

U.S Policy & Geopolitical Dynamics in the Middle East: Shifting Decision from Barrack Obama (2012-2016) to Donald Trump (2017)

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Abstrak

Sejak 11 September 2001 (9/11), Amerika Serikat (A.S) telah berperang, konflik terpanjang dalam sejarahnya. Warga negaranya telah menyaksikan lonjakan yang gagal ke Afghanistan, sebuah malapetaka di Irak yang membantu mengacaukan petak-petak luas di Timur Tengah, sebuah perang inkonstitusional di Libya yang menciptakan kekosongan kekuasaan yang dieksploitasi oleh ISIS, dan sebuah perang tak berawak yang telah menewaskan ratusan orang tak berdosa di setengah lusin negara. Dua presiden terakhir berkampanye melawan perang dan menang. Kandidat yang lebih intervensionis telah kehilangan suara setiap pemilihan sejak 2008. Pada tanggal 20 Januari 2017 Donald J. Trump dilantik sebagai Presiden ke-45 Presiden A.S, dan saat ini dia sangat nekad. Dia dianugerahi kegagalan demi kegagalan dalam kebijakan domestik, dengan peringkat persetujuan yang buruk dan tidak ada cara yang jelas untuk meningkatkannya, kecuali dengan mencoba mengeksploitasi kecenderungan historis masyarakat Amerika untuk mengepung sebuah presiden yang sedang berperang dalam menerapkan kebijakan luar negeri A.S. Tidak pernah ada kasus yang lebih kuat untuk lebih awal mengekang kemampuan seorang presiden yang secara sepihak melancarkan serangan militer ke negara-negara asing yang tidak menyerang AS. Untuk memungkinkan seseorang yang memiliki karakter, Trump mempertahankan kekuasaan tersebut, setelah perluasannya oleh presiden sebelumnya yang ternyata di luar batas Konstitusi, dan akan menjadi kebodohan.

Kata-kata kunci: Amerika Serikat, kebijakan domestic, kebijakan luar negeri, konflik unilateral

Abstract

Post September 11, 2001 (9/11), the United States (U.S) has been at war, the longest conflict in its history. Its citizens have witnessed a failed surge into

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Afghanistan, a catastrophe in Iraq that helped destabilize vast swaths of the Middle East, an unconstitutional war in Libya that created a power vacuum exploited by ISIS, and a drone war that has killed hundreds of innocents in a half-dozen countries. The last two presidents campaigned against wars and won. The more interventionist candidate had lost every election since 2008. On 20 January 2017 Donald J. Trump is inaugurated as nation's 45th U.S President, and currently he is desperate. He is flailing from failure to failure in domestic policy, with dismal approval ratings and no clear way to increase them, except by trying to exploit the American public's historic tendency to rally around a president at war in implementing the U.S foreign policy. There has never been a stronger case for preemptively reining in a president's ability to unilaterally launch military strikes on foreign countries that are not attacking the U.S. To allow a man of Trump's character to retain that power, after its expansion by decades of presidents who pushed it beyond the bounds of the Constitution, would be folly.

Keywords: *U.S, domestic policy, foreign policy, unilateral conflict*

Introduction

What would happen if two schools of thought competed to dominate the making of U.S. foreign policy? One school, led by one of the major political leaders, stressed the importance of a strong relationship between the national government and big business and argued that the country needed to be integrated into the global system, especially the international political economy, in terms that were favorable to it. The other school, led by an opposing political leader, stressed that the most important thing for the country would be to remain removed from foreign policy and to concentrate instead on safeguarding the homeland, intervening only when it becomes absolutely necessary. These were the arguments between Alexander Hamilton on the one hand and Thomas Jefferson on the other, put forward when the United States was created on July 4th, 1776. But it sounds a lot like the arguments that have been made recently. Should the U.S be more involved in the world or not? Is it the responsibility of the U.S to help spread democracy? When should the U.S intervene in the affairs of other countries? These are not new questions, although the answers keep changing as times, dynamics circumstances, and the priorities of the presidents and other political leaders change.

This research attempts to elaborate on American foreign policy draws on basic political science approaches and theories. However, it is difficult to arrive at a practical understanding of U.S foreign policy and the decisions that have been made by President and its team without grounding them in history. To integrate the approaches, the writer will use a historical framework to put the major themes and concepts of U.S foreign policy into the context of the time at which they were formulated.

This requires looking at the various domestic political priorities as well as the international context that helped frame the decisions made, for the two go hand in

hand in the making of foreign policy. In addition, this text relies heavily on primary documents in order to explore the ideas as fully as possible, using the words of the authors of those policies. Using primary sources is important since doing so will provide a broader context for understanding the particular policies as they were defined and implemented at that particular time in U.S. history. The time and context might change dynamically, but each policy set the stage for what followed and therefore must be examined carefully. In an era of Internet technology, finding these documents is relatively easy and provides an accompaniment to this text.

Why is it important to learn about American foreign policy? Generally, Americans do not give much thought to foreign policy. They don't make decisions about candidates for office based on the candidates' foreign policy positions unless the country is at war or in a conflict where Americans are dying. In fact, many Americans pay attention to foreign policy only in terms of the value of the dollar against another currency, such as the Euro, the Yen, or the Pound, if they are planning to travel abroad. Some want to know whether a Japanese car is going to cost more or less than it did the last time they bought one or whether there will be a line of cars at the border when they cross into Mexico or Canada. In fact, as the presidential election campaign of 2012 clearly illustrated, the dominant campaign issue was the economic situation, especially the high unemployment rate. As the campaign was heating up in June and July 2012, the unemployment rate was hovering at around 8.2 percent (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, July 2012). By November, as the election was approaching, that number had dropped to 7.7 percent (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, December 2012), still high, but the trends were in the right direction to benefit Obama. This allowed the president's campaign to stress the progress that was being made at a time when Americans were more worried about the economy than about any aspect of U.S. foreign policy, even with troops still deployed in Afghanistan.

The New York Times found that the national economy was the overwhelming issue on people's minds, with three-quarters identifying the economy as their highest or second most important concern (New York Times, October 2012). The Republican candidate, Mitt Romney, hit hard at Obama for his handling of the Libyan crisis, which resulted in the death of U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three others. Of greater interest, though, was that the two candidates were fairly close on their vision of U.S. foreign policy; this suggests there is an understanding that there are things the United States can or cannot control internationally. Coming out of two long wars with inconclusive results, both candidates could see the dangers surrounding the attempts to nation build or impose democracy using U.S. troops to try to do so.

The final weeks of the campaign were dominated by news about Hurricane Sandy as well as the improving economic situation. At that point, Iraq, Afghanistan, and even Libya, which the Republicans tried to make into a major campaign issue, faded quickly as priorities to be replaced by discussion and debates about which candidate had the best solution to fix what was still an ongoing problem and one that was seen as more immediate to most Americans than the war.

Most Americans pay little attention to foreign policy unless it appears to affect them directly. But foreign policy does affect everyone, not only because of threats of terrorist attacks or the danger of war, but for far more mundane reasons. Look at the label on the last article of clothing that you bought. Where was it manufactured? In China? Bangladesh? What about your computer, where was it made? When you called the technology help line because you had a problem with a product, where was that person sitting? Was it in the United States or in India? All of this is possible because of trade, and trade is foreign policy.

Do you know anyone who is out of work because his or her factory closed and the product is now made overseas? Allowing American companies to be based in another country is a foreign policy decision. Do you know someone who came to U.S to get a better education and then decided to stay because he or she could get a better job here than would be possible back home? The decision about who can enter the country is a foreign policy decision. In other words, foreign policy is not remote, nor is it important only for diplomats or bureaucrats.

Foreign policy can affect everyone. Most of these foreign policy decisions such as: what countries to trade with, how many people to allow into the country and from where, whether to allow companies to relocate or outsource are relatively routine. They become more political, and therefore get more attention, in election years or when something extraordinary happens. The foreign policy decisions that most people know about and follow closely are those that are extraordinary because the stakes appear to be so high. Yet the reality is that many routine foreign policy decisions can have a very direct and immediate effect on individual lives.

Even during the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962, Americans were glued to their radios and televisions because of the fear that the world was poised on the brink of nuclear annihilation. It was only years later we learned how close to truth that was (Michael Dobbs, 2008).

The Persian Gulf War of 1991 was a true media event; by the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, reporters were embedded with troops in order to quench the public's desire for news about the progress of the war. Furthermore, Americans expected that minute-by-minute account. On the other hand, few people are glued to CSPAN watching the latest debate on the imposition of steel tariffs. The imposition of the tariff, a decision made by President George W. Bush in March 2002, had important implications for American foreign policy, the relationship of the U.S to its allies, and even the price of building or buying a house, something that could affect you or your family.

One could argue that there is little the ordinary citizen can do about foreign policy. Why not simply take the decision-makers' word when they state that U.S "national interest" is best served by a particular foreign policy decision? As educated citizens, we need to ask what is in state national interest. We need to ask whose interests are being represented when national interest is given as a justification for particular decisions.

Before casting a vote on U.S Election Day, everyone should know how to evaluate critically the promises of a politician running for office who claims that she or he will act in the country's best interest.

Citizens in the world today need to understand that countries are interrelated and that decisions made by one country have implications for decisions made by another, which will, in turn, determine other decisions.

Ordinary people cannot ask meaningful questions or make rational decisions unless they know what foreign policy is and what the related concept of national interest means. Not everyone will arrive at the same answers. This is the basis for legitimate intellectual debate. Since the results of foreign policy decisions affect each of us, we all have a right and a responsibility to ask these questions.

Make no mistake: this is not an easy process. Understanding foreign policy is an inexact science, often with no clear-cut right or wrong answers. Rather, approaching it requires putting many pieces together, looking at the outputs or the decisions that were made, and then trying to understand the various pieces or factors that went into making the decisions and why.

This research will not provide all the answers to understanding U.S foreign policy. What it will do is provide insights into the components of foreign policy making that can inform the questions to ask. It will also help point the reader to ways to determine answers to those questions.

U.S Foreign Policy: Middle East

"I've seen that road before," reads a famous Beatles' song, "It always leads me here" (Lennon-McCartney, 1970). We may be tempted to use such a melancholic song to explain America's policies in the Middle East. In spite of more or less genuine desires not to get stuck into the shifting desert sands of the region, no US president since the end of the Second World War has managed to avoid deep political and military commitments in the Middle East. After the end of the Cold War, the area became a magnet for American troops. The region is so significant on a global level that it turns out to be an inescapable source of concern for a leading world power such as the United States. Powerful transnational factors such as culture and religion, moreover, have prompted a blurred and ever expanding conceptualization of the region. As these lines are written, in spite of president Barack Obama's compelling call for a reduction in US military commitments overseas and greater focus on "nation building here at home"(Obama, 2011), American forces continue to play a crucial role in a great many Middle Eastern trouble spots. A careful analysis of US policy toward the area is of critical importance for the proper understanding of the overall achievements and legacy of the Obama administration's foreign policy. The next paragraphs will thus examine the basic ideas underpinning the Obama administration's strategic outlook and how they have stood the test of Middle Eastern geopolitics with particular focus on those cases in which the use of American military power has represented a major ingredient in the policy mix.

On September 10, 2014, the U.S government announced the formation of a broad international coalition to defeat The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) had dramatically undermined regional stability in Iraq, Syria and the broader Middle East and pose a threat to international peace and security. ISIS continues to commit gross, systematic abuses of human rights and violations of international law, including indiscriminate killing and deliberate targeting of civilians, mass executions and extrajudicial killings, persecution of individuals and entire communities on the basis of their identity, kidnapping of civilians, forced displacement of Shia communities and minority groups, killing and maiming of children, rape and other forms of sexual violence, along with numerous other atrocities. ISIS presents a global terrorist threat which has recruited thousands of foreign fighters to Iraq and Syria from across the globe and leveraged technology to spread its violent extremist ideology and to incite terrorist acts. As noted in UN Security Council Resolution 2170, "Terrorism can only be defeated by a sustained and comprehensive approach involving the active participation and collaboration of all States... which is why our first priority is to encourage others to join in this important endeavor".

Five mutually reinforcing lines of effort to degrade and defeat ISIS were put forth at an early September 2014 meeting with NATO counterparts (U.S Department of State, 2014). These lines of effort include: First, to provide military support to our partners; Second, to impede the flow of foreign fighters; Third, to stop financing and funding; Fourth, to address humanitarian crises in the region; and Fifth, to expose true nature.

The U.S government emphasizes that there is a role for every country to play in degrading and defeating ISIS. Some partners are contributing to the military effort, by providing arms, equipment, training, or advice. These partners include countries in Europe and in the Middle East region that are contributing to the air campaign against ISIS targets. International contributions, however, are not solely or even primarily military contributions. The effort to degrade and ultimately defeat ISIS will require reinforcing multiple lines of effort, including preventing the flow of funds and fighters to ISIS, and exposing its true nature.

Humanitarian assistance to those affected by the conflict is equally important to meeting urgent needs and maintaining regional stability, and contributions to humanitarian assistance, including a critical contribution of US\$500 million by Saudi Arabia to the humanitarian response in Iraq, have been essential (U.S Department of State, 2014). With the needs of vulnerable civilians continuing to grow, additional contributions from the international community are necessary in order to address the greatest needs, including provide shelter, food and water, medicine and education.

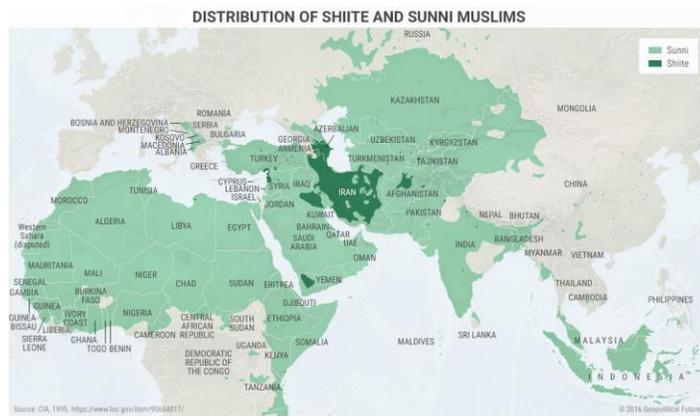
U.S Strategies & Policy Implementation

On 1 February 2017, Iran confirmed that had test-fired a ballistic missile. The U.S has responded by imposing new sanctions on Iran and stating that Iran

remains both a major source of terrorism and a threat to American national security interests. A review is now underway concerning U.S policy toward Iran. At the same time, President Donald Trump has declared his intention of crushing the Islamic State, which has been U.S policy since the emergence of IS.

The U.S strategy in Iraq prior to the 2007 surge was to oppose both Shiite and Sunni claims to power in Iraq and tried to craft a government in Baghdad that was independent of both major factions, ideally secular and closely aligned with the United States. That government was created, but it was never effective. The Shiites, supported by the Iranians, deeply penetrated the government, and more importantly, the government never had broad support beyond the coalition that backed it. The most dynamic forces in Iraq were deeply embedded in the Shiite and Sunni communities. Both drew strength from outside Iraq, which the Sunnis from Saudi Arabia and the Shiites from Iran.

Picture 1 Distribution of Shiite & Sunni Muslims



Source: <https://geopoliticalfutures.com> on 8 February 2017

During President Donald Trump's inauguration speech on 20 January 2017, he reiterated his promise to destroy the Islamic State. Previously, he also pledged to reduce international commitments that don't benefit the U.S. The two statements are not incompatible. Trump is simply saying that the destruction of IS fundamental to the national interest. On the surface, this is not an obvious priority, so people must try to understand why IS so important in his thinking. Why will it become challenge for U.S national interests ?

The Islamist State is a Sunni movement, primarily located in Syria and Iraq which committed to re-establishing the caliphate and dominating the Islamic world. It has established a relatively contiguous area of control stretching from Mosul to Palmyra. Within this space, it has developed a government, and its capital is Raqqa. It maintains rudimentary services, raises taxes and conducts trade. While, it has maintain a substantial military that has been battling forces trying to retake Mosul. If it succeeds in uniting the Islamic world under a caliphate, it could represent a global challenge. A modern industrialized society governed by a single, integrated state based on Shariah and possessing that much territory would be a very real challenge to American interests.

It must be remembered that a Shariah-based industrial force able to project power globally which will face international tension between the social order commanded by Shariah and a truly global power. Additionally, IS threatens regional powers like Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel with its military capabilities, and others, including the U.S, with intermittent terrorist attacks. In the end, the single power most hostile to the Islamic State is Iran, which IS challenges theologically and politically.

However, the presence of IS does not pose a direct threat now to the U.S, and that plenty of intermediate, regional powers are in a position to block IS. Given the overarching theme of Trump's global strategy, IS should be a problem for regional powers to deal with. The U.S government does not need to address it until much further down the line, if ever.

People tend to think of the Middle East as they think of Europe which is a group of independent nation-states collaborating or fighting with each other. Maps create this image, but they are deceiving. Thinking of only the Middle East is also problematic. To make sense of the issue, you need to think of the Muslim world, stretching from Morocco to the Philippines and from Central Asia to Africa. It is a world of over 1.6 billion humans, roughly a quarter of all humanity.

In fact, the Muslim world is never under the control of a single caliphate, but massive regional powers emerged. For example, at one point the Mediterranean basin was controlled by Muslims. Their power dominated the Iberian Peninsula and stretched toward Vienna. Reasonable people might have thought that Christian Europe was vastly outclassed by Islam during that period. However, the balance of power there, in the Indian subcontinent and in Southeast Asia shifted back and forth between Muslims and their adversaries.

The balance of power began to shift toward the Europeans from 18th century. As Christian European empires enveloped the world, this included the Muslim world as well. The Dutch in Indonesia in 1596 imposed force that shattered political Islam in the East Indies. British and French imperialism overwhelmed political Islam in South Asia and North Africa, respectively. The Russian Empire imposed its force on the Caucasus and Central Asia. And as the Ottoman Empire weakened and fell, the Europeans overran the Middle East. European imperialism fragmented the political power of Muslims. It did not shatter the religious principles that powered political Islam. The ability to express them as a political force was limited by European power, but the core was not broken. And that core did not regard Islam as a private religion. It saw Islam's public and private legitimacy and power as part of the same fabric. The religion was theocratic at its core. Its inability to act politically was developed over time, but it is not a permanent condition.

After the collapse of the European empires in 20th century, a set of states remained, floating atop the wreckage the Europeans left behind. But beneath that wreckage was the layer of political Islam that had never gone away, however powerless it might have been the previous few centuries. It was that layer, freed from constraints, which gave rise to al-Qaida and IS, as well as numerous other organizations centered in the Sunni world, such as the Taliban. The emergence of

political Islam was not an aberration, but a struggle on the part of Islam to return to its historical normal.

There is a great debate raging in the West about how to distinguish average Muslims from Islamist radicals. In the thinking that flows from Trump's position, that is the wrong question to ask. Political Islam is Islam. Various weakened strands of Islam, broken by Europe's domination, have pushed the political aspect to the side, but Islam is inherently a political religion. The core question is not distinguishing Islam and political Islam. They are one. However, this does not mean that political Islam must be savage.

Post 9/11, after emerging from European domination where Islam is undergoing a wrenching revolutionary process. It is trying to reconstruct itself within the context of a dispirited Muslim community. Urgency and external pressure do not radicalize Muslims. Rather, the entire process of reassertion is impossible without a radicalization of the Muslim community due to the liberal process of the repressed beliefs of Islam. This pressure does not turn Muslims into radicals. It is release from pressure that opens the door to it. In 18th and 19th century, the European revolutions, such as the Russian, German and French revolutions, proceeded barbarically. This should not bring anyone comfort. It signals what the human toll of creating an Islamic polity might be.

For the U.S to back away from this and let nature take its course ignores the reality that radicalism tends to displace moderation, not the other way around. Therefore, simply allowing it to be contained by Turkey or Saudi Arabia fails to take into account that they are also subject to radicalization. Or to put it differently, the idea that radicalization is taking place misstates the reality. Islam is not searching for radicalization or moderation, but for authenticity. Realized, an authentic Islamic state emerging to power is not in the American interest. Should the U.S deal with the Islamic State emerging to power ?

Perhaps, the solution is to continue the fifteen year war that started after 9/11 but it will create humanitarian catastrophe. All this does is strengthening the emergence of political Islam. The other is to use the balance of power, particularly between Iran and Israel. The problem is they may decide not to be used, and in the case of Iran, what might result would be no solution. Donald Trump's strategy would be to return the Muslim world to the status quo ante 1945. For centuries, Islam was political, on the defensive, demoralized and fragmented. That was achieved by Europe hurling itself against the Muslim world as it did against the rest of the world. And obviously, the Europeans are in no position to repeat that.

Better solution is to break the Islamic world's growing confidence in itself while defeating the Islamic State is not an end in itself but a means to an end. The presence of the Islamic State is merely a new construction of political Islam in its revolutionary form. But unlike other such movements, IS has stood and fought, indicating political Islam's growing vigor. For Trump, the enemy is this rising confidence and vigor. Political Islam cannot be eradicated. But its confidence can. And notions such as radicalization, which are used to argue against harsh measures, miss the point. It is not anger at harshness that radicalizes, but pride

and hope for the future that draws on it. That future has to be made enormously more distant.

Therefore, accepting this notion would lead to arguing for a massive insertion of U.S forces designed not only to shatter a particular movement but to demonstrate the hopelessness of political Islam establishing itself for another century. This is what European powers did during their reign. The hopelessness of the situation was evident, and with it, the virtue of moderation. Without hopelessness, it is unclear what advantage there is in being moderate.

It is difficult to imagine what this attack will look like. The Trump team cannot defeat IS and solve problem easily. The roots are in the population, and the population must be convinced that their hopes are beyond realization. The pronouncement on defeating IS and large increases in the defense budget are of note. In writers' view, Trump appears to operate in a disjointed manner in order to keep his options open. He is aided in this by his enemies who deny there is any coherence to his thought process. There is no evidence of incoherence, only things he doesn't have the power to do at this point for sustainable U.S strategies in the Middle East.

U.S Perception on the Middle East

Designated in 1979 as a State Sponsor of Terrorism, the Assad regime continued its political support to a variety of terrorist groups affecting the stability of the region and beyond, even amid significant internal unrest. The regime continued to provide political and weapons support to Hizballah and continued to allow Iran to rearm the terrorist organization. The Assad regime's relationship with Hizballah and Iran continued to grow stronger in 2013 as the conflict in Syria continued. President Bashar al-Assad remained a staunch defender of Iran's policies, while Iran has exhibited equally energetic support for Syrian regime efforts to defeat the Syrian opposition. Statements supporting terrorist groups, particularly Hizballah, were often in Syrian Government speeches and press statements.

The Syrian Government had an important role in the growth of terrorist networks in Syria through the permissive attitude the Asad regime took towards al-Qa'ida's foreign fighter facilitation efforts during the Iraq conflict. Syrian Government awareness and encouragement for many years of violent extremists' transit through Syria to enter Iraq, for the purpose of fighting Coalition Troops, is well documented. Syria was a key hub for foreign fighters en route to Iraq. Those very networks were the seedbed for the violent extremist elements that terrorized the Syrian population in 2013.

As part of a broader strategy during the year, the regime has attempted to portray Syria itself as a victim of terrorism, characterizing all of its armed opponents as terrorists.

Assad's government has continued to generate significant concern regarding the role it plays in terrorist financing. Industry experts reported that 60 percent of all business transactions were conducted in cash and that nearly 80 percent of all Syrians did not use formal banking services (Country Reports on Terrorism, 2013).

Despite Syrian legislation that required money changers to be licensed by the end of 2007, many continued to operate illegally in Syria's vast black market, estimated to be as large as Syria's formal economy. Regional hawala networks remained intertwined with smuggling and trade-based money laundering, and were facilitated by notoriously corrupt customs and immigration officials. This raised significant concerns that some members of the Syrian Government and the business elite were complicit in terrorist finance schemes conducted through these institutions.

In 2013, the United States continued to closely monitor Syria's proliferation-sensitive materials and facilities, including Syria's significant stockpile of chemical weapons, which the United States assesses remains under the Asad regime's control. Despite the progress made through the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons' Executive Council and UNSC Resolution 2118 (2013) to dismantle and destroy Syria's chemical weapons program, there continues to be significant concern, given ongoing instability in Syria, that these materials could find their way to terrorist organizations. The United States is coordinating closely with a number of like-minded nations and partners to prevent Syria's stockpiles of chemical and advanced conventional weapons from falling into the hands of violent extremists.

As a matter of fact, history and geopolitics suggest that America's predicament in the region is neither surprising nor exceptional. For century's location, history, and religious factors have made this region a key issue in the calculations of Western powers (Pagden, 2008; Wawro, 2010: 1-13; Frémeaux, 2014: 11-38). From the early XX century onward the rising importance of fossil fuels has added a new major reason for continued interest in the area. Both as the world's largest economy and as the West's leading security provider the United States has thus seen its commitment to the stability of the Middle East and the preservation of access to its oil supplies increase.

In addition to crude geopolitical and economic considerations, US policy in the Middle East has been strongly influenced by ideological factors concerning America's status and role in international relations. During the Cold War, the region gradually became a major theater of the confrontation between the US and the Soviet Union. From Henry Truman to Ronald Reagan, the security of the Middle East was a persistent concern of Cold War American presidents – and the theater of both covert operations and full-scale military interventions (Little, 2008: 117-155). In the process, the very concept of Middle East gradually expanded to include large parts of the predominantly Muslim-populated areas of Africa and central and southwestern Asia (Bacevich, 2016). It was indeed in the Middle East that the first major crisis of the post-Cold War era, the Gulf crisis of 1990-1991 prompted American leaders to try to articulate a renewed vision for a US-led international order (Ruggie, 1994). From that moment on, the region has become the main testing ground for competing visions of America's role and purpose in the post-Cold War world. From Bush 41's "New World Order" to Bush 43's "Global War On Terror", the

central role of America's massive military power and the belief that the U.S possessed an almost unlimited capability to reshape the international environment became the key assumptions underlying the foreign policy approaches of Obama's post-Cold War predecessors (Haley, 2006; Bacevich, 2013).

As Obama took office in January 2009 such an approach appeared no longer sustainable. While Obama entered the White House, the most pressing issue on the agenda was the need to cope with the military overstretch and economic imbalances inherited by the past administration. The US was under pressure from both exhausting overseas military engagements and the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. Inevitably, the administration's main efforts concentrated on avoiding economic collapse and promoting reform at home (Mann, 2012: XIX; Chollet, 2016: 51-53). For both ideological and pragmatic reasons, the new president and his staff felt compelled to engage what Derek Chollet (2016) has defined a "Long Game" aimed at reorienting and redefining the direction of America's grand strategy. Within that framework, Obama tried to articulate a foreign policy outlook which called for a conception of US global leadership based on the international rule of law, multilateralism, and diplomacy rather than outright military power. In practical terms, the key foreign policy priority was "rebalancing". The idea that policy-makers is necessary for the U.S to resist the temptation of military adventurism. In general to adopt a more pragmatic attitude on the international stage (Mann, 2012: 340). The Obama administration also announced bold plans to reorganize America's geopolitical priorities and shift the focus from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific (Clinton, 2011). Yet, in spite of plans for a pivot to Asia, the Middle East has remained a major testing ground for US policy-makers and their quest for a viable post-Cold War global strategy.

The Middle East in Obama's world: From Rebalancing to Engagement

Breaking with his predecessor's missionary rhetoric, Obama outlined a pragmatic and realist policy outlook concerning the US role in the Middle East (Obama, 2009b; Gerges, 2012: 8-9). As for the "War on Terror," the president identified the Iraq War as the "war of choice" that had made it harder to pursue the "war of necessity" – the effort to defeat the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. As it emerged from public statements and insider accounts, however, Obama was in fact determined to end both conflicts as soon as possible (Obama, 2009b; Woodward, 2010). Soon after taking office, the new president pushed for a new strategy aimed at better addressing the transnational dimension of the Taliban revival, and authorized a temporary increase in troop numbers in Afghanistan in order to help stabilize the country (Obama, 2009a; Bergen, 2011: 309-334). His success in pursuing that goal has been limited. Despite years of US and allied military, political, and economic efforts, Afghanistan's institutions remain extremely fragile, and a sizable number of American troops is set to stay in the country through the end of Obama's mandate (Kugelman, 2016; Salinas, 2016).

The desire to scale down American presence in the Middle East has been further frustrated by the wave of political instability, regime change and violent

conflict that has erupted in the Arab world since the end of 2010. Game-changing events – such as regime change and persistent political instability in a long-standing partner of the US such as Egypt, conflict and the risk of a humanitarian catastrophe in oil-rich Libya, and the collapse of the Syrian state followed by the outbreak of an intractable civil war – have made sure that the region remains a central source of concern for Obama and his advisers as well as a key destination for America’s troops and military assets.

As sudden and fast-paced events unfolded in the Arab world, the Obama administration tried as much as possible to remain “on the right side of history” without going off track with the rebalancing agenda (Lynch, 2013: 193-235; Gerges, 2012: 106; Chollet, 2016: 91). The crises in Libya and Syria, however, put additional pressure on Obama’s effort to reorient America’s grand strategy by confronting the administration with the challenge of humanitarian emergencies.

In Libya, the administration faced the challenge of dealing with a popular uprising that quickly degenerated into a mounting humanitarian crisis compounded by the explicit threat of indiscriminate mass atrocities on the part of Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi. In March 2011, with France and Britain ready to intervene militarily, a supportive Arab League and UN Security Council authorization, the Obama administration eventually opted for a policy of “leading from behind.” The result was a British- and French-led NATO air campaign in which the US played a crucial but discrete back-up role (Chollet, 2016: 101-115; Hastings, 2011). Such an approach succeeded in preventing a mass slaughter and eventually tipped the military balance in favor of the Libyan rebels without the need to deploy US forces on the ground (O’Hanlon, 2011). As Libya’s persistent political instability demonstrates, however, neither the US nor its Western and Arab partners had a sound plan to stabilize the country in the aftermath of regime change (Kuperman, 2015; Goldberg, 2016; Wintour and Elgot, 2016).

Syria presented the Obama administration and the rest of the world with yet another massive humanitarian emergency. In fact, as evidence that the Assad regime used chemical weapons against Syrian civilians emerged in August 2013 the call for military intervention became even more compelling. Close regional partners of the US such as the Gulf monarchies strongly supported the resort to military force and France was ready to participate. Contrary to the Libyan case, however, there was neither international consensus around the idea of intervention, Iran and Russia actively supported the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad nor an apparently viable local opposition to the Syrian dictator (Holland and Bremer, 2013; Lewis et al., 2013). The strategic imperative not to get bogged into in another Iraq-style, large scale and open-ended military engagement in the Middle East, “don’t do stupid things” as famously suggested by Obama himself eventually persuaded the administration to adopt a cautious but controversial policy of military restraint and constant but frustrating diplomacy (Chollet, 2016: 10; Remnick, 2014; Goldberg, 2016; “Syria War: Cessation of hostilities comes into effect,” 2016).

The persistent state of war and humanitarian catastrophe in Syria has had a major and negative impact on the Obama administration’s effort to extricate the US military from Iraq. Building upon a modicum of political stability and a status of

forces agreement achieved in the last phases of the George W. Bush presidency, the Obama administration successfully managed to complete the withdrawal of US combat troops in December 2011 (Gordon and Trainor, 2012: 523-559, 690-693; Logan, 2011). Post-Saddam Iraq, however, failed to develop stable and truly democratic political institutions. Ethnic and sectarian rivalries and violence, compounded by state failure in neighboring Syria, turned the area into breeding ground for extremism – a process that eventually allowed the brutal extremist group and terrorist network known as Islamic State (IS, AKA ISIS, ISIL, or Daesh) to conquer vast swathes of territory in both Iraq and Syria (“Sovereignty without security, 2011; “The slow road back, 2013; Weiss and Hassan, 2015). By late summer 2014, IS advances created a direct threat to the Iraqi state, and the Obama administration eventually opted for a new military campaign (Salman and Coles, 2014). Arguably, Obama’s response to the rise of IS has been slow, and the idea to dismiss the organization as a “jayvee team” was rather unfortunate but in the event it seems to reflect the administration’s overall strategic vision: a multilateral framework, no massive deployment of American combat troops overseas, and a preference for reliance on air power and local ground forces (Remnick, 2014; Mason, 2014; Stewart and Ponthus, 2014; Irish and Szep, 2014). In fact, the administration’s military strategy against IS appears geared at managing and containing the threat while working with allies and other powers with a stake in the conflict in order to find a longer term political solution (Chollet, 2016: 138; Georgy, 2014; Packer, 2014; Kerry, 2014; De Luce, 2015). However, in the ultimate analysis this policy-making process as a new round of American military involvement in Iraq and Syria. Further underscores how difficult it is for America to readjust its global strategic priorities.

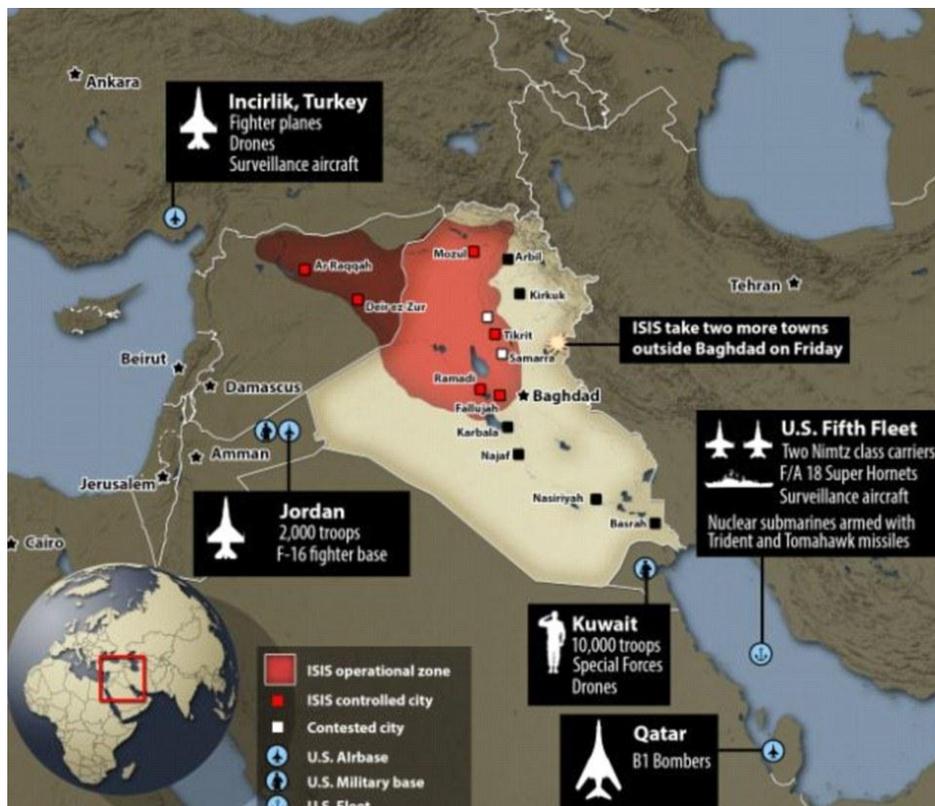
During the second term, the foreign policy approach of the Obama administration has evolved toward a loosely framed doctrine of engagement directed at countries that have been persistently at odds with the US but appear ready to negotiate (Friedman, 2015; Slaughter, 2015). The most notable result of Obama’s engagement policy has been the July 2015 deal which sets limits on, and increases international supervision over, Iran’s nuclear program in exchange for the gradual lift of international economic sanctions against the Tehran regime (Borger, 2015). The deal has reversed another destabilizing trend inherited by the Obama administration as a dangerous escalation in the longstanding confrontation between the US and Iran, America’s longtime Persian Gulf nemesis. The Iranian government has constantly maintained that its nuclear program is peaceful (Zarif, 2014). However, by the time Obama took office, evidence collected by the US and Western intelligence communities strongly suggested that the Tehran regime had explored weaponization options (Pollack, 2013: 39, 51-52). From the standpoint of leaders in Tehran, in the aftermath of America’s military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq the quest for a nuclear deterrent made sense (Nasr, 2006: 185-226). Yet a nuclear armed Iran would increase the risk of instability and arms races in the Middle East (Pollack, 2013: 403-404). After years of sanctions and threats of an American or Israeli military strike, the 2015 nuclear deal has established a multilateral monitoring framework aimed at ensuring the peaceful intent of the Iranian nuclear program (Mostafavi, 2012; Pollack, 2013; Lewis, 2015). As these lines are written, the eventual normalization of relations between Iran and the US is far from certain.

The deal has given rise to heated debates in the US political arena as well as to disorientation and resentment among long-standing US allies such as Israel and the Gulf monarchies (Drew, 2015; Odenheimer and Ben-David, 2015; McDowall and Al Sayegh, 2015). Considering Iran's unquestioned economic potential and geopolitical clout, however, it seems fair to argue that besides minimizing the odds of a nuclear-armed Iran, the deal reflects a pragmatic conception of American national security policy that had been lacking in the strategic approach of Obama's post-Cold War predecessors.

The U.S Middle East Policy and Obama's Play Game

Since the end of the Cold War, the Middle East has been the theater of the boom-and-bust of a peculiar American conception of international order. It is the idea that the US has a mission to transform the world and that the main tool to perform this mission is America's unchallenged military power. The region has been, and remains, a major testing ground of American power.

Picture 2 the U.S Military in the Persian Gulf



Source: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk>, on 9 April 2017

Encouraged by budgetary constraints and the recent memory of military quagmires, the Obama administration has been ready to engage in a profound and long-lasting reappraisal of America's role in the world (Mann, 2012; Brands, 2014;

Chollet, 2016; Goldberg, 2016). Changes in policy have been small and incremental. On the one hand, Obama's foreign policy outlook does not question the assumption of American Exceptionalism, and under his watch US foreign policy has remained quite militarized. The administration has shown a very restrained attitude toward the idea of putting boots on the ground overseas. However, a counter-terrorism strategy highly reliant on the massive resort to air power including controversial drone strikes and special forces including the Navy Seal raid that led to the killing of Osama bin Laden on May 1, 2011, suggests that after all Obama and his foreign policy staff have neither repudiated the military instrument nor abandoned the objective of preserving America's military edge (Mann, 2012: 151-155; Schmidle, 2011; Becker and Shane, 2012). On the other hand, major foreign policy initiatives adopted by the Obama administration in the Middle East, such as the drastic reduction in troops numbers in Iraq and Afghanistan and the leading from behind approach in Libya which reflect a genuine effort to challenge conventional wisdom and try new approaches.

The engagement policy adopted during Obama's second term (2012-2016) and the Iran nuclear deal suggest that Obama's strategic outlook has been much more pragmatic and less militaristic than that of his predecessors. This approach appears to have allowed the U.S to manage international crises without the need to resort to new, large-scale, and open-ended overseas military commitments, although not all of the high expectations originally raised by Obama have been turned into actual policies (Gerges, 2012: 90-91; Cohen, 2014; O'Hanlon, 2014; Dueck, 2015).

Based on U.S policy makers, Bashar al-Assad has carried out chemical attacks this past week on civilians, including women and children, and carried out attacks earlier on March 25th and 30th, in Hama province as well (Rex W. Tillerson, 2017). The U.S policy makers have a very high level of confidence that the attacks were carried out by aircraft under the direction of the Bashar al-Assad regime, and also have very high confidence that the attacks involved the use of Sarin nerve gas, at least the past three attacks.

I think it's also clear that previous agreements that had been entered into pursuant to UN Security Council Resolution 2118, as well as Annex A agreements that the Syrian Government themselves accepted back in 2013 whereby they would surrender their chemical weapons under the supervision of the Russian Government, and the U.S and the Russian Government entered into agreements whereby Russia would locate these weapons, they would secure the weapons, they would destroy the weapons, and that they would act as the guarantor that these weapons would no longer be present in Syria (Rex W. Tillerson, 2017).

Picture 3 the U.S Allies Target (2013)

provide a secure environment so refugees can begin to go home and begin the rebuilding process.

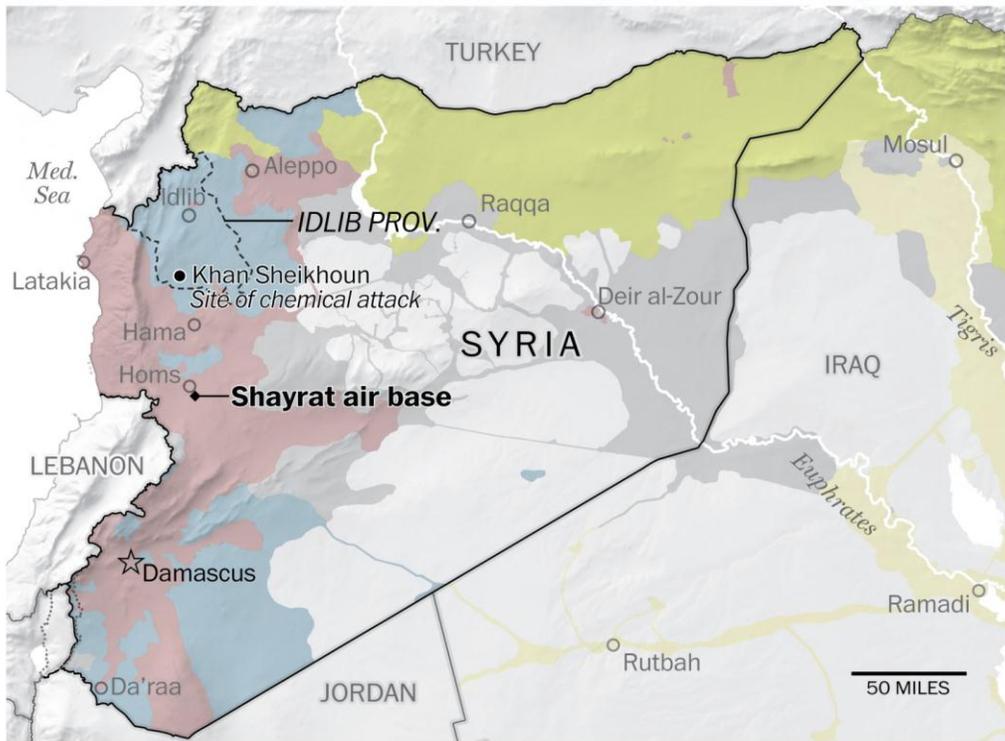
The U.S military launched 59 cruise missiles at a Syrian military airfield early Friday in the first direct American assault on the government of President Bashar al-Assad since that country's civil war began nearly six years ago since 2011 (The Washington Post, 7 April 2017).

Picture 4 the U.S Target in Syria (2017)

U.S. targets airfield in western Syria

U.S. officials said they believe planes used during a chemical attack Tuesday in the Idlib province originated from the Shayrat air base.

Area controlled by: ■ Assad regime ■ Iraqi government
■ Islamic State ■ Armed opposition groups ■ Kurdish groups



Source: IHS Jane's Conflict Monitor as of April 4

THE WASHINGTON POST

Source: The Washington Post, 7 April 2017

The military operation, which the Trump administration authorized in retaliation for a chemical attack killing scores of civilians dramatically expands U.S military involvement in Syria and exposes the United States to heightened risk of direct confrontation with Russia and Iran, both backing Assad in his attempt to crush his opposition.

In comparison, the start of the Iraq War in 2003 saw the use of roughly 500 cruise missiles, and 47 were fired at the opening of the anti-Islamic State campaign in Syria in 2014.

The U.S President, Barrack Obama began military operations against the Islamic State since 2014, it backed away from a planned assault on Syrian government sites in 2013 after a similar chemical attack on Syrian civilians.

Syria and Russia swiftly denounced the attack, launched at around 3:40 a.m. local time Friday (8:40 p.m. EDT Thursday) from U.S ships in the eastern Mediterranean. Assad called the missile strikes an “unjust and arrogant aggression” and Syrian officials said they would hamper the country’s ability to fight militant groups, Syria’s state news agency reported (The Washington Post, 7 April 2017).

The missiles were launched from two Navy destroyers, which is the USS Ross and USS Porter in the eastern Mediterranean. They struck an air base called Shayrat in Homs province, which is the site from which the planes that conducted the chemical attack in Idlib are believed to have originated. The targets included air defenses, aircraft, hangars and fuel.

In Moskwa, Russia announced it was pulling out of a pact with Washington to share information about warplane missions over Syria, where a U.S-led coalition is also waging airstrikes on Islamic State targets. Russian President Vladimir Putin called for an immediate meeting of the U.N. Security Council, and his spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, called the U.S. missile strikes “violations of the norms of international law, and under a far-fetched pretext” (The Washington Post, 7 April 2017).

While, the U.S President Trump said the strike was in the vital national security interest of the United States and called on all civilized nations to join with the U.S global coalition in seeking to end the slaughter and bloodshed in Syria.

In facts, the U.S military assault adds more complexity to Syria’s prolonged conflict, which includes fighters battling the Syrian government and others focused on combating the Islamic State, which despite over two years of American and allied attacks remains a potent force.

Conclusions

Location, massive oil reserves, powerful transnational forces such as religion and ethnicity, and the persistence of global threats such as terrorism and nuclear proliferation, have made the Middle East a focal point of instability in the modern world as well as a source of concern for a global power such as the United States. The area somewhat invites intervention from great powers with global ambitions. As recent history shows, this power of attraction can become an irresistible urge to intervene for policy-makers that conceive status and leadership in narrow terms of military power. From this point of view, it is not surprising to observe how the Middle East has become so relevant as a testing ground for competing conceptions

of America's role in the world in an age of unchallenged US military primacy. The enormous human and economic costs of US military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, combined with the financial crisis of 2008, however significantly tamed America's appetite for military adventures. Such a critical situation has made the quest for a new American grand strategy even more compelling, and Obama's fresh and unconventional foreign policy outlook has had a significant impact.

As the record of policy in the Middle East, especially the Iran deal shows, Obama's approach can indeed bring positive, even game changing results at a relatively small cost. Progress toward a less militarized, more inclusive, and more sustainable order in the region may indeed signal the transition to a more pragmatic and less militaristic, and perhaps more effective conception of America's global leadership. The other side of Obama's pragmatism, however, is a certain difficulties to discern a truly long term vision, something that leaves us a bit uncertain about his legacy and the future of his long game. While at the U.S Election Day 2016, it is open to question whether Obama's successors will continue along the path of a more pragmatic American leadership or the "Long Game" will turn out to be only a momentary policy adjustment. From Libya to Afghanistan, the multiple and interrelated crises that tragically continue to torment the Middle East will provide a great many opportunities to test the direction of US global strategy and the quality of America's global leadership.

Since 11 September 2001, the United States has been at war, the longest continuous conflict in its history. Its citizens have witnessed a failed surge into Afghanistan, a catastrophe in Iraq that helped destabilize vast swaths of the Middle East, an unconstitutional war in Libya that created a power vacuum exploited by ISIS, and a drone war that has killed hundreds of innocents in a half-dozen countries. The last two presidents campaigned against dumb wars and won. The more interventionist candidate has lost every election since 2008.

Yet the anti-war faction that mobilized against the Iraq War shrunk precipitously during the Obama years, and is less noisy as Trump takes office last January 2017.

Donald Trump is so singular a figure in background and temperament, so large a personality, and so seemingly immune to the usual pressures and incentives, that it is tempting to imagine that foreign policy under him will be simply the projection of his will. Think again. Like presidents before him, Trump will learn that going solo is not a recipe for an effective and enduring foreign policy. Always fraught and frustrating, the domestic politics of foreign policy have in recent years become even harder for presidents to manage. Trump will be no exception.

No grand strategy is perfect, and the very undertaking of grand strategy involves wrestling with the problems, challenges and tensions inherent to foreign policy. To its credit, the Obama administration has crafted a set of grand-strategic principles that give guidance to American policy, and that seem fairly reasonably, given Washington's international position and the particular challenges of the current situation.

However, the U.S grand strategy is rife with potent dilemmas, ranging from the political to the geopolitical. Considered individually, each of these dilemmas has the potential to be rather problematic; taken collectively, they raise real questions about how well a grand strategy that seems plausible enough in theory will ultimately fare in practice. How effective U.S. policy makers in this administration and the next U.S leadership will be in managing these issues and answering that question remains to be seen. What is certain is that the ongoing debate on American grand strategy will benefit from recognizing both the nature and the merits of the Obama grand strategy as well as the challenges and dilemmas therein.

To conclude, the U.S strategy of the last 15 years hasn't worked well as the former U.S President Barack Obama's attempt to be friendly in Middle East, but didn't help and that doing nothing and hoping for the best seems risky. None of the reasoning matters until the strategy is worked out.

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