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The existing literature explains the wavering course of President Barack Obama’s policy on the 2001–03 Egyptian crisis as attributed to either his personal characteristics (lack of an international experience, predisposition to sermonize rather than to strategize) or to the impact of the decline of the United States as a global superpower (inability to influence foreign actors and contexts). Although both explanations are worthy of consideration, this article seeks to demonstrate that they are insufficient when accounting for the uncertainties shown by the United States during the Egyptian crisis. Domestic factors, particularly the internally divided US political elite and a foreign policy team with different views, played a crucial intervening role in defining the features of US foreign policy. It was domestic politics that made the Obama administration ineffective in dealing with the new scenario that emerged in the Middle East and in Egypt in particular.

Keywords: US foreign policy; Egyptian crisis; Obama’s leadership; American decline; domestic factors

Introduction

The Arab Spring is one of the few foreign policy issues with which the administration of Barack Obama had to deal unconstrained, thanks to the legacy of the previous US President, George W. Bush. Nevertheless, the Obama administration failed to pursue a clear and consistent course of action designed to achieve politically sensible objectives. Instead, its choices had elements of uncertainty, if not incoherence, that seemed unprecedented in US foreign policy in the region over the last three decades. Our analysis of the Obama administration’s position towards the Egyptian crisis for the period 2011–13 confirms the charge, advanced by several observers, that Obama was ‘wavering’ in dealing with the domestic political change in Arab countries. This wavering was renewed during the Syrian crisis between August and September 2013, and it had been previously observed during the Libyan crisis of 2011.

How can the Obama administration’s uncertainties be accounted for? This article, first, reconstructs the Obama administration’s uncertainties, even contradictory positions with regard to the Egyptian crisis and how it evolved during the period between 2011 and 2013. Secondly, it attempts to advance an explanation of these uncertainties that goes deeper than both the macro- and micro-accounts currently available. Indeed, two interpretations were advanced for explaining Obama’s uncertainty
during the Egyptian crisis: the first we call the micro-interpretation, attributing the causes to the US President’s personal inexperience in foreign policy and his tendency to sermonize rather than strategize; the second we call the macro-interpretation, which attributes his uncertainty as being the expression of a deeper process of US decline. Although these factors are not to be discounted, they are indeed treated as independent variables in this study; they are considered here as insufficient in explaining Obama’s wavering in the Egyptian crisis, treated here as the dependent variable. Both factors should be located in a larger analytical framework where domestic factors, in particular the divisions both between the President and Congress and among the President’s bureaucratic staff, played an intervening role. The Egyptian crisis makes it possible to delineate a theoretical model of US foreign policy, distinct from the various strands of realism and liberalism rooted in International Relations (IR) theory, that stresses the role of domestic institutional variables, as recognized by Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), for understanding why the Obama administration had difficulties in dealing with the novel features of the Egyptian crisis.1

Obama and the Middle East

Analysing US foreign policy from the wider perspective of global leadership, Zbigniew Brzezinski, a former National Security Advisor to President Jimmy Carter, concluded his Second Chance (2007) by proposing that the United States would have to restore friendly relations with the world of Islam, engage other regional powers, and identify itself with universal human values in order to correct the disastrous management of foreign policy under George W. Bush. Two years later, Brzezinski and other observers thought that it fell to Barak H. Obama, the then newly elected American President, to fulfil this mission to solve the decades-long dilemma of US Middle East policy by promoting both democratic ideals and its security and economic interests (Brzezinski 2007). In his seminal speech at Cairo University in June 2009, President Obama advanced the expected new approach to the problems of the Middle East when he said: ‘I have come here to Cairo to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based on mutual interest and mutual respect.’ Obama’s mention of democracy was ranked fourth in the issues he evoked in his speech. Reiterating US support for universal values of free speech, rule of law and good governance, Obama nevertheless stressed that ‘no system of government can or should be imposed by one nation on any other’ (Obama 2009).

Throughout the period between 2009 and 2010, the Obama administration pursued a non-interventionist approach towards the Middle East; abandoning the previous paradigm of democracy promotion, and relaunching the importance of building effective relations with all actors of the region (Ryan 2011). The Obama administration downgraded democracy promotion in Egypt through cuts to programmes instituted by the previous administration, whose activities were reduced from US$50 million to US $20 million. A similar cut was made in the programmes of organizations supporting Egyptian civil society from US$32 million to US$7 million, and the latter amount went only to those non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that generally enjoyed the approval of the Egyptian government (McInerney 2010).

Facing a new regional context, Obama remained doubtful about whether or not US interests had to coincide with supporting friendly authoritarian regimes in the region. In August 2010, Obama reportedly sent to senior members of his foreign policy team a memo entitled ‘Political Reform in the Middle East and North Africa’ that emphasized
evidence of growing citizen discontent with the region’s regimes’, in which he urged his advisors to challenge the traditional idea that stability in the region always serves vital US interests. An inter-agency group concluded the review in mid-December 2010 – just when the protests started in Tunisia – by stating that conventional wisdom was wrong and that ‘all roads led to political reform’ (Ryan 2011). It was the unfreezing of the old geopolitical cleavages that opened the road to political change in the area.

On 25 January 2011, as soon as the protests erupted against Egypt’s President Hosni Mubarak’s 30-year rule, the Obama administration acted cautiously given the weakening of the previous foreign policy’s parameters. The initial statement made by the then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, declaring the United States’ support for free assembly, read: ‘our assessment is that the Egyptian government is stable and is looking for ways to respond to the legitimate needs and interests of the Egyptian people’ (Clinton 2011a). It was not until 28 January, when the Egyptian police used massive force against peaceful demonstrators, that the administration began moving away slightly from its earlier belief about Mubarak’s regime’s ‘stability’, with Obama stating that ‘this moment of volatility has to be turned into a moment of promise […] and] that there must be reform – political, social, and economic reforms – that meet the aspirations of the Egyptian people’ (Obama 2011a).

When Mubarak attempted another manoeuvre on 1 February by declaring his intention to remain in power until the next presidential elections – scheduled in October 2011 – in which he would not run, Obama responded on the same day with a significant shift signalling his recognition that Mubarak’s leadership should be regarded over: ‘An orderly transition must be meaningful, it must be peaceful, and it must begin now’ (Obama 2011b). The administration’s position persisted and became even clearer when, on 5 February, it had to distance itself from the views expressed by Presidential Envoy, Frank Wisner, who had been sent by the administration to meet with Mubarak on 31 January. He argued that Mubarak’s presence was required to implement the desired reform (Fahim, Landler, and Shadid 2011). Less than a week later the revolution triumphed with the resignation of Mubarak.

Surfing the tide

As the sequence of events described shows, the positions taken by the Obama administration gradually moved from supporting Mubarak, to calling for reform, to signalling that Mubarak’s rule was over and that an orderly transition should begin ‘now’, to denying that Mubarak’s presence was required to implement the desired reform. In this, the positions taken by the administration corresponded to those of the Egyptian protesters that became radicalized with the regime’s rejection to consider their demands, its use of violence against civilians and then procrastination of the required changes. In fact, a soft political roadmap to be implemented upon Mubarak’s supervision was proposed by Omar Suleiman, ex-Chief of Intelligence who Mubarak appointed as Vice President. For the very first time, a new political component emerged from the crisis of the Egyptian regime, in the form of domestic public opinion independent from the established authorities, although unquestionably connected with various religious and civilian groups and associations. Egyptian politics grew more complex because of the political emergence of a civil society traditionally kept within the shadow of the regime’s organizations and state institutions. It was President Obama who evoked the necessity of this emergence in his Cairo speech, but,
once emerged, civil society made the relations between the United States and Egypt inevitably less hierarchical. As Zaki Laidi stressed, ‘Arab public opinion will now have a place in Arab–American relations’ (Laidi 2012, 128).

The demands of the Egyptian protesters therefore gradually moved from asking socio-economic reforms and the firing of the Prime Minister and the Minister of Interior to requiring that Mubarak appoints a Vice President and rerunning the December 2010 parliamentary elections, to no less than the resignation of Mubarak himself. In short, Obama, who was realistic enough to maintain the traditional US alliances in the region, but still dissatisfied with the lack of democracy, gradually adapted to events that led to the January 2011 revolution, choosing to surf the tide.

In 2011–12, when the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) ruled Egypt, the Obama administration attempted to play a role in influencing post-revolutionary Egypt by working with the ruling SCAF to shape the transitional period ending with democratic elections and handing over power to an elected civilian leadership. The Obama administration chose to maintain the realistic approach of enhancing economic aid considered to be the key to the country’s stability, and of having strong ties with the military – the major stakeholder in the US aid and the backbone of the Egyptian–Israeli peace which is a ‘must-have’ in US–Egyptian bilateral relations. In short, money was used for obtaining influence. In fact, on the one hand, before the G-8 summit in Deauville in May 2011, the United States approved a US$1 billion debt-swap deal with the Egyptian government that allowed Egypt to invest this amount in creating jobs and fostering entrepreneurship, and committed to guaranteeing another US$1 billion in Egyptian loans raised in the global capital markets (‘Factsheet: economic support’ 2011). At the summit in Deauville, the G-8 group decided to provide US$20 billion for Tunisia and Egypt through the international development banks by 2013. Much of this funding, however, is yet to be delivered. On the other hand, the Obama administration publicly encouraged the SCAF to promote the basic features of a democratic system and good governance – pluralism, freedom of speech, religious freedom and economic reform – although its encouragements, apparently, did little to direct the transitional period towards a government that would sustain these principles.

Throughout the 18-month period of the SCAF rule, the United States ‘saw the generals make mistake after mistake – including failing to draft a constitution, blessing an elections law designed to favor Islamists and giving vent to anti-Christian violence – but policymakers did little more than pose questions’ (Saltoff 2013). The worst crisis of US–Egyptian relations since the SCAF assumed power came in December 2011, when Egyptian security forces raided the offices of American democracy-promotion NGOs (Freedom House, the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute), whose US personnel were charged with criminal offenses and then forbidden to leave Egypt in January 2012. The Obama administration chose to settle the issue with minimal fuss as it reportedly paid a ‘bail’ of US$330,000 for each of those US personnel which allowed them eventually to leave Egypt (Reuters 2012). The Obama administration, in the words of Steven Cook, ‘has sought to shape the generals’ behavior by praising them in public while quietly pushing them from behind the scenes’ (Lynch and Cook 2011). Reportedly, the Obama administration had insisted that Islamists should have a ‘seat at the table’ of power in Egypt, so that the SCAF would allow the Muslim Brotherhood a power position in the new parliament (Day 2011).

As Islamists, the Muslim Brotherhood and the ultra-orthodox Salafis won close to 70% of the vote in the parliamentary elections held in November 2011, the Obama administration quickly accepted this result. In a press statement, Secretary of State
Hillary Clinton congratulated the Egyptian people and noted that ‘the United States stresses the importance of Egypt’s transition to democracy continuing in a just, transparent, and inclusive manner’ (Clinton 2011b). The final act with SCAF came in July 2012 when Secretary Clinton paid a visit to Cairo after the electoral victory of Mohamed Morsi, of the Muslim Brotherhood, and Egypt’s first president to reach the government’s highest office through free elections. Though Clinton stressed the need to protect the rights of all Egyptians, in her meeting with Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi, head of SCAF, she voiced support for a ‘full transition to civilian rule’ (BBC News 2012).

Pragmatist expectation
What explains Obama’s support for an accelerated transition towards free elections that would have guaranteed the success of Islamist parties? Obama adopted, unlike his predecessors, a more nuanced approach to Islamic politics, an approach that drew a distinction among the many faces of Islamists that was based on whether or not a particular Islamist party/group renounce the use of violence. This approach was largely discussed in the US anti-conservative media. In March 2009, for instance, the analyst Fareed Zakaria expressed the view that the United States, while fighting jihadi terrorists, should also learn to live with political Islam, citing former CIA analyst Reuel Marc Gerecht who said: ‘what you have to realize is that the objective is to defeat bin Ladenism, and you have to start the evolution. Moderate Muslims are not the answer. Shiite clerics and Sunni fundamentalists are our salvation from future 9/11s’ (Zakaria 2009).

As one Egyptian commentator aptly put it, Obama had adopted the so-called ‘engagement leads to moderation’ theory. According to the latter, the engagement of Islamists in the political process would transform them from extremist, radical groups into moderate forces, since their attempt to get the votes of a large sectors of society would necessarily mean the Islamists’ adoption of compromises and ideas that are consistent with what the majority believes in (Kamal 2013). According to Obama’s doctrine, which viewed the 9/11 terrorist attacks as a response to US hegemonic power in the larger Middle East, Muslim Brotherhood ‘ascendancy in Egypt would inhibit the evolution of a new generation of Osama bin Landens and pre-empt another 9/11’ (McCann 2014).

That is why, for example, in February 2011, the US National Intelligence Director, James Clapper, testifying before the House Intelligence Committee, stated that

the term Muslim Brotherhood is an umbrella term for a variety of movements. In the case of Egypt, a very heterogeneous group, largely secular, which has eschewed violence and has decried al-Qaeda as a perversion of Islam. […] They have pursued social ends, a betterment of the political order in Egypt. (ABC News 2011)

Thus, the Obama administration came to consider the notion that the Islamists in power would learn how to deal with Egyptian political and religious complexity. In this regard, the Turkish experience was considered to be a crucial reference for success. In fact, ‘having decided to reduce America’s military footprint in the region and lower its profile, Obama looked to Turkey, with its liberal, successful economic model, to fill any power vacuum and serve as an example to neighboring Muslim countries’ (Gerges 2013a). Notably, during the Egyptian crisis, Obama spent more time in meetings and telephone calls with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip
Erdogan than with any other foreign leader (Gerges 2013a, 316; McCann 2014, 14). Alternatively, in the case of failure, under consideration was the Indonesian example where, in the words of Thomas Friedman, ‘Islamist parties swept democratically held elections in the 1990s, but soon lost ground after failing to meet voters’ expectations’ (Feteha, Alaa, and Ali 2012).

Either as a result of no choice or as a calculated pragmatism for dealing with ascendant political Islam, the Obama administration came to rely on the view that ‘engagement leads to moderation’, which was also predicated by letting the Islamists change positions to cater to the US vital interests concerning relations with Israel and free-market economy (Gerges 2013b). The assumption was thus that the exercise of power by the Muslim Brotherhood, if not supported by moderation, would inevitably bring about the defeat of political Islam in the following elections and their replacement by more liberal forces à la Indonesia. Otherwise, the electoral constraints would push the reorientation of political Islam towards a more moderate approach à la Turkey. In either case, Egyptian politics would move towards a more inclusive political system, where Islamists could assume and then lose power, thus institutionalizing the transition towards democracy from within.

**Testing the pragmatist expectation**

Tested by the ‘engagement leads to moderation’ view, Morsi’s one-year presidency has not proved to be a success as expected. Externally, President Morsi loudly proclaimed his government’s desire for a continued ‘strategic partnership’ with the United States (Washington Post 2012), though the attack on the US embassy in Cairo by an Egyptian mob in September 2012 brought about the strongest statement ever made by Obama on post-Mubarak Egypt: ‘I don’t think that we would consider them an ally, but we don’t consider them an enemy’ (Reuters 2013). Morsi also asserted his commitment to the Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty and even played a key role in the ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas in Gaza in November 2012. The Morsi government also negotiated a US$4.8 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), but eventually failed to reach an agreement after rejecting to implement the required economic reforms out of concern over the latter’s political implications in the next parliamentary elections (Khalaf 2013).

Notwithstanding pragmatist expectations, the democratically elected Morsi went on to govern undemocratically. In November 2012, Morsi issued a constitutional declaration that gave the President sweeping powers, immunized his decisions from judicial review, and initiated a brusque intervention by the executive authority in the judicial authority’s competence by firing the incumbent prosecutor-general and substituting him with another prosecutor-general subordinated to the President (Ahram 2012). Shortly thereafter, the Constituent Assembly – boycotted by all non-Islamists, including liberals, leftists as well as the country’s Islamic authority, Al-Azhar, and the Coptic Church – passed in a single 16-hour session a 236-article draft Constitution (later to be approved in December 2012 by a 64% majority of one-third of eligible voters) whose ostensibly progressive articles on individual freedoms were countered by other articles on the superiority of principles of Sharia law, the extensive authority of the President, and the trial of civilians in military courts. The Morsi government’s inaction towards repeated attacks on Coptic churches, primarily the first-ever attack on the papal cathedral in Cairo in April 2013, and on Egyptian Muslim Shiites in June
2013, confirmed the ambiguity of the Muslim Brotherhood’s position on religious freedom.

In short, Morsi’s one-year presidency fulfilled, almost precisely, what Obama had warned against in his 2009 speech at Cairo University:

[T]here are some who advocate for democracy only when they are out of power; once in power, they are ruthless in suppressing the rights of others. You must maintain your power through consent, not coercion; you must respect the rights of minorities, and participate with a spirit of tolerance and compromise; you must place the interests of your people and the legitimate workings of the political process above your party. Without these ingredients, elections alone do not make true democracy. (Obama 2011b)

The pragmatist adaptation thus turned into wishful thinking. The Obama administration failed to respond properly to the Morsi government’s breaching of the above ingredients. For instance, in February 2013, in a telephone call with Morsi, President Obama reaffirmed the US support to the Egyptian people in their transition to democracy and ‘welcomed President Morsi’s commitment to serving as a President for all Egyptians, including women and people of all faiths’ (Obama 2013a). Then, the US position slightly shifted in light of the multi-million anti-Morsi demonstrations on 30 June 2013. Indeed, in another telephone call with Morsi on 1 July, Obama stressed that the ‘United States is committed to the democratic process in Egypt and does not support any party or group [and that] democracy is about more than elections’. The White House statement stressed that ‘the current crisis can only be resolved through a political process’ (Obama 2013b). Shortly thereafter, nevertheless, when Egypt’s Army Chief, General Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi, did outset Morsi on 3 July, the US position changed again. Obama called upon the Egyptian military ‘to move quickly and responsibly to return full authority back to a democratically elected civilian government as soon as possible […] and to avoid any arbitrary arrests of President Morsi and his supporters’, while initiating a review of all US aid to Egypt (Obama 2013c).

While the pro-Morsi supporters continued to demonstrate in Cairo, the US decided on 24 July to delay the delivery of four F-16 fighter jets – part of an already agreed order of 20 planes – eight of which had already been delivered to Egypt. Citing ‘the current situation in Egypt’, the Pentagon spokesperson confirmed that ‘we do not believe it is appropriate to move forward at this time with the delivery of F-16s’ (BBC News 2013). Another act of pressure came on 15 July, after the Egyptian security forces dispersed two large pro-Morsi encampments in Cairo, which resulted in several hundred deaths. In response, Obama decided to cancel the joint US–Egyptian military exercises that were scheduled in September 2013 and instructed his national security team ‘to assess the implications of the actions taken by the interim government and further steps that we may take as necessary with respect to the U.S.–Egyptian relationship’ (Obama 2013d). The latest act of pressure came in October 2013 when the administration decided to suspend the bulk of US military aid to Egypt (Psaki 2013).

Obama, however, was careful not to cross the line of no return with the new Egyptian leaders. The Obama administration deliberately refrained from calling the ousting of Morsi a coup d’État since such a definition would necessarily mean cutting US financial aid to Egypt. In fact, the Fiscal Year 2012 Consolidated Appropriations Act prevents the United States from providing ‘any assistance to the government of any country whose duly elected head of government is deposed by military coup d’État or decree’, whereas Obama’s FY 2014 budget request allocated to Egypt US$1.3 billion in military aid and US$250 million in economic aid (Zilberman 2013).
Deputy Secretary of State William Burns, in a visit to Cairo on 15 July, called the Morsi’s ouster ‘a moment when Egyptians have a second chance to put their post-revolutionary transition on a successful path’ (Burns 2013). Even more, the new Secretary of State John Kerry told Pakistan Geo News on 1 August that the Egyptian military was in fact ‘restoring democracy’ (Bradely and Shah 2013).

Another balancing act was remarked in Obama’s speech before the United Nations General Assembly in September 2013, where he noted that despite the fact that Morsi was democratically elected, [he] proved unwilling or unable to govern in a way that was fully inclusive. The interim government that replaced him responded to the desires of millions of Egyptians who believed the revolution had taken a wrong turn, but it, too, has made decisions inconsistent with inclusive democracy. (Obama 2012)

Also, despite suspending the bulk of military aid, the United States decided to continue the military assistance that is related to border security, counter-terrorism and Sinai security, as well as economic aid (Psaki 2013).

Obama’s wavering: explanations

Thus far, we have reconstructed the uncertainties of US foreign policy towards the Egyptian crisis. How could those uncertainties be interpreted? Obama’s wavering in the period between 2011 and 2013 constituted an object of discussion among observers, journalists and scholars. The discussion has been intense, nevertheless it has not helped in delineating an analytical framework able to give account of US policy relative to a country such as Egypt which is experiencing an unexpected domestic transformation. Two interpretations have emerged, but with limited explanatory power. One interpretation, which might be defined as micro-assessment, focused on the President’s personal qualities or political convictions. It stressed that Obama is weary of using military power; he is not comfortable with the traditional messianic tone of US foreign policy; he tends to sermonize rather than to act; he is a prisoner of the intellectual contradiction of being a liberal pressured to behave as a conservative. For instance, Brzezinski, who noticed the absence of a coherent Middle East policy matching rhetoric and action, commented: ‘I greatly admire his insights and understanding. I don’t think he really has a policy that’s implementing those insights and understandings. […] He doesn’t strategize. He sermonizes’ (Ryan 2011). Likewise, Carla Robbins observed: ‘he is a cerebral guy and may have a strategic vision for the US but he hasn’t articulated it publicly’ (The Economist 2013, 15). In short, he ‘is aloof and cautious’ (The Economist 2013, 5). At the same time, Obama’s aides tried to give a cultural dignity to the President’s behaviour: ‘he is an anti-ideological politician interested only in what actually works […] a “consequentialist”’ (Ryan 2011). Undoubtedly, there is a certain truth in these observations and analyses. Obama was trained as a community organizer; he was a civil rights’ supporter; he came to power as the promising fixer of domestic problems. Before entering the White House, Obama had no significant record in foreign policy, had very few relations with foreign leaders and did not develop any consistent view on international politics. After assuming the presidency, he surrounded himself with seasoned politicians trained in foreign affairs – such as his Vice-President Joe Biden and then Secretary of State Clinton – in order to focus on domestic politics, subletting foreign policy to others. Seen from this perspective, the incoherence of Obama’s Egyptian and Middle East policy might be plausibly explained in subjective terms.
Although we do not discount this interpretation, since the personality of the decision-maker always matters, evidence suggests that the latter cannot be considered the decisive intervening variable in this case study because it cannot be detectable in other foreign policy issues. Obama’s foreign policy was quite determined and successful in other crucial areas, such as the imposition of sanctions on Iran and counterterrorism (particularly the drone attacks and the hunting down of Osama bin Laden to his hiding place in Pakistan). Indeed, in those issues, the personal leadership of Obama was positively acknowledged.

A second interpretation of Obama’s wavering, which might be defined as *macro-assessment*, focused on the decline of US power in the aftermath of the Great Recession that exploded in 2007. As Christopher Layne argued:

[I]t is apparent that much has changed since 2007. Predictions of continuing unipolarity have been superseded by intimations of American decline and geopolitical transformation. The Great Recession has had a two-fold impact. First, it has raised doubts about the economic and financial underpinnings of US primacy. Second, [...] China’s breathtakingly rapid rise to great power status has confirmed the erosion of American geopolitical dominance.

The net outcome has been the following: ‘The Unipolar Era has ended up and the Unipolar Exit has begun’ (Layne 2012, 410–412). Obama’s wavering in the Egyptian crisis might thus be considered as an example of the difficulty of defining a course of action in a period of US retrenchment. As Robert Kagan critically noticed, ‘the inability of the United States to wield influence effectively in the Middle East [...] or to manage the tumultuous Arab Awakening [was considered] a sign of weakness and decline’ (Kagan 2012, 22). There is a certain truth in this *macro-assessment* of the US foreign policy’s uncertainties. To be sure, at the heart of Obama’s foreign policy there continued to be an unprecedented dilemma to deal with: ‘while the United States cannot solve the world’s problems alone, it is not ready to allow any of these to be solved without it, let alone against it’ (Laidi 2012, xii). Either as an effect of the Great Recession or of more general systemic transformations, it seems unquestionable that the global system has entered a new political era.

The events of the 2000s, starting from 9/11 to the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2003 to the demise of the neo-conservative grand strategy of exporting democracy to the Middle East, probably postponed the acknowledgement of the historical change in the world’s power structure that emerged with the end of the Cold War. The combination of the crisis of legitimacy crisis, induced by the failure of the George W. Bush’s wars and the financial crisis, triggered by the functioning of unregulated markets has led the United States to a serious crisis. It has become increasingly clear that the United States has no longer the material resources or the moral standing for playing its post-Second World War traditional role of the indispensable nation for keeping or guaranteeing the international order only by itself.

However, if it is plausible to identify a change of the international system in a post-American direction – a change that has certainly made cumbersome US policy in areas of dramatic transformations as the Middle East – it is also plausible to assess that any interpretation of those difficulties as the expression of an ‘America declining in the Middle East’ (Hudson 2013, 461–464) is quite premature. It is true that other powers are emerging, such as China in particular, but it is also true that economic prosperity does not automatically translate into geopolitical power. In Robert Kagan’s words: ‘Did the fundamentals of America’s relative power shift so dramatically? The answer
is no’ (Kagan 2012, 20). In short, the United States has not become a ‘first among equals’ country. Its multidimensional power cannot be underestimated, although the rise of other regional powers has created a new and unbalanced multipolar world.

A foreign policy analysis model

According to our interpretation, both micro- and macro-factors are necessary but not sufficient for understanding Obama’s wavering. The insufficiency of the subjective characteristics of the President or of the global factor of American decline to account for the incoherence of US foreign policy on the Egyptian crisis calls for a different theoretical explanation. At the same time, the Egyptian crisis of 2011–13 may be considered a crucial empirical test for delineating a theory of US foreign policy distinct from the mainstream theories (realism and liberalism) used in IR (Snyder 2004, 36–62).

Indeed, US foreign policy in the Egyptian crisis cannot be interpreted through the various strands of realism, given that the crisis did not epitomize a confrontation between states, nor was US behaviour motivated by the necessity to prevent or oppose other states or superpowers from taking its position of influence in the area. Certainly, the United States had to preserve its role of global superpower in the Middle East in order to advance its three core interests, which are the free flow of oil, the security of Israel and the countering of terrorism active in the area. However, the existence of those interests does not explain the wavering of Obama’s foreign policy per se. Realism is too deterministic in its explanatory capacity to the point of downsizing the role of politics. US foreign policy in the Egyptian crisis cannot be explained through the various strands of liberalism either. The Obama administration gave up to the idea of exporting democracy in the region (the militant Wilsonian liberalism of the George W. Bush presidency), nor was it engaged in setting up a system of institutional interdependence in the region. The Egyptian crisis derived from an internal transformation connected neither to the expanding aims of an anti-US power nor to the expression of a purely liberal revolution in search of a new institutional order in the region (as in post-1989 Eastern Europe).

For these reasons, to interpret US foreign policy in the Egyptian crisis, a different model to those derived from IR theories, is required. Our model derives rather from FPA, a subdiscipline of political science connecting domestic politics (as conceptualized by Comparative Politics – CP) and the international system (as conceptualized by IR), as it has come to be developed from the pioneering work of James N. Rosenau in 1971 to the most recent work by Christopher Hill in 2003 (Rosenau 1971; Hill 2003). According to our model, the dependent variable (Obama’s wavering) can be considered the outcome of the interaction between the two independent variables discussed above (the personality of the President and the features of the international system) and two crucial intervening variables (i.e. the divisions between the governmental institutions and the divisions within the foreign policy team of the Obama administration). All US foreign policy outcomes are necessarily constrained by the personal characteristics of the President and by the international role of the country. The US presidency is a monocratic office, contrary to parliamentary governments that are generally collegial. In monocratic offices, the personality of the power-holder necessarily matters. At the same time, the United States is the global power. The transformation of its role in the international system necessarily affects the behaviour of US decision-makers. However, those variables constitute the background factors of a
foreign policy-making process which was affected then by more specific political factors. In our case study, two factors stand out as the most important: polarization between US political parties and divisions within the Obama foreign policy team.

Regarding the first factor, the condition of divided government – that is the political context within which the Obama administration had to operate during the period in question – had negative political effects on the coherence of the administration’s foreign policy. The Republican party’s conquest of the majority of the House of Representatives in the mid-term election of 2010 (a majority that it kept afterwards) made the relationship with the Democratic President highly adversarial. Although in the Senate (to which the US constitution gives special prerogatives in influencing foreign policy) the Democrats maintained an absolute majority. Nevertheless, the latter was not sufficient for neutralizing the permanent threat of a Republican filibustering against the administration’s choices. At the same time, although the House has no direct role in foreign policy, it has, however, the power to affect indirectly the latter through its control of the purse (the budget). In separation of power systems, as the US governmental system, presidents cannot govern without the consent of Congress. Indeed, it is said that the president proposes, but the Congress disposes.

The paralysing implications of a divided government in a separation of power system tend to emerge particularly when there is no consensus between the two parties on the policy to pursue relative to unexpected issues. The Arab Spring epitomized the unexpected issue par excellence. How to deal with it was not part of the foreign policy’s agenda that the country came to identify for getting out from the previous George W. Bush administration’s mistakes. On how to deal with the latter’s mistakes in Iraq and Afghanistan, in fact, an electoral consensus emerged with Obama’s success in 2008, and reconfirmed in Obama’s re-election of 2012, namely that the United States should exit from those countries’ military intervention in due time. However, on how to deal with the Arab Spring, Obama could not claim to have got an electoral mandate. In devising the course of action for dealing with the unexpected domestic crisis of the Arab regimes, and for managing the implications of those regimes’ collapse in the area, the Obama administration had to elaborate a new policy paradigm. However, divided government showed to be a powerful constraint on that endeavour, particularly because it was accompanied by a radical polarization of the two political parties on all the main national and international issues – an unprecedented phenomenon indeed.2

The radical opposition of the Tea Party-led Republican Party to all Obama’s main policy initiatives, the systematic attempt of the Congressional Republicans to delegitimize his leadership, the unprecedented polarization of inter-parties’ politics, dramatically reduced the margins for developing a bipartisan approach to the Egyptian crisis, let alone for creating a national debate on the choice of foreign policy to adopt in the new historical context of Egypt’s transformation. Instead of confronting different policy options, the US political elite came to radicalize its different views, making impossible even the most innocuous compromises. For instance, in a divergence from the administration’s pro-protesters position during the 2011 revolution, Senator John McCain, the Republican candidate for presidency in 2008, expressed his concern on 3 February that even though it was time for Mubarak to step down, the Muslim Brotherhood would hijack any election to be held in Egypt (Robinson 2011). Ironically, Senator McCain, who in 2011 expressed the concern that the Muslim Brotherhood would hijack any election to be held in Egypt, referred in August 2013 to the ouster of Morsi as a coup d’état and even called upon Obama to cut off all aid to Egypt (Killough 2013). Paradoxically, three Tea Party-supported
Republican senators – Michele Bachmann, Steve King and Louie Gohmert – visited Cairo in September 2013 and expressed their support to the Egyptian military that moved against the ‘great evil’ of the Muslim Brotherhood (Thompson 2013). A polarized political elite could not identify a domestically sustainable approach to the country’s readjustment to the new structural context that emerged with the Arab Spring. Seen from this perspective, the incoherence of Obama’s foreign policy towards the Middle East seemed to derive from the difficulties the national political elites had in agreeing on the US role in the region, on identifying US friends and foes, and on elaborating a shared interpretation of the changes taking place in Arab world. Given these domestic divisions, Obama’s pragmatism became probably inevitable. After managing to detach the United States from crucial fields (as in Iraq and Afghanistan), he played a leadership role from behind in the Libyan conflict, he pursued a prudent approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and he was generally cautious of not involving the United States in wars that it could not bring to a successful and stable peace.

However, the divisions between parties would not necessarily prevent an incumbent administration to elaborate its foreign policy doctrine, as President Clinton did in the 1990s facing, for instance, the transformation of Eastern Europe. Obama did not elaborate a coherent autonomous approach to the Arab Spring and the Egyptian crisis because of a second domestic factor (or intervening variable), namely the different views that divided (and continued to divide) his foreign policy team. As Toby Dodge stressed:

a closer examination of the people Obama chose to run his foreign policy indicates a deliberate attempt at balancing realists, pursuing what they perceive to be America’s national interest with liberal idealists seeking to use America’s power to enforce a global regime of human rights and global democracy. (Dodge 2012, 213)

Pursuant to ‘the cabinet of rivals’ model, Obama called around the table the supporters of realistic and idealistic foreign policy approaches. But the discussion around the table was unable to identify a persuasive answer to the implications of ‘the breaking of the pact of silence’ between the United States and the West and the Middle East’s authoritarian regimes such as Egypt’s Mubarak. According to Zaki Laidi, ‘the pact had simple rules: the West turned a blind eye to the nature of these regimes, which, in exchange, guaranteed at least a part of the West’s security’ (Laidi 2012, 105). Obama’s team was divided on how to fill the void left by the breaking of the pact, leaving Obama with only a pragmatist option. Robert Gates, former Secretary of Defense, recalls in his memoirs how divergent were the views of the administration’s top officials during the anti-Mubarak protests in January 2011. Vice President Biden, Secretary Clinton, Secretary Gates, National Security Advisor Donilon and Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff Michael Mullen were all in strong agreement, urging caution, while the White House and the National Security Council staff, particularly Denis McDonough, John Brennan and Ben Rhodes were leaning strongly towards the protesters and ‘to be on the right side of history’ (Gates 2014, 502–510). It was these disagreements that probably prompted Gates to resign a few months later in July 2011. Former Secretary of State Clinton reports a similar account in her memoirs too. In her words, in January 2011, ‘some of President Obama’s aides in the White House were swept up in the drama of an idealism of the moment’. It was this team of staffers who convinced the President, against the advice of his cabinet members, to make the idealistic request, on 1 February, that an orderly transition should start ‘now’ in Egypt (Clinton 2014, 343).
A similar divergence occurred after the ousting of Morsi in July 2013 as the Obama’s uncertain policy is at least partly attributed to tension between Secretary Kerry and the National Security Advisor Susan Rice. In the words of Nathan Brown, ‘Kerry’s statement likely reflects a greater emphasis on regional dynamics. […] Others would emphasize internal Egyptian politics a lot more and show far greater concern about Egypt’s political trajectory’ (Higgins 2013). As Eliot A. Cohen put it, if the United States looks weak and hesitant in the Middle East and in Europe, this is not only explained by ‘a constipated decision-making apparatus centered in a White House often at war with the State and Defense departments’, but also by having ‘members of the Obama administration [who] speak and, worse, think and act, like a bunch of teenagers’ (Cohen 2014). In the end, pragmatism remained the only usable foreign policy approach.

In short, Obama’s wavering in the Egyptian crisis seemed to derive from a combination of independent variables (as the President’s personality and the downsizing of the US role in the region) and specific domestic political factors (as policy polarization between the parties and divisions within the foreign policy team). A FPA’s model, rather than one derived from IR theories, can better explain US foreign policy in the Egyptian crisis of 2011–13. Specific features of US domestic politics affected US relations with Egypt. Those features constrained President Obama from leading the United States to adjust to the new scenario that emerged with the Arab Spring in its Egyptian configuration. At the same time, those features have to be considered in a larger context, in which the personality of the President and the retrenchment of US power in the Middle East played a background role. If it is true what Joseph S. Nye wrote, namely that:

> Obama was faced with the two types of historical power shifts that are occurring in this century: power transition and power diffusion. Power transition from one dominant state to another is a familiar historical event, and in adjusting American policy Obama resisted the misleading metaphor of American decline but accepted the rise of emerging powers. […] Power diffusion, however, is a more novel process and more difficult to manage. The problem for all states in today’s global information age is that more things are happening outside the control of even the most powerful states (Nye 2012, 98–99)

then one might conclude that a dysfunctional political system, as the United States one has become, constitutes a crucial intervening variable for understanding the uncertainties of the American international role. This is why a FPA model can be used also to interpret US foreign policy in other international crisis expression of domestic transformations, where neither the realist framework based on the relations between rival powers nor the liberal framework based on the diffusion of democracy can be applied.

**Conclusions**

Obama’s approach to the Egyptian crisis represents a powerful test for understanding US foreign policy in a period of historical power shifts. Devoid of the support of a domestic cohesive political elite and functional governmental system and in the absence of an agreed analytical framework for conceptualizing the dramatic changes that took place in the Middle East, the Obama Administration relied on an internally divided foreign policy team that did not come up with coherent positions, let alone an Obama doctrine, for dealing with the Arab Spring and the Egyptian crisis. The Obama Administration supported and then deprecated, in the sequence, Mubarak,
Morsi and the generals. In sum, it tried to surf the tide, avoiding making mistakes but still regularly following the events. In the end, it assumed that the Egyptian military intervention in July 2013 could be seen as ‘playing a balancing game, trying to send tactically sharp messages while preserving influence in an increasingly polarized society, protecting other national security interests in the region’ (DeYoung and Wilson 2013).

Given the domestic structure of US foreign policy and the novelty of the changes brought about by the Egyptian Spring, and the popular refusal of Mubarak’s regime, Obama had probably no choice but to rely on a pragmatist approach for dealing with these events. On the one hand, he made sure not to burn the bridges with the Egyptian military, not only because of the latter’s key role in keeping Egyptian–Israeli peace, but also because cutting off relations with the generals could potentially cost the United States any influence it might have had in the future Egypt and would not necessarily be effective in convincing the military to shift positions (Scowcroft 2013). On the other hand, relying on the ‘engagement leads to moderation’ view, Obama expected to legitimize the United States for its support of pro-democracy principles with the larger Egyptian public. Pragmatism, however, did not work as expected. Each of the conflicting parties of the Egyptian crisis came to blame the United States for opposing reasons – basically because each assumed that the United States supported the other side. The fact that the Obama administration avoided calling Morsi’s defenestration a coup d’état infuriated the Muslim Brotherhood and other pro-Morsi Islamists. At the same time, the anti-Morsi camp blamed the United States for its presumed ‘unconditional’ support of Morsi’s presidency. Most critical was General al-Sisi who, in an interview with the Washington Post, referring to the Obama administration, said: ‘You left the Egyptians. You turned your back on the Egyptians, and they won’t forget that’ (Weymouth 2013). At the end of the day, pragmatism helped Obama’s administration to avoid making irreparable mistakes as the previous George W. Bush administration had done, but it was not sufficient for defining a coherent course of action for dealing with the new scenario created by the Arab Spring.

Notes
1. For more details on the domestic politics-based explanation of US foreign policy in the Middle East, see Yossef and Fabbrini (2011).
2. On the structural reasons that brought about the polarization between the elites of the two parties, and on the consequences of divided government, see Fabbrini (2008), chs 2–3.

References


