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## Liberalism in Obama's age \*

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*By John Ikenberry*

*Professor of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University*

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I'm trying to lay out my thinking on Obama's foreign policy and the larger debate often seen inside the United States about the role of the United States in the world over the next years.

I'll also focus on some questions about the future of the US as a great power, the questions that are always debated every ten or fifteen years in America: Is America declining? What is the future of the American role in the world under conditions of declining power? And then, the questions that are even more difficult and tangled: If America is -relatively speaking- declining, is the world going to be more crowded with more great powers from different parts of the world, North and South, East and West? What is the future of this international order the US spent so many decades building (what I sometimes call the **Liberal International Order**, which is rule-based and openly built around all sorts of different institutions and partnerships)? When the world, as I put it in a *Foreign Affairs* article, becomes less American, will it become less liberal? What happens on the other side of the American century?

I want to face those questions through the eyes of the Obama administration and say mostly very positive things about president Obama and his team over the last four and a half years. I do think there are a coherent vision and a coherent set of initiatives and agendas to push the world in the right direction and bend history. That's what we always do when we are interested in foreign policy, to create conditions that would create more cooperation. So I think there is a coherent vision I would describe as **pragmatic internationalism**, which is a view of problem solving in international cooperation very much without ideological pretensions.

I study and teach international politics at Princeton in the Woodrow Wilson School. But Obama is not quite like Wilson. I think Obama's greatest challenge is domestic: the slow economic recovery as well as the deep and sharp partisan conflict in the United States is very disturbing and detrimental to the coherent agenda of his administration. I think the House Republicans are a source of a lot of this hostility and, in some ways, are dedicated to trying to prevent a successful administration to finish its turn.

That gap is not simply a gap between partisans on the right and Obama, it's a more general tendency in American politics. Political scientists, who talk about how to measure partisan divide and record the metrics based on voting behaviour in Congress, have found that the divide between Liberals and Conservatives, Republicans and Democrats is as wide today as it's been since the 1870's. I don't know what the 1870's were like, but I don't think it was quite as nasty as it is today. I think that there is something that's really quite difficult and dysfunctional even in a political system which celebrates division. Madison expected this and in the Federalist Papers it was designed the system for us to check each other and work through this gap. So it's not in that sense outside of the tradition. But it is something that should be looked

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Consejo Argentino  
para las Relaciones  
Internacionales  
Uruguay 1037, 1° piso  
C1016ACA Buenos Aires  
Argentina

Tel: ++54 (11)  
4811-0071 al 74

Fax: ++54 (11)  
4815-4742

cari@cari.org.ar

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out, and I hope that politicians of good will make the next two years a little better than in the past.

But it does mean, I think, that given the resistance in the Senate and in the House, there won't be new treaties, no climate change action, no law of the seas, and - even if the Pentagon wants it -no arms control that requires a treaty. These are basic conditions that the US will not be able to do when they require ratification of agreements in Congress.

And you will see how towards the next presidential election the Libertarian faction within the Republican Party will grow in the background. They have a very different critique of the American world from Bush, McCain and other Neoconservative Republicans who were, in some sense, internationalists. The Libertarian Republicans, such as Ron Paul, have a much more radical critique of the United States and are very willing to talk about dramatic shifts, pull backs, defence budgets, decreases, and disengaging, including NATO, perhaps.

So there will be in the future more of what I might call existential debates about the American role in the world, and those on the side that I'm on, of a very robust American internationalism, will have to provide good ideas and step up to make arguments in favour of engagement.

Obama has been in office for four and half a year, so we really can talk about his vision and his record. He came to office seeking a fresh start and with great ambition. He saw an opportunity to make a fresh start after 8 years which were controversial, tied to 9/11 and the War on Terror in Iraq. When a Democrat succeeds a Republican, it's a chance for a whole new team of thousands of critical appointees to come into a new administration. And he himself represents a fresh image for America, a new generation with non-traditional experiences and community-organizing. Of course, he is the first African-American president as well as the first Asian president; he lived in Indonesia and Hawaii, very fusion-oriented societies, full of different cultures and traditions. That's why he is so used to dealing with different types of people and working together on something.

At the same time, he came to office with constraints and crises that were pretty serious, some would say as those faced by Truman when he became president, perhaps. And these problems were not just as crises that would come and go, but more intractable, complex kinds of multigenerational problems in terms of struggles for solutions: unfinished unpopular wars in Iraq and Af-

ghanistan, stalled peace talks in the Middle East -which now are to some extent being unstalled-, North Korea and Iran building nuclear capacity, a deteriorating non-proliferation treaty, European friends in crisis. We invigorate the NPT, rise in public debt, global financial crisis that was the worst since the Great Depression, a trillion dollar overhang from these wars that were not funded by taxes. And finally, a sense of change in the global system, a multipolar anxiety about the future of a rising China and the BRICS, the global South, a new terrain for global politics that is going to require a new thinking and new kinds of foreign policies. All of this confronted Obama when he came to office.

My argument tonight is that there is a coherent approach in the context of all those crises and problems, even though events are making it difficult for Obama in many areas. I'm sure we'll talk about these problems tonight.

As I said, I would describe Obama as a pragmatic internationalist, with certain US leadership in tracking and tackling global problems, willing to work with anyone who comes to the table. Obama, as I read him, doesn't come with lots of ideological absolutes; he looks for the middle ground and believes in a reasoned discourse. That's an Enlightenment way of thinking about solving conflicts, an old-fashioned mentality where rational souls can sit down, discuss their problems and find a reasonable course. This is why I think he is having a really difficult time figuring out how to deal with Republicans in the House of Representatives, because they don't seem to fit that mould proposal to overcome problems.

I would say emblematic of his approach is the Nuclear Safety Summit held in Washington. You may be familiar with this initiative Obama hosted, where 47 heads of state came together to talk about how to -not necessarily reduce nuclear weapons- but make nuclear weapons and capacity more safe, introducing new safeguards and drawing these capacities down. So, not minding a treaty would not come out of this effort, it's not an agreement that requires ratification but it's a voluntary plan of action towards problems that we all agree exist.

So his approach is more of lead rather than command; I think that's a new style: watchwords, pragmatism, coalition-building, leading from the front, but also leading from behind. In fact, leading from behind can be kind as clever if the others who are leading from in front are doing things you want them to do and doing things with you, in coalition. The Libya intervention is an ex-

ample of that. He's comfortable working with democracies and non-democracies, asking practical questions: What is the problem? How do you fix it? Who is going to work with us on it?

As for his philosophy, I would say Obama's is a blend of realism and liberalism, which is very much an American approach to the world. He joins a liberal, open, trade and institutional perspective together with a power perspective.

He is a realist in his emphasis on working with other great powers. He shows willingness to collaborate with major states, such as China or Russia, with their own equities, their own portfolios, their own regional agendas. It is something that Henry Kissinger would be very comfortable with, quite similar to his Harvard doctoral dissertation of the concert of Europe, a kind of collective governance system of great powers. I think it is something that Obama is very comfortable with. It means engaging and respecting other great powers' accommodation, to restrain, reciprocity. These are traditional ways of building frameworks of diplomacy and cooperation. China is a key example of this. Putting the strategic and economic dialogues into place, institutionalize it and bringing it down to deputy level meetings with China. The START treaty with Russia is another example of that realist type of behaviour, starting with the important issues of power and order, and then working on from there.

He is liberal also, though; and this is very much part of Obama's mind-set. We have seen his liberal view in his support for the NPT and Global Zero, which I think he is sincerely trying to push forward since he cares about an arms control and disarmament agenda. And he is giving full rein to the secretary of state Hillary Clinton's own very creative efforts to the State Department, which I was impressed with, adding development to diplomacy, women's issues and clearly looking at building social constituencies for reform at the domestic level and at the international level, with NGOs and non-traditional security issues. This is all on the liberal side.

These two parts of Obama, the duality of the hard side and the pragmatic side, are very much American, and I think it's been very productive over the years.

Obama's pragmatic and often sober internationalism can be seen in his Oslo Nobel Peace Prize speech, which he wrote himself. I understand it's a real intellectual product, a set of ideas that a very powerful person has sat down himself to think about. I'm sure it was very

embarrassing for him receiving that prize so early in the administration. He was pragmatic in quoting John F. Kennedy, in his American University Speech in the summer before his assassination: *"Let us focus on a more practical, more attainable peace, based not on a sudden revolution in human nature, but on a gradual evolution of human institutions."* The essence is we can't redo the world, but we can craft institutions and make us bias ourselves a little bit in a certain direction we all want to go. In that Oslo speech, he was liberal in his embrace of the rule of law and international relations: *"we have a moral and strategic interest in binding ourselves to certain rules of conduct"*, channeling FDR and JFK.

So that's very much the Obama view; but what has he done? And this is where there's a debate: What are the accomplishments? What's left to do? What can you do, given the constraints? There's a lot to debate, but it can be said that this is the product of four and a half years:

- Ending two wars. We gave an acceptable closing in Iraq. And, in Afghanistan, not prolonging the agony and looking for some acceptable limit that would allow for what was the original cause of the intervention: that it would not be an Al Qaeda base anymore. So there will be provisions of a main grid security role that will keep that in check.
- Stabilising relations with China. I'll say more about that, I know China moves larger in Latin America than ever before. The so called 'pivot'; I would not have used that language, it's not really a pivot in the sense of doing new things in Asia, it's really pivoting from two wars to a kind of more globally oriented focus on Asia.
- Isolating Iran. The US showed willingness to negotiate with Iran while helping the Europeans with a tighter sanctions regime, the toughest sanctions ever.
- Strengthening the brand of the United States. I think in Europe and most of the world -except in the Middle East- the US is more favourably seen that when we took office.
- Reestablishing nuclear arms control in the global arena. I think that's an agenda, nothing we can say of is a deep accomplishment yet, but it's there.
- Embracing the G20 as a recognition that the governance system has to change. The UN Security Council will not be reformed.
- Stabilizing the economy after the world's most difficult crisis since the Great Depression.

- Resisting some interventions, including Iran and Syria.

Some people have started to liken Obama to Eisenhower. He's a president who doesn't get dramatic popular press and people sometimes forget about him, but he was in many eyes very successful, partly by agreeing not to do things. On two occasions Eisenhower said "no" to his military on using nuclear weapons. Remember he competed for the Republican nomination with Douglas MacArthur, who almost won and who was committed to using nuclear weapons in Korea. So there could have been a very different world. We don't credit Eisenhower for that; it's a non-event but an important one. I think some of what ultimately history would say about Obama is that he may have held back and that was a good thing.

As for the disappointments, I think the Middle East peace process is a huge disappointment, set up by the Cairo speech, and a very messy policy towards the Arab Spring and Egypt; not an easy policy problem to tackle but not a lot of easily identified policy direction either.

There is nothing very bold on global warming. As somebody who has been very supportive of the overall philosophy of Obama's foreign policy, I think he is not moving as much as I would like.

Given my past writings and my criticism on the War on Terror Bush pursued, putting an end to it means revisiting the Patriot Act, the surveillance programs and torture. But Guantanamo Bay still lingers and there is a very ambivalent view about drones, which I find limits the kind of warfare which may be necessary in the age we live in, but need to be put in a normative and internationally agreed upon contexts so that they don't come back to bite America later on.

Just one thing before I conclude about China. I think a very robust strategy in the general view is to engage China but also counterbalance China. The US is engaged in counterbalancing China and it's very functional because China tends to cooperate most when we talk openly and honestly about supporting Taiwan, about human rights and about North Korea; it's expected and it's respected, and it's reciprocated with seriousness. I think that it's not bad to be tough with China but we want to, at the same time, have a very intelligent policy of engagement involving the strategic dialogue, reinsurance about allies and reengaging the ASEAN. I think it was a brilliant move several years ago by Hillary Clinton adding America's voice to ASEAN efforts to make sure

that China settles the South China Sea in an agreed upon way. That was a great move, a terrific effort to be on the right side of issues.

Going to meetings is very important. Showing up in Asia at meetings is important, even though you are jetlagged and tired, you've got to be there, it's not just symbolic, and it's real. And Hillary Clinton, of course, has the markings of a weary traveler.

One final thing about Asia: South Korea is one of the great success stories of the last decade, a country that has made transitions that are very much in the mould of stakeholder, embracing a system of multilateral trade and security cooperation; the hallmarks of this system the US has devoted itself to. The State Department and Defence Department are going together to two-plus-two talks in Seoul with their counterparts; the first time that was ever done, a very important signal. And, of course, in Seoul under President Lee, and now with Madam Park, there is a reciprocal commitment and willingness to do great things on a global stage, such as hosting the second meeting of the Nuclear Summit, supporting other kinds of multilateral events and hosting the G20 process. So, Korea is a country to watch as it rises up and finds opportunities to leverage its position in the global system.

Part of my own work on institutions and strategic restraint is the need to create institutions to allow signaling restraint. Rising states have a problem, the same that post-Bismarck Germany had of self-encirclement based on power growth; how do you grow and become more influential on a global stage without triggering a counterattack or a counterbalance? Well, by tying oneself to other countries, signaling our benign intentions through multilateral cooperation, involving ourselves in institutions. So the United States would need to find tools for China to use to signal restraint.

And last, a final word, Mr. Chairman, about the big picture. I think that Obama has got the right type of vision of engagement in a multi-faceted world, that recognizes that power shifts are under way, that understands that leadership may be even more necessary than in the past, and that discerns a sense of mutual security vulnerability, or what I describe as a recognition that the greatest master trend in the world today is the **rising security interdependence**, that we face threats that are diffuse, uncertain and globalized. We are in a world where people that we didn't know about before could pose threats to us through health pandemics or terrorism, or economic policies that reverberate our way. So the world is connected



in several ways, not just economically, but in terms of security. The way other people live and act in other places, matters (more) than ever before; how they burn energy, how they educate, how they engage in public health, how they treat their minorities, how they abide by international agreements, it all matters in more places and in more ways than ever before.

The first time I was actually aware that somebody named Senator Obama was up and running as a politician, was at an interview he gave to the *International Herald Tribune*, where he basically said “*part of being a leader is signalling your commitment to restrain the use of your power*”, and that was perfect Ikenberry thinking. The irony that world politics tells is that being actually able to credibly tell other people that you’re not going to be nasty and aggressive makes them more willing to work with you. And under conditions of unipolarity, I think Obama understood that it’s not simply about marching around the world doing things and insisting other people to follow, but restraining yourself and quietly helping frame debates; it doesn’t mean you aren’t powerful or influential, but it means that you indirectly try to shape and, as I suggested, bend history through sustained engagement over the long term.

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**G. John Ikenberry** / Is the Albert G. Milbank Professor of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University in the Department of Politics and the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. He is also Co-Director of Princeton’s Center for International Security Studies. Ikenberry is also a Global Eminence Scholar at Kyung Hee University in Seoul, Korea. In 2013-2014 Ikenberry will be the 72nd Eastman Visiting Professor at Balliol College, Oxford.

Professor Ikenberry is the author of six books, including Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American System (Princeton, 2011). His book, After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars (Princeton, 2001), won the 2002 Schroeder-Jervis Award presented by the American Political Science Association for the best book in international history and politics. A collection of his essays, entitled Liberal Order and Imperial Ambition: American Power and International Order (Policy) appeared in 2006. Ikenberry is also co-author of Crisis of American Foreign Policy: Wilsonianism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Princeton 2009), which explores the Wilsonian legacy in contemporary American foreign policy. Ikenberry has also the editor or co-editor of fourteen books, including America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power (Cornell, 2002), The End of the West? Crisis and Change in Atlantic Order (Cornell 2008) and Unipolarity and International Relations Theory(Cambridge, 2011). Ikenberry has authored 127 journal articles, essays, and book chapters.

Professor Ikenberry is the co-director of the Princeton Project on National Security, and he is the co-author, along with Anne-Marie Slaughter, of the final report, Forging a World of Liberty Under Law. Among his many activities, Professor Ikenberry served as a member of the Policy Planning Staff in 1991-92, as a member of an advisory group at the State Department in 2003-04, and as a member of the Council on Foreign Relations Task Force on U.S.-European relations, the so-called Kissinger-Summers commission. He is also a reviewer of books on political and legal affairs for *Foreign Affairs*.