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Has the U.S. Entered an Era of "Low Profile"? --The Obama Doctrine and the U.S. Diplomatic Transformation

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Since he took office six years ago, President Obama has made significant adjustments to U.S. global strategy and a series of foreign policies. His diplomatic idea is called the "Obama doctrine". This article analyzes the background and characteristics of the "Obama doctrine", and discusses the conditions under which the U.S. diplomatic transformation, represented by the "Obama doctrine", can be sustained in the next few years.

1. Background of the Obama doctrine

The Obama administration's diplomatic strategy is actually associated with its domestic development strategy. Its priority is

economic revitalization and social change, and dedicates most of its energy and resources to addressing domestic issues. Thus, the expenditure on national defense and military is reduced correspondingly. The most important diplomatic adjustment Obama has made in the past six years is to shift the main focus of foreign strategy from military security issues that center on counter-terrorism and non-proliferation to economic security issues that center on safeguarding global financial stability and promoting world economic recovery.

In the past six years, U.S. "measurable indicators", such as economic strength, military strength, technical strength, level of higher education, continue to rise. For example, the U.S. has made remarkable progress in the development of new energy and renewable energy. The extraction of shale oil and shale gas helps to increase the U.S. energy self-sufficiency rate to over 80%. And there is also the potential of large gas exports. As of 2014, the U.S. became the world's largest energy producer with its oil production exceeding Saudi Arabia and natural gas production exceeding Russia. Strategic visions like "re-industrialization," "get back to manufacturing" and "double exports" etc. are very possible to be realized. However, the trend of "polarization" in U.S. domestic politics has not been improved. The two parties antagonize and constraint each other and veto each other's proposals, which has severely restricted political and economic reform.

Although the U.S. did not decline in regard of the rise and fall of the hard power of world's major countries and the U.S. own development, its impact on global political affairs has markedly and indisputably declined. The first reason is that given the fact that the strength of the U.S. European allies is impaired and the Japanese economy falls into long-term recession, the overall strength of the West and its influence in international affairs fall. The second reason is the rapid rise of the strength of China and other emerging

powers and their international influence. The third reason is that in the era of Internet, state power is decentralized and shifted to a lower level, and the issue of global governance is increasingly complex. The U.S. ability to control the international rules on fighting terrorism, climate change, network security and other issues has been weakened. The fourth reason is that because the U.S. is more focused on domestic affairs, its confidence and motivation on intervening external affairs have weakened. The recent strong momentum in the U.S. economy is more from domestic demand than from international markets. This has in turn strengthened the U.S. inclination to domestic affairs.

2. Characteristics of the Obama doctrine

One American commentator borrowed the saying of French thinker Montesquieu to describe the Obama doctrine as "pointless conflicts will undermine necessary conflicts". It can be also applied to the US diplomacy, meaning that some goals should be abandoned so that energy can be focused on urgent and important issues.

Following the principle of economy-first, emphasizing on multilateralism and smart power, making efforts to improve America's international image and focusing on the building of international mechanisms and global governance issues are no doubt the characteristics of Obama doctrine, but these characteristics are of the same origin with the "Clinton doctrine" that his Democratic predecessor pursued.

Obama's own characteristic of diplomacy is a simple diplomatic principle, which, in his own words, is "don't do stupid stuff" or "don't do stupid shit" (which can be abbreviated as DDSS). The "stupid stuff" primarily refers to the Iraq war that was launched by the Bush administration. In his speech at West Point on May 28, 2014, Obama said, "since World War II, some of our most costly mistakes

came not from our restraint but from our willingness to rush into military adventures without thinking through the consequences." He further explained, "when issues of global concern do not pose a direct threat to the United States, when such issues are at stake -- when crises arise that stir our conscience or push the world in a more dangerous direction but do not directly threaten us -- then the threshold for military action must be higher. In such circumstances, we should not go it alone. Instead, we must mobilize allies and partners to take collective action. We have to broaden our tools to include diplomacy and development; sanctions and isolation; appeals to international law; and, if just, necessary and effective, multilateral military action."

Some of Obama's critics argued that the so-called "DDSS" is essentially a conservative thought of inaction. However, according to Obama's statement, the US has not abandoned its global leadership, but wants to "lead from behind". In other words, the essence of the Obama doctrine is "restraint" and "retreat", as well as mobilizing allies and partners to take collective action to share risks and responsibilities.

As Obama said, when the U.S. is not under a direct threat, "the threshold for military action must be higher". Even though military action is really necessary, such as the war in Libya and when fighting extremist forces of the ISIS in Syria, the U.S. will not send ground troops, but only carry out air strikes, especially air strikes by drone to reduce casualties of the U.S. military. For the Ukraine crisis, the Syrian civil war, and the fighting in the Central African Republic, Mali and South Sudan, the U.S. even has no intention of sending troops. For the Iranian nuclear issue and the DPRK nuclear issue, the U.S. clearly has plans for military strike, but the plans have not yet carried out. In all these scenarios that military conflicts might have occurred, the Obama administration has insisted on using diplomacy, economic sanctions, international

pressure and other means and tried to avoid taking direct military action. "DDSS" also means avoiding confrontation with China and other emerging powers in the future. While strengthening its military deployment against China, the Obama administration is trying to strengthen contacts and cooperation with the Chinese military, hoping to minimize the risk of war or strategic conflicts with China by improving the mechanism of crisis management and control.

The most important reason Obama has for advocating his "DDSS" principle is that the country needs to recuperate after two exhausting wars. However, from the "Arab Spring" that overthrew the Mubarak regime in 2011, to the sudden emergence of the Islamic State (IS) in 2014, the U.S. long-term vision of stabilizing the Middle East has been disturbed. After the military occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. has in fact imposed a direct rule and pushed "democratic elections" in the two countries. This is unprecedented in the history of U.S. foreign relations, but the result is counterproductive. The Obama administration and many U.S. strategists came to realize that Western democracy and legal system are "not acclimatized" in those countries. Thus, although the U.S. does not give up the fancy of transforming the world on its own values, it has emphasized more on the stability of the world order in practice. This is another unspoken meaning of the "DDSS".

3. When is the end of the U.S. "low profile"?

Judging from the past six years' diplomatic practice and its guidelines and concepts of the Obama administration, the U.S. does achieve a diplomatic transformation. We may say that the US has entered an era of "low profile". It can be expected that if there are no completely unexpected events internationally, Obama will continue to try to stabilize Sino-U.S. relations; struggle but maintain a superficial harmony with Russia; suppress the extremist forces in the Middle East but not send ground troops; reduce but



not completely stop sanctions on Iran; seek to ease the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; promote international agreements and norms on climate change; seek to sign the TPP agreement with Japan and other countries; push the TTIP negotiations with European countries; improve relations with Latin American countries, etc. In short, everything will be done according to the existing principles.

Yet, regardless of Obama's personal political inclination and preferences, he must comply with the "orthodoxy" of the U.S. as the President of the U.S. The U.S. will not abandon its plan of global hegemony, but it will seek hegemony in different ways due to its lack of power and voluntary retreat. In the last two years of his administration, Obama will probably continue to "keep a low profile" while persisting in the "orthodoxy". The problem is, whether the above-mentioned adjustments of the U.S. global strategy are specially made by the Obama administration, or a long-term trend that is committed to the cooperation between major powers and the maintaining of the existing international order?

This problem needs to be analyzed in domestic and international perspectives. Domestically, some American strategists and the public opinion are dissatisfied with the Obama administration's idea of "pivot to Asia". They think that Europe has far more close political and cultural ties with the U.S. than Asia does. Jews and religious Americans are also greatly concerned with the Greater Middle East (especially Israel). Some people accused Obama administration's "over-tolerance" towards China, who is rising rapidly and posing a growing challenge to the U.S. They believe this is "breeding evil", and advocate a timely adjustment on the Asia-Pacific policy to shift the economic and security focus. Others criticized that Obama has overemphasized on the global governance issues like climate change and lost grip on the crucial points of international politics -- being too soft to Russia in the geopolitical contest between major powers; procrastinating on the Middle East issues and leave

extremist forces like the ISIS expanding; not daring to confront “authoritarian governments” with human rights issues in these countries, etc.

At least at this stage, these objections are yet unable to change Obama's diplomatic policies. Two years later, however, neither a Democratic successor nor a Republican president will follow the Obama doctrine. At least the new president need to be more active, tougher, more aggressive if not completely abandon "low profile", and he/she is almost impossible to be more low-key than Obama. Yet, Obama's successor is unlikely to deny his central concept, which is the concept of focusing on domestic economic development, social justice, science and technology and education rather than on external expansion.

Internationally, if we look at the world over the past six years, we will find that the global economy is slowly recovering, and all the so-called "return of geopolitics" phenomenon, including the conflicts and the sudden emergence of extremist forces in the Middle East, the Ukraine crisis, the South China Sea territorial disputes and Sino-Japanese tensions etc., are essentially not harmful to national security and economic interests of the U.S. However, if a major crisis occurs, the "low profile" principle will be severely tested. Firstly, it's very difficult for the U.S. to persuade its allies into fighting the battle for their own interests while the U.S. standing behind and take the command (for instance, on the issue of fighting against the IS). Some commentators have pointed out that, during the Cold War, the U.S. shared about half of NATO's military budget, and today the proportion has increased to three-quarters. With such a weak NATO, no wonder Putin can brazenly intervene in Ukraine with military forces. Secondly, many international observers worry that most East Asian countries would likely "sit on the fence" between the U.S. and China and ultimately take the side of China because of the rise of China and the decline

of the U.S. as well as its "concession" to China's "ambition". Finally, the U.S. allies in the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey and other countries, either lack military capabilities or try to throw the problem of extremist forces to other countries.

Like the strategic planning of other countries, the U.S. so-called "grand strategy" planning can only envisage the principle of action according to the ever-changing "big game" of the world and the "pawns" in its own hands. The strategic decisions it has made are more of "going with the flow", "taking advantage", or even sometimes pushed to the wrong direction that can impair its long-term interests by international events. To what extent the Obama doctrine would continue is depending on the world situation, as well as emergencies and actions that are done by actors other than the U.S. The U.S. domestic politics, economic development and strategic goals can only decide what it wants to do and what it is able to do. What it will actually do is more dependent on how it will develop in the outside world, as well as what the external actors will do to the U.S. That is to say, the outside world and the U.S. itself together determine the plasticity of US global strategy. In this sense, China's strategic positioning and its U.S. policy are indeed decisive.

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