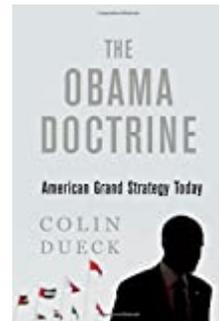


# H-Net Reviews

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**Colin Dueck.** *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. 336 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-020262-0.



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Over the last fifteen years, Colin Dueck has steadily built a deserved reputation within the academy as his generation's leading scholar of the ideological and political-cultural dimension of US grand strategy. In this latest book, we find him drawing upon that background, in combination with a parallel strand of contemporary policy analysis in his oeuvre, to make an early start on what will no doubt be an extended process for historians and political scientists: to ascertain, taxonomize, and evaluate the foreign policy strategy and legacy of President Barack Obama.

Obama is generally given credit for presenting a calm and moderate-sounding account of whatever his policy might be at any given time. When it comes to the substance of the underlying strategy, however, he has at some point or other been labeled in every way imaginable, from a pseudo-liberal front man for the American imperial project to a borderline-treasonously weak agent of retreat. With due sobriety, Dueck lays the table for his own analysis by noting this diversity of diagnoses, then mapping out a classification system of the strategic approaches he thinks are available, including retrenchment, containment, regime change/rollback, engagement, accommodation, and offshore balancing.

In a trajectory familiar to those acquainted with Dueck's past literature that slices and dices US policy and policymakers into distinct schools, he moves seamlessly from sharply delineating these alternatives to conceding that no actually existing policymaker fits cleanly into any such category. Rather than Obama included pursue hybrid strategies that mix and match elements from several. In these taxonomical sections there are others later on the strands of the domestic foreign policy debate and opposition the book is reminiscent of a less populist spin on Walter Russell Mead's *Special Providence* (2002), or a more contemporary riff on a similar tune to that of Henry Nau in his recent *Conservative Internationalism* (2013). Individual readers' enthusiasm may vary when it comes to these sorts of category-mapping exercises, which seem to fall back on diagnoses of blend and crossover when defied by reality. But as an example of its type, this one is certainly well executed.

When it comes to his evaluation of the Obama presidency, Dueck's account begins, as befits a mature critique that aspires to provide the definitive analysis (at least for the time being), with an outline of the major planks of Obama strategy of the sort a relatively sympathetic analyst might give. His core thesis is that Obama was a president whose overriding priority was a trans-

formational domestic agenda. We must therefore see his foreign policy in this context, reflecting a desire to keep costs down, sidestep decisions liable to trigger division within his painstakingly assembled Democratic constituency, and above all avoid getting embroiled in anything sufficiently large and controversial to distract and detract from the overriding priority of nation-building at home.

In Dueck's telling, Obama's strategy combined elements of almost all the options in the typology, but with the emphasis on retrenchment and accommodation. His policies saw the United States draw down on regretted overseas ground operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, while restricting new interventions such as that in Libya strictly to a light-footprint model. In dealing with hostile powers such as Iran or great power rivals such as Russia or China, he preferred a conciliatory approach which seemed to assume that by being considerate regarding what others perceived as their interests and displaying openness to concessions, relationships based on good faith and mutual compromise might be available. Viewed in isolation as a strategy for achieving US objectives in the world, Dueck rates this "Obama doctrine" as a disappointment: too many pre-emptive concessions without ensuring reciprocity and too much false optimism about the behavior of rival powers based on a shaky understanding of the rules of international politics. Meanwhile, in his handling of the political and strategic turbulence of the Middle East, the gap between Obama's objectives as articulated and the concrete actions taken communicated weakness and inconstancy. Between this and his perceived aloofness towards security allies, Dueck considers Obama to have sent bad signals about the solidity of American commitments and its value as an alliance partner.

Such apparent missteps make more sense, however, Dueck argues, if one understands that Obama's strategy did not really prioritize providing a consistent framework for effective delivery of the objectives articulated. Rather, the primary goal was simply to pull the United States back from its entanglements, redirect resources homeward, and seize upon whatever policies and narratives would allow most progress in that direction while staving off rows that might fracture the support base necessary to sustain the president's domestic agenda. Dueck is also rather critical of Obama as a manager of the policy process. He gives the president due credit for being personally calm, reflective, and deliberative. His process, however, has been highly centralized, entrusting an inner circle of White House loyalists with significant in-

fluence while keeping the holders of senior Cabinet offices at arm's length, and also, some have claimed, more swayed by domestic political considerations than the previous administration.

Having surveyed the main schools of conservative critique of Obama—these come in anti-interventionist, internationalist, and nationalist flavors—the final part of Dueck's book is given over to advocacy for Dueck's own favored approach, what he calls "conservative American realism." Like most of the strategies ultimately advocated by the author in books of this genre, this has a touch of Goldilocks about it: intervene, but prudently and only when interests are in play; maintain American credibility through robust and confidence-inspiring commitment to appropriate allies; and do not overreach or get drawn into costly conflicts unnecessarily. Still, with its emphasis on a more explicit and hard-nosed transactional bargaining with great powers, and a "say what you mean, mean what you say" approach to allies and interventions, it is hard to deny the appeal of Dueck's formulation, or that it would make for a bracing change if implemented. Likewise, his recommendation of greater investment in the strategic planning sections of the main foreign and security departments, and better structures to draw them together in pursuit of coherence, is hard to oppose if you believe long-term planning and coherence matter.

There are elements of Dueck's analysis that might strike a critic as loose threads worth pulling. Obama's own description of his domestic agenda might fit the bill of being "transformational" as advertised here, as might some of the ambitious projects of his first two years in office such as the Affordable Care Act. But with the loss of the House of Representative to uncompromising Republicans from 2010 onward, liberal legislative proposals have been dead on arrival since then. To what extent, then, can we accurately talk of a transformational domestic agenda dominating that president's time and attention after that point, unless by that we mean simply fighting to hold onto existing achievements in the face of pressure for rollback?

On the rationale for policy, the idea that Obama might have been more active if his priorities had been different may understate the extent that he was genuinely convinced none of the more activist roads untaken would have actually delivered the outcomes the United States wanted. If there is one lesson Obama learned from his predecessor abroad, it may be that there is at best a limited connection between investment and results in foreign policy. When Obama looked at Iraq, Syria, or

Afghanistan, his reasonable view may well have been that America's choice was between committing the minimum politically possible and seeing unwelcome events unfold, versus committing more resources in exchange for the same results, perhaps very slightly delayed. Perhaps this is merely to rephrase what Dueck is in fact arguing, but the point is that relative inaction may not be simply a matter of prioritization as much as it is a matter of pessimism about effectiveness. The part of Dueck's critique that unquestionably does land hard is that Obama has displayed a penchant for talking bigger than he intended to live up to in concrete policy, and for crafting narratives around his policy that create a misleading veneer of consistency, one that quickly falls away when subjected to stress or inspection.

With the benefit of hindsight, the strong suspicion must be that Obama, if given an entirely free hand, simply wanted no part of the Afghan commitment he inherited, and no part of the Syrian civil war that came about after he took office, even while foreseeing that less American involvement might be good news for actors distasteful to the United States. Perhaps he should have been more straightforward publicly about these positions, and more unambiguous in his pursuit of them. Perhaps, for similar reasons, he should have thought better of intervention in Libya. And Dueck's case that policy during the "revolution" in Egypt would have benefited from less naivety is persuasive. Meanwhile, Obama's belief that the United States should invest in its military options for hedging against China's rise at the same time cutting back on misadventures in peripheral states appears both sincere and right. If Dueck is correct that the signals of priority in this direction from the president have not been followed by proportionate resource allocation, the correction truer to Obama's strategic conviction would be to follow through more fully on resourcing the pivot to Asia, not to restore spending levels across the board.

Of course realist prescriptions such as those with which Dueck concludes lead us to a major political challenge with which he is well acquainted: can American leaders craft a strategy that explicitly cleaves to realist principles while also holding in place sufficient and stable domestic political support? After all, as noted above and as he seems well aware himself, many of the features of Obama's behavior of which Dueck is critical may stem less from inconsistency or inadequacy in the president's actual preferences, but from the need to keep his coalition together and also speak in language public opinion recognizes and accepts. Domestic political and ideological constraints are no less real, after all, than the external

realities with which strategists must contend.

Suppose it were true as seems quite plausible that Obama's personal position on Afghanistan from the outset was that he simply wanted the United States to withdraw, and beyond some bare essentials was not especially bothered by what that meant for government of that country. Such a position—cutting losses and escaping a draining ground war in strategically peripheral places—would be eminently reconcilable with realist principles. But could a president simply come out and put it in those terms within the confines of the politics of 2010? Surely not without alienating military leaders, powerful Cabinet officers, and large swathes of congressional and public opinion. Hence the occurrence of the pattern Dueck identifies: the articulation of a plan that appears highly unlikely to achieve its claimed objectives, not because the president believes in it but because it basically trends as close as is realizable towards his preferred destination, while making the gestures and compromises required to remain viable in the courts of elite and public opinion. In this and other instances, a president free to be entirely honest might simply explain what appear to be tensions between the avowed ends and means of policy by reference to the obligation political reality often imposes to be somewhat disingenuous.

In proposing conservative American realism, Dueck believes he can see a way through to an American policy that is all at once clearer in defining the boundaries of US interests, more robustly transactional in dealings with others, and transparent about the fact that it is operating in this manner. This has, however, long been an uncertainty in debates over US policy: could an American populace weaned for decades on relentless sermons about the necessity and virtue of American global leadership and the universal validity of liberal values be induced overnight to subsist happily on a diet of raw and unvarnished realist narratives about hard bargaining on behalf of the national interest narrowly defined? Even if a president were inclined to try, opportunities would be numerous for political rivals to play for advantage by tapping of the reservoirs of ideological sentiment thus left unattended. This would be especially the case when the country was next inevitably confronted by instances of human suffering, calculated terrorist outrages, or nose-thumbing provocations from a rival great power.

It may be true that President Obama's strategy would have benefited from fewer illusions about the likely outcomes of some of his chosen paths. But believing that unvarnished realism could be established and sustained

explicitly as the guiding framework for US policy may require a few illusions of its own about the malleability of the ideology tendencies prevailing in the polity. Nevertheless, whatever reservations one might have about its prospects for imminent adoption as presidential doctrine, Dueck's charted alternative, and his critique of Obama, present a bracing and richly knowledgeable analysis of pressing questions. This book is to be recommended both

as food for thought for those already initiated into the world of policy and as an accessible primer for a more general audience interested seeking context for Obama's choices and legacy.

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