the U.S. Fifth Fleet serving as the U.S. bridgehead to monitor and contain Iran). Human rights violations are criticized in the hostile countries like Iraq, but muted in Saudi Arabia (quasi-alliance with the U.S., abundant in oil energy, where the U.S. naval and aircraft bases are based). The use of chemical weapons by Israel goes unpunished, but turns to be a “red line” in Syria. To justify the Saudi Arabia’s military intervention by sending troops to Bahrain to violently suppress the protesters, the Saudis and the U.S. even accused Iran of “infiltrating the Arab Shi’ite population and hijacking their political demands for geostrategic advantage.”[[49]](#footnote-49)

### 3.1.3 More continuity than real change

The Obama administration significantly altered the style, tone and attitude of its policy towards the Middle East in an effort to show great determination and willingness to engage and listen rather than calling the shots in the region. Obama stated in his first interview with Al Arabiya that the U.S. “is ready to initiate a new partnership based on mutual respect and mutual interest.”[[50]](#footnote-50) Unlike the previous administrations, the new administration took initiative to tackle the Israel-Palestine issue from day one rather than waiting until the later years of office. Moreover, the Obama administration also shelved the Bush’s forceful strategies of “freedom agenda” in the Middle East whilst focusing on respecting human rights at home by closing the Guantanamo detention camp. All these conciliatory and extraordinary moves raised the expectation of the Muslim world that Obama would bring a real change and reverse the hostility of the Bush years. It seemed as if the Middle East ranked high on Obama’s agenda. However, either the attempts to smooth over the existing tension between the U.S and the Islamic world or endeavors to rebuild its capacity to lead by example served as temporary expedient aiming to stabilize the Middle East and buy time for the U.S. strategic shift to Asia and restoring national strength.

Indeed, despite all the lofty rhetoric and gestures, Obama has shown in his foreign policy towards the Middle East more continuity with the past than real change. Obama has not pursued a transformational foreign policy and has refrained from challenging the predominant narrative in Washington. He has adopted a pragmatic–realist approach towards the region, an approach consistent with the dominant US foreign policy orientation.

First, Obama’s conduct continued the structural–institutional basis how things are done in Washington. Obama’s Middle East policy is hampered by institutional, bureaucratic and domestic dysfunctional politics. The special interest groups, particularly pro-Israel lobbyists, as well as Congress, put such great pressure on him that he cannot adopt an even-handed approach towards the Israeli–Palestinian issue but continue to offer unconditional supports to Israel. No wonder after Obama was refused when he openly called on Israel to freeze all illegal settlement construction, it was back to business as usual as Obama continued his predecessor’s pledge to Israel of $30 billion in military aid over the next decade and went to great lengths to protect Israel at the UN. In fact, it appears that Washington has changed Obama far more than he has changed Washington.

Second, the new administration’s foreign policy towards the Arabian Peninsula in particular has followed the traditional pattern of focusing on security. Relations with Gulf States continue to be dealt with through the prism of the perceived Iranian threats, weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), counterterrorism and the protection of oil access. To protect its interests, the Obama administration is building on Bush’s commitments to accelerating the deployment of anti-missile defense systems, maintaining its military presence and increasing arms sales in the Gulf States. All those measures in effect continue with the old policy of creating a pro-American Arab alliance to counter the Iranian regime.[[51]](#footnote-51)

Third, out of economic interest or to maintain stability and security, the Obama administration has kept the long record of supporting nondemocratic, repressive regimes in the Middle East. Obama was the defender of Franklin Roosevelt’s “our S.O.B.” in the Middle East, which is best captured by his continued support for unpopular dictators such as Egypt’s Mubarak and the willingness to turn a blind eye to repressiveness of the Gulf monarchies such as Saudi Arabia.[[52]](#footnote-52)

In short, despite his initial effort to broker an Israeli–Palestinian settlement, actually Obama did not care about freedom or the peace process all that much. His policy was dictated by cynical realism which has often dominated the making of U.S. foreign policy towards the Middle East since the end of the Second World War. Therefore, Obama administration’s Middle East policy features more continuity than real change.

## 3.2 The real intentions of the policy

The reason why Obama’s Middle East policy is featured by inconsistency and hypocrisy is that what he said does not represent what he means. His lofty rhetorics and great promises may just act as the cover-up of his real intentions. Therefore, it is very essential to dig deep into the intentions that drive him to make decisions before we can reach a profound understanding of the U.S. Middle East policy.

### 3.2.1 Protecting the U.S. core interests

Foreign policy, including the use of military power, is not an end in itself. It is designed and geared towards pursuing national interests which are theoretically supposed to drive a country’s foreign-policy strategy. The same is true with the Obama administration’s Middle East policy aiming at protecting the U.S. national interests. At a speech before the U.N. General Assembly, President Obama spelled out the four “core interests” of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East:

1. We will confront external aggression against our allies and partners, as we did in the Gulf War.

2. We will ensure the free flow of energy from the region to the world. Although America is steadily reducing our own dependence on imported oil, the world still depends upon the region's energy supply, and a severe disruption could destabilize the entire global economy.

3. We will dismantle terrorist networks that threaten our people. Wherever possible, we will build the capacity of our partners, respect the sovereignty of nations, and work to address the root causes of terror. But when its necessary to defend the United States against terrorist attacks, we will take direct action.

4. And finally, we will not tolerate the development or use of weapons of mass destruction. Just as we consider the use of chemical weapons in Syria to be a threat to our own national security, we reject the development of nuclear weapons that could trigger a nuclear arms race in the region, and undermine the global non-proliferation regime.[[53]](#footnote-53)

The above-mentioned four core interests can be divided into three categories: security, oil and allies.[[54]](#footnote-54) These are the basis on which the U.S. Middle East policy is made. Whatever Obama said about democracy, freedom, and human rights etc. all serves to pursue the U.S. strategic interests that the United States really cares about and is prepared to protect at their own blood and treasure.

The biggest concern of the U.S. is its security. The organizing principle of a country’s foreign policy is protection of the homeland. As the *National Security Strategy 2010* put it, “This Administration has no greater responsibility than the safety and security of the American people. And there is no greater threat to the American people than weapons of mass destruction, particularly the danger posed by the pursuit of nuclear weapons by violent extremists and their proliferation to additional states.” Since the 9/11 attacks, counter-terrorism and preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction has become the U.S. top national security priorities. As the frontline of fight against terrorists and extremists, the Middle East constitutes a very important part in the U.S. national security strategy. “We will disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaida and its affiliates”, as well as “reverse the spread of nuclear and biological weapons and secure nuclear materials.”[[55]](#footnote-55) To this end, the Obama administration has exerted great efforts to fight the Afghanistan war, stop Iran’s nuclear program, and draw the “red line” for Syrian use of chemical weapons. Actually apart from other concerns, the U.S. connivance of the Gulf dictators and even the moderate engagement with Iran and Syria are partly based on the consideration of anti-terrorism, for the U.S. needs their help to provide more intelligence in this connection. To safeguard the security of the United States and its citizens is the most important driving force behind the U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East.

Controlling oil access also serves as a cornerstone of the U.S. Middle East policy. President Eisenhower described the Middle East as the most “strategically important area in the world” where over half the global oil reserves are located. “The Middle East countries supplied about 30 million barrels per day (mmb/d) of liquid fuels in 2010, or more than one-third of the estimated total worldwide daily supply of 86.3 mmb/d. Three countries: Saudi Arabia (10.07 mmb/d), Iran (4.25 mmb/d), and the United Arab Emirates (2.81 mmb/d), accounted for about 57% of total Middle East liquid fuels production.”[[56]](#footnote-56) For quite a long time, the oil has been the primary reason why the United States has interests in the Middle East. Although due to increased domestic production of petroleum and natural gas the United States is reducing its dependence on foreign oil with imported liquid fuels as a share of total U.S. liquid fuel use dropping from 57% in 2008 to 45% in 2011,[[57]](#footnote-57) oil still means a lot to the U.S. as oil price is determined internationally by what is available for all global consumers. If the Middle East cuts off its oil or the 20% of the world’s daily supply that passes through the Strait of Hormuz, the price of oil will spike dramatically. Therefore, to safeguard the security of oil supply in the Middle East and ensure stable access to affordable oil is in vital interests of the United States. Out of its interest in controlling the oil resources of the region, no wonder why the U.S. supports corrupt and oppressive Gulf governments who are the major oil producing states and even use force to keep the Strait of Hormuz open.

Israel is a strategic asset for the United States in the Middle East. Since the founding of Israel, the United States has made clear its support to Israel which has become the consistent standing and tradition of successive U.S. administrations. Safeguarding Israel’s security is the U.S. major responsibility and interests in the Middle East. Obama pledged in the United Nations General Assembly, “America’s commitment to Israel’s security is unshakeable. Our friendship with Israel is deep and enduring.”[[58]](#footnote-58)As its vital ally, the U.S. provided enormous economic and military assistance to Israel and also put Israel under the umbrella of the U.S. diplomatic protection by pursuing a biased policy towards Israel. For the United States, maintaining the “special relationship” with Israel is in line with its interests. First, due to the special geography, Israel can serve as an important backing for the U.S. to preserve its dominance in the Middle East. Second, a powerful Israel with strong military capacity can help the U.S. fight against Islamic extremists and terrorists. Third, supporting Israel is in accord with the broadest conception of the American national interest --- supporting like-minded societies. Therefore, Israel constitutes “the most enduring and the most immediate interest”[[59]](#footnote-59) of the United States in the Middle East.

### 3.2.2 Maintaining balance of power and stability

The war in Iraq broke the existing balance of power in the Middle East, especially between Iraq and Iran. Previously, the two rivals were well-matched in strength and could counterbalance each other. But after the U.S. invasion destroyed both Iraq’s government and army, Iraq was severely weakened, leaving Iran, the U.S. primary enemy, the dominant power in the Persian Gulf. This posed a fundamental challenge both for the U.S. strategy and the extremely complex region. And the Iraqi war also sent the pro-Iran Shiites to power in Iraq, which was favorable to Iran and detrimental to the U.S. interests. Moreover, the succeeding Arab Spring further changed the political landscape of the Middle East with Turkey and Qatar playing a much greater role. This internal dynamics dragged most of the Arab countries into crisis and conflicts, and also drastically influenced the foreign policies of the regional players that sought to use national power to reshuffle cards. All these developments posed a threat to the U.S. dominance and control over the Middle East.

In order to protect its geopolitical and economic interests, the United States must play the role of the defender of regional security and stability, avoid any moves that would further disrupt the regional balance of power such as military strike against Syria, and prevent hostile forces alliance and the emergence of an oil hegemonic state which would use oil as a tool to exert political pressure on the U.S. in the Middle East. Given the decline in both power and influence, the best way to restore the regional balance of power and stability is to adopt the offshore balancing strategy. By relying on the balancing forces composed of local powers to counter any potential hegemonic ambitions, the United States does not need to deploy ground troops in the Middle East, as long as it maintains the sea and air power deterrence posture.[[60]](#footnote-60) To maintain the balance of power, the United States does not have to dominate the region itself but just makes sure no one else does. That’s why the United States distanced itself from the Arab turmoil and preferred to act as a behind-the-scene player.

Based on that strategy, the United States must make great efforts to guarantee that the two major powers in the region, Turkey and Iran, could keep counterbalancing each other. For one thing, Turkey does not become hostile to the U.S. interests and for another, Iran and Turkey do not form an alliance for the domination and division of the Arab world. To this end, the United States should seek political accommodation with Iran in that as long as the U.S. maintains the basic terms of its agreement with Iran, Iran will represent a threat to Turkey. On the other hand, Turkey, the only country capable of being a counterbalance to Iran and a potential long-term power in the region, would not be satisfied with Iranian domination of the Arabian Peninsula which does not serve Turkey’s interest as Turkey has its own appetite for the region’s oil, reducing its dependency on Russian oil. Whatever the inclinations of the Turks, they will have to protect themselves, and to do that, they must work to undermine Iranian power in the Arabian Peninsula and the Arab countries and also improve their access to the oil to their south. A powerful Turkey would counterbalance Iran while stabilizing the Arabian Peninsula. In due course the Turks will begin to react by challenging the Iranians, and thus the new balance of power will be resurrected, stabilizing the region.

### 3.2.3 Addressing the U.S. national identity crisis

Diplomacy begins at home. Having an external Enemy helped the U.S. presidents garner domestic political support for a strong and active foreign policy.[[61]](#footnote-61) “We are about to do a terrible thing to you,” a Soviet official quipped toward the end of the Cold War. “We are going to deprive you of an enemy.” Without the Soviet threat, the U.S. foreign policy debate about national interests split wide open.

National interests derive from national identity. “We have to know who we are before we can know what our interests are.”[[62]](#footnote-62) Historically the substance of American identity has involved four key components: race, ethnicity, culture (most notably language and religion), and ideology. But now the racial and ethnic Americas no longer exist. The remaining central elements of American identity---America’s core Anglo-Protestant culture and the American Creed of liberty and democracy are facing great challenges from the ideologies of diversity, multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism. With the spread of Spanish as the second American language and the rising trend of Hispanization, America is highly likely to be transformed into a bilingual society without strong national cohesion. To some degree, America is undergoing national identity crisis.

Crisis at home and abroad could generate a powerful centripetal force in the United States. According to Samuel Huntington, whether America remains “divided over the appropriate roles of their Creed, language and core culture in their national identity” depends on “the extent to which Americans suffer terrorist attacks on their homeland and their country engages in overseas war against enemies.”[[63]](#footnote-63) When Osama bin Laden attacked America in September 11, he also did two other things beyond killing people. “He filled the vacuum created by Gorbachev with an unmistakably dangerous new enemy, and he pinpointed America’s identity as a Christian nation.”[[64]](#footnote-64) Overall, the domestic consensus in the wake of September 11 was broader and stronger than at any point since the end of the Cold War. A new sense of patriotism flourished, and this sense of “recapturing the flag” was well portrayed by the journalist George Packer, “The force of the blows woke us up to the fact that we are a part of a national community. This heightened awareness could be the disaster’s greatest legacy.”[[65]](#footnote-65)

The Obama administration is also trying to renew American sense of national identity, their national purpose and cultural values they have in common through constant attacks to their enemy---terrorists and military interventions in some conflicts under the guise of defending the values which constitute their identity. No matter what Washington politicians’ real intentions are, at least American people will buy their story. A sense of fear and common values can help enhance national cohesion and address national identity crisis.

## 3.3 The influencing factors of policy formation and action

The formulation and implementation of a foreign policy is based on the overall consideration of both internal and external factors. When it comes to the Obama administration’s Middle East Policy, it is primarily influenced by three aspects: the American domestic condition, the Middle Eastern states’ situation and other players that may pose a threat to the U.S. strategic interests.

### 3.3.1 Domestic pressure

The U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East is the product of multi-stakeholders and its complex political system, covering the role of the general public, special interest groups, particularly the Israel’s supporters and military-industrial complex, as well as bipartisanship and Congress, imposing severe constraints on President’s ability to pursue what he thinks is the best approach towards the specific issue. US politicians including Obama are trapped in the dysfunctional political culture that is driven by interests and power. Thus, in making the Middle East policy, Obama has to deal with various interference factors and calculate different even conflicting interest demands, which to some degree caused the inconsistency and contradiction of his approach. On the whole, the domestic pressure comes from three sources: social-economic problems, interest groups, and election.

The first pressure is exerted by social-economic problems. When Obama took office in 2009, it was imperative for the new administration to promote economic recovery and address a series of social problems brought by the financial crisis. His priority was to stimulate economy, increase employment, launch health care reform and boost clean energy development. The high military spending of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan represented an enormous drag on American economic recovery, so Obama decided to withdraw from Iraq and plan to cut half of the 1.3 trillion dollars financial deficits at the end of his four-year term.[[66]](#footnote-66) American unemployment rate once exceeded 10%, raising great dissatisfaction among people. In September 2011, “Occupy Wall Street” movement began, crying for complete reform. Under such circumstances, Obama adjusted his priority from anti-terrorists and preventing the proliferation of WMD to strengthening international economic and financial cooperation and maintain economic security.

The second pressure comes from interest groups. Foreign policy interest groups are domestic advocacy organizations which seek to manipulate the government’s foreign policy. In the case of the Middle East policy, the main special interests groups are Israel lobby and military-industrial complex. U.S. support for Israel is due largely to the unmatched political power of the Israel lobby such as the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), a loose coalition of Jewish Americans that seek to influence American foreign policy in ways that will benefit Israel.[[67]](#footnote-67) There is a strong norm for conformity on Israel and against dissenting voices of Israeli policy in Washington. Beyond unconditional financial and military support, Israel lobby also exerts pressures on the White House in a wide-range of issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the ill-fated invasion of Iraq, and the ongoing confrontation with Iran. Their channels for exercising that political influence are various: “appealing to Jewish-American campaign donors and voting blocs in elections, lobbying Congress, and exerting it directly through Israel supporters who serve in prominent foreign policy positions.”[[68]](#footnote-68) As long as Israel is involved, Congress will fetter the president’s hands and limits his options. Another interest group is military-industrial complex. Such group makes great money through wars which can bring it huge arms sales contracts. No wonder why Washington has great interests in the continued tensions in the Middle East. After meeting King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia in April 2011, Defense Secretary Robert Gates did not even raise the question of Saudi intervention in Bahrain but focused on the discussion of more pressing issues, such as the sale of more than $60 billion worth of arms, in the biggest arms deal ever signed by the United States[[69]](#footnote-69), which would also create millions of jobs to the American industry. In short, hampered by entrenched special interest groups, Obama has not been able to translate his promises into concrete policies.

Last but not least is the electoral pressure. In 2009, the new President was not as encumbered by national politics as he was in 2011, when he began fighting for a second presidential term. He and his advisers convinced themselves that challenging the institutional status quo would mean a loss of votes, money and, ultimately, office. In 2008, Obama won nearly 78% of the Jewish vote. More than ever, Jewish voters remain a crucial part of his political base – in terms of campaign contributions as well as votes. Electoral pressures drew Obama back firmly into the traditional position of unquestioning support for Israel. With regard to the Middle East peace process, Obama changed his initial position towards Israel and stopped pushing Israel on the settlement issue. Moreover, out of the need to please voters, all the candidates paid more attention to domestic affairs, as American people showed coldness to foreign affairs after the financial crisis. According to a survey in 2011, only 3 percent thought the most urgent challenge was counter-terrorism in Afghanistan while 73 percent believed that Obama should refocus on domestic policies.[[70]](#footnote-70) This neo-isolationism that sought to reduce America’s international commitments and make them more self-centered will exert an influence on Obama’s Middle East policy for quite a long time. It would be more difficult to respond to the dynamics in the region.

### 3.3.2 Uncertainties and complexity of Middle-East situation

Due to the fragmented geopolitical structure combined with various ethnic and sectarian clashes, the Middle East short of a long-term regional security mechanism has always been associated with the continuing turmoil, widespread unrest and instability. But in the past decades the political fundamentals of the region had been kept in good condition without big upheavals. However, the 2011 Arab Spring sweeping across the Middle East like a hurricane toppled several autocratic regimes whose rule indeed played a role of maintaining relative stability and triggered profound upheaval whose future course is still uncertain and that is unlikely to be resolved anytime soon. “Conflict is now occurring across many fault lines -- Sunni vs. Shiite, Arab vs. Persian, secular vs. Islamist, democratic vs. authoritarian, etc. -- and in ways that are beginning to shake the foundations of the political structure that first took shape at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference.”[[71]](#footnote-71) The uncertainties of the Middle East situation mainly lie in the following three aspects:

Firstly, there is political uncertainty about the Shiite Crescent. The Shiite Crescent represents an emerging alliance of Shiite political forces in the Middle East, stretching from Iran via Iraq and Syria to Lebanon and Palestine, with the specific aim of countering the Sunni Arab, U.S.-backed states such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel. The “leader” Iran grew much stronger from the war on terror. It is uncertain whether Iran can finally make nuclear weapons and constitute a direct threat to the U.S. and Israel or Israel will bypass the U.S. and launch a preemptive strike against Iran. In the case of Syria, the international community fears to be drawn into the potential quagmire based on the perception that the regime maintained formidable forces and the uncertainty of how local opposition forces would react to foreign forces. Also the future of Assad is uncertain. If Assad becomes another Gaddafi, it will weaken the Shiite Crescent which may lead to the political restructuring of Lebanon and Palestine while irritating Iran who would accelerate its nuclear program. If he can survive this crisis, the U.S. and Israel would face more daunting challenges and fiercer confrontations from the Shiite Crescent.

Secondly, the future of Israel’s security is unclear. After the upheavals, the traditional landscape of peace maintained by moderate Arab countries for Israel no longer existed, as in Egypt you cannot find another leader as obedient to the U.S. interests as Mubarak and no new president in Syria would prefer maintaining the status quo as Assad. Even the NATO ally Turkey has loosened its relationship with Israel. Given the rising power of Islamic extremists in the Arab countries, Israel would face a more dangerous and hostile environment. The peace enjoyed from 1979 Camp David Accords would also disappear. The trend of deterioration of Israel’s security situation would cost Obama more political capital and resources to protect this ally, which must be taken into account when he makes the Middle East policy.[[72]](#footnote-72)

Thirdly, the development prospect of the Gulf States is uncertain. Although the Gulf States temporarily escaped the democratic storm of the Arab Spring, there is still an uncertainty about development of their political situations. Besides Israel, the U.S. does not have a real ally in the Middle East. Although the Gulf States like Saudi Arabia are the important pillars of America’s Middle East policy and the shapers of the new regional landscape, they are not democratic countries like Israel. Therefore, under the impact of the Middle East turmoil, the changing situation of those Gulf allies may run out of America’s control. A new Islamic revolution is likely to emerge in those monarchies.

It has been proven that the U.S. military power and its heavy-handed political influence are not an antidote to domestic instability in the Middle East. The United States should not disengage, but it should not be overly eager to interfere either. Given the uncertainties and complexity of Middle-East situation, “the wisest policies for the United States are to reduce its footprint in the Gulf and Middle East, and formulate a viable long-term energy strategy that minimizes its vulnerability to the vicissitudes of that endemically turbulent region.”[[73]](#footnote-73)

### 3.3.3 Challenges from other major players

The competition for influence and power in the Middle East has always been intense among political powers because of its strategic importance. Undoubtedly, the Obama administration’s Middle East policy would be challenged by other players in the region like Russia, China and EU. Inherited the legacy of the Soviet Union, Russia began to return to the Middle East in recent years. China also increases its involvement in the Middle East affairs and plays a key role in addressing the Iran and Syrian issues. Boasting deep historical connections with the Middle East, European countries have great influence in the regional affairs.

Russia is the super rival of the United States in the Middle East. For Russia, the world price of oil is the single-most important factor for the future of its economy. The Middle Eastern abundant natural gas and oil resources exert a great influence on the global energy market. Thus, as a big energy exporter, Russia is sure to take an active part in the Middle East affairs. Russia also has extensive economic and trade exchanges with many countries there especially in terms of arms sales, so the Middle East situation has a direct bearing on Russia’s prosperity. Since Putin took office, he reshaped Russia’s foreign policy and began to return to the Middle East with a pragmatic diplomacy. Although Russia seeks cooperation with the U.S. in the hotspot issues in the Middle East, it preserves its independent positions. The differences and even antagonism between Russia and the U.S. on those issues inflict great constraints on Obama’s policy. For example, in the case of Syria, Russia’s support has become a big obstacle for Obama to tackle Syria issue according to the U.S. will. Syria is an important ally of Russia in the Middle East, especially after the regimes of Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya were overthrown. Syria’s military has been equipped with Russian-made arms since the 1960s, and the port of Tartus is Russia’s only military base beyond Commonwealth of Independent States.[[74]](#footnote-74) Russia and China twice vetoed U.N. resolutions on Syria. Russia’s hardline position on Syria poses a tremendous challenge to Obama. Therefore, in this game, Obama also strives to contain Russia’s strategic space so as to preserve the U.S. predominance over the Middle East.

China also poses great challenges to the United States. With the all-round and deep development of China-Middle East relationship, China participates in the Middle East affairs in a more active manner. Politically, with the rising of China’s international standing, China will take more due obligations in the region and also need the supports from Arab and Islamic world in the international affairs. Economically, the Middle East is the largest source of China’s oil imports. According to the statistics of the Ministry of Commerce, China imported 239 million tons of crude oil in 2010, 81% of which are from the Middle East and Africa. China also has many direct investments in many Middle Eastern countries. Take Libya for an example. The Libyan crisis inflicted heavy losses to China’s investments there involving 75 companies, 50 projects, and 18.8 billion dollars.[[75]](#footnote-75) In terms of security, the “three forces” of the Middle East infiltrate Xinjiang, Tibet and other areas in China, posing a great threat to China’s border security. Besides, the change of the situation of the Middle East is also closely concerned with the safety of Chinese citizens.[[76]](#footnote-76)China pursues an independent foreign policy and upholds that hotspot issues should be resolved in a peaceful way through dialogue and consultation in opposition to military intervention in others internal affairs. On Israeli-Palestinian issue，China takes sides with the Palestinian people and exerts continued pressure on America and Israel when it comes to Israel’s illegal settlement on the occupied territory. On Iran，China, as one of the permanent members of the UN Security Council, plays a vital role in the resolutions concerning Iran. Since 2012, the U.S. and European countries have strengthened the sanction against Iran. China, in accordance with the U.N. resolution, insisted on importing oil from Iran and opposed the U.S. unilateral sanction based on its domestic law. On the whole, China’s principled position and approach on the Middle East issue prevented and stopped, to some extent, the U.S. casual intervention into other’s internal affairs for the sake of its narrow interests.

European Union also has conflicts of interests with the United States. As the backyard of European countries, the Middle East of great strategic significance is the best place where the EU is committed to raising its international standing and exerting international clout. Many countries there used to be the colonies of European countries and still maintain some special relationship with such countries as Britain, France and Italy. Although the United States appreciates EU’s active part in handling the Middle East affairs, which to some extent shares the U.S. concerns and burdens, the challenges of EU to the U.S. Middle East policy are enormous and mainly embodied in the following three aspects. First, EU is jostling with the U.S. for dominance and influence in the Middle East. Compared to the U.S., Islamic people are more friendly to the EU, because the latter provided large amounts of assistance to help maintain the security and stability of the region in a positive manner. Since the upheaval in the Middle East of 2010, the EU has actively sought to expand its influence as the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Ashton, visited successively Tunisia, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon and Jordan in February 2011 and announced to increase aids and promote economic cooperation to support those countries and improve the regional security. Second, the battle between the EU and U.S. is also for the control of energy resources. The prosperity and stability of the EU depends on the petroleum resources of the Middle East as over half of oil and natural gas consumptions of the European countries are imported from that region. The oil security of the Middle East appears more important for the EU given the sovereign debt crisis in Europe and the turbulence in the Middle East. Therefore, the EU shall not tolerate the U.S. sole control of the energy there. The “Wars for Oil” in history waged by major oil exporters also serve as a reminder of the importance to adopt different Middle East policy from the United States. Besides, the EU’s efforts to promote the Barcelona Process[[77]](#footnote-77) and Mediterranean Union Plan exerted serious impact on the U.S. interests in the Middle East. Third, the EU is at odds with the U.S. on hotspot issues of the Middle East. EU’s divisions with the U.S. on Middle East issues become public and increasingly widening. For example, three European countries, namely the UK, France, and Germany all voted for a resolution proposed by Palestine to condemn Israeli illegal settlement construction despite the veto of the U.S. in the Security Council of the United Nations in February 2011. In terms of counter-terrorism, both sides also have divergence as the EU opposes pure reliance on military means but emphasizes on a comprehensive approach with multiple means as evidenced by its objection of the U.S. unilateral operation against Iraq. On the Iranian nuclear issue, the EU also expressed its understanding of Iran’s peaceful use of nuclear energy and even signed a nuclear fuel swap deal with Iran. In the midst of Arab Spring, the willingness of the U.S. to lead from the behind gave the EU countries, France in particular, an excellent chance to take the lead in the Middle East. Previously, the EU was only in a subordinate position to help the US carry out its global strategy, while now it desires to gain an equal footing with the United States and strive to seek its own interests in global affairs even at loggerheads with the U.S.

# Conclusion

The Middle East, of great interest and concern to the United States, remains a vital pillar in the U.S. global strategy during the Obama administration. Against the backdrop of the financial crisis, setbacks in the Middle East and rising powers of Asia, Obama refocus on the home front and adopts a retrenchment strategy by promoting a “pivot to Asia” away from the Middle East. However, the emergence of the Arab Spring contains the U.S. strategic shift and brings Obama’s attention back to the Middle East. Addressing the regional turmoil becomes the priority of the U.S. Foreign policy. Counter-terrorism, preventing the proliferation of WMD, ensuring the energy security and protecting Israel remain the core interests of the United States in the Middle East, which will not change in the short term. Although the U.S. is facing a series of challenges, the Obama administration will not disengage from the Middle East because of its strategic importance and the U.S. interests there. Either taking initiative to improve the relations with the Islamic world or launching military interventions in others’ internal affairs, behind all those endeavors are the U.S. real intentions to safeguard its national interests, restore the regional balance of power within the U.S. control and strengthen the national unity and cohesion in the homeland. The U.S. basic stance in the Middle East has remained unchanged.

Nevertheless, the Obama administration’s Middle East policy is more flexible and pragmatic with emphasis on the use of smart power and offshore balancing approach. Obama reverses the warmongering and unilateral policies of the Bush administration and attaches great importance to international cooperation and multilateral mechanisms by means of “engagement and dialogue.” But that does not mean the abandon of the use of military forces. When soft power could not reach its objectives, Obama would repeat Bush’s old ways of military threat and economic sanctions, just as what has been done to Iran and Syria.

It now seems that Obama’s Middle East policy has not yielded any remarkable achievements but only made some corrections of the old strategy. Obama has not rescued American foreign policy from the baleful influence of the “Israel first” school and made concessions to domestic poisonous politics, thereby undermining U.S. credibility and influence. Obama’s Middle East policy shows more continuity than real change. Even without the U.S. hegemonic dominance, the situation of the Middle East may not improve in a substantial way.

Due to the limited time and resources and the complexity of the subject, there are some deficiencies in the thesis which need to be corrected in the future research. Based on the findings of this thesis, the future research could focus on comparative analysis of both Bush’s and Obama’s Middle East policy with a view to finding out what role of party affiliation plays in their making of the U.S. Middle East policy.

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