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Research article

## US Middle East Policy Shift: Trump’s Administration Divergency

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**Abstract.** Middle East is one of the most volatile geopolitical hotspots in the world. US administration approach towards the region is crucial for geopolitical relations between great powers, regional stability, moreover projects leverages and friction for political developments far beyond its geographical definition. Main research objective takes a comparative prospective between administrations of Barack Obama and Donald Trump and their approaches towards the region. Key hypothesis is that approach of Donald Trump differs from the one of Barack Obama. Sub-hypothesis is: was US influence in the Middle East more profound and sinewy, during Obama administration and his “universal liberalism” – theoretical approach, or Trump administration Hobbesian realism, zero-sum and “make the job done” is more potent for new geopolitical constellation of power. Further, autocratic dictators or Islamist forces, is democracy in the Middle East increasing or decreasing US influence in the region. This article determines effects of how different theoretical, personal and operational dynamics influence political developments on multiple levels. Identifies vectors and modality of US relations with key countries in the region during both administrations. Analysis in this article lies in the realist school of thought in international politics and uses comparative methods of Comparative politics in political science.

**Keywords:** Trump, Obama, Geopolitics, Middle East, Asia, Russia, Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey

### Introduction

According to observations of Joseph S. Nye Jr., even the founding fathers (of US) worried whether their new republic would decline in virtue like its ancient Roman predecessor. The resulting system of security alliances, multilateral institutions and relatively open economic policies has been called the American International order or the “liberal international order” [1]. This system now is facing new challenges in a new multipolar world. US security apparatus alongside its fi-

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nancial might encountered new volatile issues which need to be dealt with in a different manner than few decades ago. “Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat” is a useful aphorism of Sun Tzu to use as preliminary guide between the Obama and Trump approaches to the Middle East [2]. Referring to Middle East at any time and place, analyzing geopolitical and social movements steps-in the domain of a Sisyphean task. It is yet to be determent possible differences in approach between Trump and Obama administrations towards the Middle East. Obama administration tried to make a strategic shift towards east Asia possibly to contain rising Chinese power in the South China sea and Asia Pacific Region. On October 11, 2011 then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton wrote an article for Foreign Affairs, titled “America’s Pacific Century”. In it she states that over the past decade US attention has been preoccupied with conflicts in the Middle East, specifically ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. She argues that the magnitude of US resources and attention spent on these wars has been a mistake, and that it is important for the US to refocus its energy on areas of the world that can deliver the greatest return on our investment, such as the Asia-Pacific region [3]. Nevertheless, as it turned out, during the shift of focus, the Middle East became a possible Achilles heel for the US global military and political reach during Obama’s Administration. Prolonged Syrian crisis, Russian strategic rapprochement into Levant, taking initiative into peace talks and resolutions, together with prospects of new economic constellations in the Gulf Region, moreover with Chinese economic push, both in the “New Silk Road”, as well in the Horn of Africa, urged Trump administration to bring back the focus to Middle East. US saturation with prolonged engagement in Afghanistan and Iraq weaken the focus towards the region, while at the same time Russia issued “The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation on February 2013 in which was stated that the main focus is “securing (Russia’s) high standing in the international community”; its paragraph 25 claims that Russia’s foreign policy is transparent, predictable and pragmatic. Paragraph 26 makes plain that “Russia is fully aware of its special responsibility for maintaining security in the world both on global and regional levels”. Together with the Foreign Policy Concept adopted in November 2016, the document reflects the views and policies of Russia after the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of its military intervention in Syria [4]. With Russian strategic rapprochement into the region, as well with China’s “push westwards”, conducted with permissive US foreign policy during Obama administration, strategic pivot to Asia-Pacific was not fruit-bearing as expected. Facing engrained social and economic indifferences, such as decline in the countries middle class and a social gap between middle-income Americans and the super-rich which can be reached back to the robber barons of the 1890’s and Gatsby’s of the 1920’s for a similar comparison [5], which was efused with liberal economic and migration policy US may lack political and economic leverage to deal with global issues with the same fervor as few decades earlier. Past experience shows that an incumbent president focus in his first term was

towards domestic policies and possible second term shifted the focus into international arena. This textbook approach is ever hard to follow in new geopolitical and economic relations. Despite having a major impact on world economy. Being the world leader in controlling the financial flows, due to the decades of liberal policy, most financial power in the US is in private hands. With the US National Debt Hitting Record highs [6; 7], the Trump administration is facing a challenging dilemma balancing between domestic issues or investing more political and financial capital in maintaining a global reach, which takes the US through a slippery path in new geopolitical constellation of the modern world. Obama's strategic approach pivoted to Asia, where US strategic thinkers had an agenda to block China in its attempt to breach the US containment in the Pacific and towards the South China Sea. Nevertheless, the flaw of such approach resulted with weakening the US position in the Middle East, peculiarly after Russia's intervention into Syrian Civil War and taking over diplomatic and political incentives in resolving the crisis. On the contrary, in east Asia, the US was only able to maintain a fragile status quo between China and US allies in the region. With the US focus on Asia, following ineffectiveness of the EU soft power approach, Russia used its military intervention approach in the strategic vacuum created between EU soft approach and US complaint diplomacy towards the region with high rate of success. Moscow positioned itself in the MENA region as a counterbalance to the West. In the Kremlin's view, as follow-up of the Arab Spring, the West – which means mainly the US but also the EU – is pursuing a destabilizing agenda aiming to overthrow some regional authoritarian regimes [4]. President Trump flamboyant style and political unpredictability creates a division between scientists and analysts regarding the differences between approaches of past and present administrations.

### **US Middle East Policy**

Analyzing processes in the Middle East, it's clear, a classical/offensive realism/neorealism to be main force of political development instead of liberalism/neoliberalism and its derivations. In December 2015 President Putin addressed the UN General Assembly and blamed the West for the chaos in the Middle East and Libya particular. A few days later, Russia deployed jet fighters and anti-aircraft missile systems in Syria, altering dramatically the balance of power in the war and the diplomatic context for its solution [4]. Barack Obama formulated a Middle East strategy designed to repair the damage done during George W. Bush presidency. The United States needed to rest an exhausted military, replenish its soft power, and create political space for addressing long-standing challenges [8]. Obama did manage to reduce troops in Iraq, restrained from conducting new large-scale military interventions, and tried to address issues with diplomacy. Nevertheless, permissive diplomatic effort, after military withdrawal and Russian strategic ingress in the region was seen as a possible weakness. Obama's combinations and engagement such as signing Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), solicitating to broker a peace deal between Israelis

and Palestinians, based on a two-state solutions, encouraging democratic reforms, avoiding Sunni-Shia divide, alongside other policies, lacked incentives and were not suitable for contemporary issues and challenges. President Trump took a more direct and steadfast rapprochement to above mentioned issues, with less equivocal goals, moreover he introduced so-called Muslim travel ban, and is promoting bloc led by Saudi Arabia, Israel and the United Arab Emirates, which seeks to contain Iran. New reality of the Middle East, Russian rapprochement, spreading Iranian influence through fight against the ISIS/ISIL hampered Obama's decision in comparison of his ideological and theoretical glance. Based on decisions that the Obama administration had made, the traditional allies of the United States only saw that the United States had done a pivot to Asia, but it also pivoted towards Iran and had upset the regional balance of power. 2018 was also a significant year in terms of energy geopolitics, the United States once again was able to regain its title as the world's largest oil producer [9]. This fact, among other increases the leverage of US strategic standing with the regional countries, especially the GCC countries. It seems that in the post ISIS/ISIL era Middle East Iran containment takes contours of future clashes and possible new alignment. US secretary of State, Pompeo said, "It is impossible to achieve peace in the region without containing Iran". He stated that Houthis, Hamas, Hezbollah were real threats, and referred groups which had support from Iran [10]. President Trump approach was to invest great effort to bring the GCC leaders and Israel at the negotiating table. It seems that Trump's proactive realist approach towards the Arab-Israeli conflict and common urge of Sunni Gulf states and Israel to contain Iran's influence bring more US incentive and makes stronger US strategic leverage which was weakened during the Obama administration. US led Middle East conference in Warsaw, which took place on 13/14 February 2019. It was meant to confront Iran against its ballistic missile program, to mobilize EU allies against the nuclear deal (JCPOA) signed under President Obama, deter Iran from its policies of support to non-state actors in Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. Through the prospect of Trump's policy, that allies need to accept more incentive and bear a greater burden, the Warsaw conference was also meant to revive the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA) [11], representing largely Sunni world, which was first discussed during President Trump's first visit to Saudi Arabia in 2017. US is prompting a creation of this alliance, consisting of the six GCC nations, Egypt and Jordan, it is colloquially called an Islamic NATO. These potential members have their own internal differences which will make difficult to realize the initiative. Nevertheless, Trump's effort and pro-Israeli card, already endeared Israel and Saudi Arabia, moreover if initiative is to be successful it would restore some of the US strategic leverage lost to Russia.

## **Iran**

Obama's approach towards Iran was his greatest gamble [12] Obama's desire to get the Iran agreement (JCPOA) at all cost actually cost plenty; the United

States ceded Middle East to Iran and Russia. Iran is a top concern of the administration. The 2017 National Security Strategy mentions it 17 times. Trump had often criticized the deal. He and other conservatives complained it did nothing to address other problematic aspects of Iranian foreign policy, including its aspirations for regional hegemony and support for radical groups such as Hezbollah. The marginalization or departure of advisers inclined to support the JCPOA – such as Secretary of Defense James Mattis, former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and former National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster and the influence of hawkish National Security Adviser John Bolton, made withdrawal more likely. In a May 2018 speech, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced that the administration would be willing to restore diplomatic and economic ties in return for: complete denuclearization; cessation of Iran's ballistic missile program; the release of all prisoners that have citizenship in the US and or an allied nation; and end to efforts to extend Iranian influence in the region, especially in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Afghanistan; and an end to cyberattacks. As a basis for negotiations, this was a non-starter [8]. In a retrospective hindsight, Iranian foreign policy priorities seem to be consistent. Despite several Iranian administrations have sought different approaches, the main pillars of Iran's foreign policy such as Pan-Islamist, Pan-Shia, anti-Western, anti-Zionist and pro-Resistance Front have remained stable. Hassan Rouhani is bent on pursuing a centrist-pragmatic vision in Iran's foreign policy, unlike an ideological-populist stance of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Within two months of inauguration, he had held a historic phone call with US President Barack Obama, becoming first Iranian and US presidents to speak directly since the Iranian revolution in 1979 [13]. Nevertheless, President Trump decision to withdraw from the JCPOA and levy new economic sanctions were probably a political calculation in a matrix containing new approaches towards Israel and Saudi Arabia. Worth mentioning, Trump's unilaterally withdrawal from JCPOA made also a rift between his European allies. Trump's Iran policy definitely differs from the previous administration, since he took office and followed up tensions escalating in last weeks. Trump administration has been ramping up criticism of Tehran considerably in recent weeks, with more sanctions expected in the coming days and strategic maneuvers such as, announced on Sunday May 5, 2019, moving a US carrier strike group to the region [14]. A US pragmatic shift towards Israel and Sunni world is evident in attempt to contain Iran and Russia. We are seeing an evidently different US *modus operandi* in the region.

### **Saudi Arabia**

Whilst the election of Donald Trump was divisive within the United States, the reaction in the region given his vocal opposition towards the Iranian nuclear deal (JCPOA) and condemnation of Iranian Proxies, within the context of pro-Israeli stance, made him a welcome entrant to the White House to key regional partners such as Saudi Arabia who had been increasingly viewing themselves as locked in an existential struggle with Iran. Moreover, given his commercial back-

ground, there was every reason to expect that he could be a new partner. Great attention is traditionally given to the first country that a President of the United States chooses to visit after the election and in that case of Trump, it was Saudi Arabia. There were, two unique aspects about this inaugural visit, which should be identified here: the first was that a major arms deal was signed with Saudi Arabia which amounted to over US \$350 billion and was heralded as the largest arms deal in history. This figure was certainly inflated due to it encompassing previously signed agreements, and included intensions to buy rather than actual purchases, it was nonetheless a political accomplishment for Trump given he was elected on the platform of economic nationalism. The more important aspect of this inaugural visit was that an international summit was convened in Saudi Arabia where Trump could address the leaders of over 50 Arab and Muslim countries, with notable exceptions being Iran, Syria and Sudan [9]. Relations between US and Saudi Arabia manifest itself through a decade's long alliance of security cooperation and business ties dominated by US interest in oil. Despite some challenges in the past, such as the 1973 oil embargo and 9/11 attacks, successive US administrations have held Saudi Arabia as a critical strategic partner in the region. Supplementing previous administrations demeanor, the House of Saud was a faithful companion. Saudis created a complex system of governance through a series of alliances based on intermarriage and distributed oil wealth that created a coalition of tribes, clans and families undergirding the House of Saud. Alongside security and business, Saudi Arabia had a key place in US interventions, from the anti-Soviet engagement in Afghanistan till modern day wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Key figure in US diplomatic and intelligence efforts for decades was Saudi prince Turki al Faisal, who guided Saudi intelligence for a quarter of century. He was regarded as a key collaborator and friend of the CIA [15]. Fruitful cooperation faced a decline during Obama administration and historically common objectives of regional stability and containing Iran deferred in that period. Lack of US support for ousted Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and his preclusion in initial negotiations on Iran's nuclear program (JCPOA) dismayed the Saudis. Saudi leadership was also ill at ease with President Obama's vision that the kingdom "share the neighborhood and institute some sort of cold peace" with Iran [16]. US-Saudi relations went off the usual tracts during Obama's indecisive and lukewarm approach towards key regional issues. US-Saudi relations got warm under President Donald Trump and Saudi de facto leader Mohammed bin Salman, who was elevated to crown prince in mid-2017. Both leaders expressed their intention to amalgamate efforts to counter Iran and return the relations to its previous tracks. Killing of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi posted some strains and discomfort in the diplomatic discourse as many members of the US Congress have called for reassessing the relationship with Riyadh. Nevertheless, volatile developments in the region, including other actors and pragmatic US approach managed to gloss over this politically unpleasant issue. With Trump's commercial background, Saudis pragmatism and joint interest arose from new geopolitical

developments, it can be expected that economic and political relations between two countries get an upward trajectory.

### **Israel, the Peace Process and new geopolitical constellation**

Narrative of US-Israeli relations during Obama presidency were strained in manifestation through personal policies agendas between the conservative Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and liberal US president. Israel's realist side of viewing possible solutions for resolving Israeli-Palestinian conflict was not in line with the liberal view of Obama administration and his devotion for two state solution peace deal. Relations in that period between two countries remained unmodified and pragmatic on both sides. Even the well-known mutual loathing between Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Obama, has done little to negatively impact the relationship as the respective policies are in close alignment [17]. Nevertheless, relations got its previous scope since Trump took office. Israel is one of the countries in the region which can be most pleased with the Trump administration. In addition to withdrawing from the JCPOA, which Netanyahu castigated as a "historic mistake", Trump moved the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and notified the Palestinians that their diplomatic mission in Washington will be closed. As ambassador, Trump send the lawyer David Friedman, a longtime friend of the president, who was seen as a vocal opponent of the two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict. The administration also canceled all funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian refugees. The administration has cut more than US\$200 million in bilateral aid to the West Bank and Gaza. In spite of this one-sided approach, Trump has promised that he will resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict [8]. He assembled a "troika", led by his son in law, the 38-year-old real estate developer, Jarred Kushner, the lawyer Jason Greenblatt, longtime Trump Organization employee and US Ambassador to Israel, David Friedman. Kushner is well known and successful in closing business deals, but has no experience in diplomacy, it is yet to be seen if he manages to apply this attainment in Middle East politics. Details of the "Troika" plan has not been publicly revealed, however key regional players such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan have publicly rejected fundamental components. In an attempt to implement the peace plan, moreover to recapitulate US approach towards the region, Warsaw Middle East Conference was made public during the US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo visit at the University of Cairo, Egypt in January 2019. He stated that the agenda of the Conference would include terrorism, extremism, cyber terrorism, crises in Syria and Yemen and also make an overt reference to Iran's intervention in politics of the Middle East. The other major aim of this Conference was to reveal the much-veiled deal, "The Deal of the Century" and convince the Arab leaders to accept a permanent solution to the prolonged Arab-Israeli conflict [10]. In such geopolitical paradigm, Palestinian issue could be used on multiple levels, first as a leverage between regional powers, which main focus

is to contain Iran and its influence in the region, and in fragile constellation of relations between world powers, US and Russia. Palestinian issue could become a bargaining chip between the regional Arab powers and Israel, based on a realist political theory of mutual interests, where Gulf countries want to block Iran's influence in political but also in religious sphere on a Sunni-Shia division. Additional complexity in the regional equation was fueled with a non-national, non-state actor (ISIS/ISIL) which triggered a reshape of possible alliances in the region as well as the geopolitical entrenchment since the Russian rapprochement in Syria. In that hindsight, in November 2017, Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) Chief of Staff, Lt General Gadi Eisenkot, made headlines when he offered to share intelligence on Iran with Saudi Arabia – nothing that the two countries shared “many common interests” [18]. Such developments could indicate future geopolitical shifts, after recent developments in the region.

Further key fusion point is Golan Heights, a Cold War relic, with status quo residing for the last half century. The war in Syria has provided an opportunity for Israel to undermine any residual Syrian claims to the Golan Heights, which it occupied in 1967 and annexed in 1981. According to some analysts, Iran's expansion within Syria, both westwards and southwards, reflects a deeper ambition to move ever closer to the Golan Heights, a move which would pose a direct threat to Israel. This could be seen as a part of a broader effort to consolidate its regional leverage and deterrence capabilities – something that it might enhance if it moves assets closer to the Israeli border [19]. Such constellations of political and military developments alongside favorable Trump administration lend Israel an opportunity, a de jure verification of de facto realist stand on the ground. President Trump said at a rally in Green Bay, Wisconsin, on Saturday, 27 April that recognizing Israel's control of the disputed Golan Heights territory was a decision that is “important strategically” for the nation [20]. Israeli proactive approach towards Gulf countries, with its timidly agitation towards the Palestinian issue, backed up with US prize policy, could be another significant indicator in geopolitical changes and an attempt to diminish Iran's and Russian influence in the region.

### **Egypt and Turkey**

Relations with two crucial allies in the region, Egypt and Turkey, have been strained in recent years. Ever since the 1979 peace agreement with Israel, the Arab Republic has benefitted from US\$1.3 billion in annual military aid, largely because Washington is eager to keep relations between key allies on a strong footing. However, in the wake of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's 2014 seizure of power, Obama administration briefly froze some military aid after the coup but relented in 2015. Concerned by Cairo's facilitation of North Korean arm sales, Trump administration also temporarily withheld some funding, almost US\$ 300 million, but released much of it in July 2018. Trump's realist “make the job done” approach could be more fruitful towards strong political figures with authoritarian inclinations such as el-Sisi than his liberal predecessor. Com-

plexity in the regional equation added Russian involvement in Syrian war. With Moscow's military and diplomatic push, Egypt and Israel both now have their own lines of communication with the Kremlin and see Vladimir Putin as a reliable statesman who does what he says and follows through on his commitments. Kremlin offers itself as a more reliable mediator than Washington and proffers equipment and capabilities that Washington is reluctant to provide. This in turn makes former Cold War adversaries in the region, especially Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Israel, more open to developing a new relationship with the Kremlin while maintaining its influence with governments like Iran that are hostile towards the US [21]. From the individual point of view, Trump's firm approach could be accepted with greater interest in contrast to strong personality of Vladimir Putin. In regards of Turkey, US relations towards Ankara in recent years, were far from the ones which were supposed to be with a key NATO ally. During Obama's turn in Office, deteriorating relations culminated after the failed coup in Turkey on July 15, 2016. Initially, both the Europeans and Americans behaved hesitantly to congratulate President Erdoğan and the Turkish people for defeating the coup plotters. Instead, they called for the preservation of Turkish democracy. Then, the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, explicitly warned the Turkish leadership to refrain from mass purges of its military officers that might weaken the fight against the ISIL. In response to the US critique of mass purges, President Erdoğan accused the US of being partially involved in the coup, since Fethullah Gülen, the leading figure of the coup, resides in Pennsylvania with a Green card [22]. It seemed that change of administration in Washington would bring some change in relations between two countries, but this also proved to be of short run. Initially, Trump and Turkish President Erdoğan enjoyed strong chemistry, however Ankara's purchase of Russian arms, attacks in Syria on Kurdish fighters, a key US ally and Washington's refusal to extradite Fethullah Gülen had no apparent impact on the relationship between the two men. In fact, according to reports, Trump first bumped the Turkish leader during NATO meeting in Helsinki in July 2018, praising him for not allowing democratic niceties to prevent decisive action, unlike other European leaders. Nevertheless, Trump drew the line when it came to safeguard his domestic political interests. Among a group of US citizens incarcerated in Turkey, the administration has focused on Andrew Brunson. The fate of the pastor was of special interest to evangelical Christians, a crucial part of the president's conservative base and Vice President Mike Pence often highlighted Brunson's case [8]. In October 2018, Trump administration successfully secured the release of Andrew Brunson, after US economic sanctions and tariffs were placed on Turkey which further erode relations between NATO allies. This was the first time the US was sanctioning a NATO ally and relations stayed restrained. Geopolitical complexity in the region, Russian strategic push and US institutional "restrains" did not find a precise leverage for the Middle Eastern matrix. Obama's initial focus to domestic politics and an incentive to pivot towards Asia did not proliferate US interest in the region and left key partners in limbo or even discouraged from the

path of mutual interest such as with Turkey. Obama allowed America's dysfunctional political culture to undermine his peace vision and defeat it [23]. Moreover, his approach did not yield expected success in dealing with key regional issues, but it did deteriorate relations with Egypt and a key NATO member, Turkey. On the contrary, Trump's approach albeit initial hope of restoring deteriorated relations, was not able to redress accumulated issues, such as the US backing of Kurds in Syria, US sanctions and tariffs within Trump's policy of economic protectionism, peculiarly afflicting Turkey because of incarceration of US citizens after the coup and Turkey's rapprochement with Russia does not give much institutional nor political framework to significantly improve relations on a short basis.

### **Iraq and Syria**

In a speech at Camp Lejeune in early 2009, President Obama outlined how he planned to end the US military commitment to Iraq, stressing his administration would “not let the pursuit of the perfect stand in the way of achievable goals”. After December 2011, he predicted, it would be up to Iraqis to secure their own future. Popular sentiment firmly supported Obama's decision. Nevertheless, he inherited US military involvement in Iraq and signed agreement with the Iraqi government by the Bush administration about the US military withdrawal from Iraq, colloquially called US-Iraq Status of Forces Agreement. This agreement complied with Obama's “anti-doctrinal doctrine” [23], moreover assimilating into his domestic policy focus as well as the strategic pivot to Asia. In accordance with this agreement, all United States forces should have withdrawn from Iraq by December 18, 2011. In 2013, anger and discontent among Sunni population sparked nationwide and peaceful protest against Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, which security forces cracked down violently. Obama turned away his attention from Iraq and in June 2013 he proposed 70 to 95 percent cuts in US funding for Iraqi peacebuilding, human rights and civil society. Escalation of war in Syria and 2014 advance of the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) from Syria to Iraq's western provinces prompted another US intervention in Iraq and subsequently, Syria. Learning from previous mistakes in 2011-2014, Obama tried to adopt more balanced approach. Strategic quagmire started in Syria was spreading through Iraq, and US military withdrawal without securing a stable and functional government in Iraq, resulted with chaos and demise of US influence. Incentives in anti-terrorist activities and diplomacy were taken over by Russia which weaken US influence in the region. Following downturns in foreign policy, President Obama sent American troops to Syria in 2015 as a part of a coalition against the ISIS/ISIL. Describing Obama's Middle East policy as a complete failure, ex US Vice President went even further with stating: “... Iraq is at risk of falling to a radical Islamic terror group and Mr. Obama is talking climate change.... Mr. Obama is busy ushering America's adversaries into positions of power in the Middle East. First it was the Russians in Syria, now, in a move that defies creduli-

ty, he toys with the idea of ushering Iran into Iraq... American freedom will not be secured by empty threats, meaningless red lines, leading from behind, appeasing our enemies, abandoning our allies or apologizing for our great nation, all hallmarks to date of Obama doctrine... In 1983, President Ronald Reagan said, “If history teaches anything, it teaches that simple minded appeasement or wishful thinking about our adversaries is folly” [24]. Cheney’s remarks describe, roughly but realistically Obama’s Middle Eastern policy and its achievements and that is a demise of US influence in the region without a supplementary gain in other parts of the world. President Trump also led to incline a possible shift of policy and not much interest for the Middle East at the beginning of his presidential term. Nevertheless, volatile developments and a prospect of losing strategic grip and influence on Russia and Iran, prompted President Trump to get significantly involved. Arranging the Middle Eastern puzzle, its noteworthy that President’s Trump feud with Erdoğan came at an inappropriate moment. Turkey is an influential actor in Syria and the US military uses Incirlik Air Base for airstrikes against the Islamic State. In early 2018, former Secretary of State Tillerson announced a plan that entailed indefinitely committing troops to Syria in order to counter Iran and secure the ouster of President Bashar al-Assad. Then, in April 2018, Trump ordered the military to begin planning for the withdrawal of troops from Syria [8], and on Wednesday December 19, 2018, President Trump ordered a complete withdrawal of all US troops from Syria [25]. The impending military withdrawal of US from Syria will also reduce Washington’s diplomatic influence over Syria-related developments. Even before the US made decision to leave, it was indicative that Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Emmanuel Macron met and discuss Syria with the presidents of Russia and Turkey [26]. Obama administration left-handedness with dealing of issues in Iraq and Syria has demise the US strategic influence in the region and spreading the ones of Russia and Iran. It’s is yet to be seen which the next steps of US strategic thinkers will be to contain Russian and Iranian influence in the region. President Trump took firmer approach, hence in the wake of present developments different instruments need to be used and different ways to be found. Possible scenario is that the Kurds in Syria and Iraq will be another bargaining chip between the regional powers and used as a leverage for the regional balance of power. Kurds are the main US ally in Syria and Iraq, as long as Turkey and Iran align with Russian strategies. Obama’s policy played a significant role in rapprochement between Russia, Turkey and Iran. Despite Kurds being a strategic US ally, they were left behind by previous US administrations in the past, moreover any possible future rapprochement between US and Turkey is likely to use the Kurdish leverage.

## Conclusion

In this article, by sublimating data and analyzing differences in approaches towards the Middle Eastern issues between Obama and Trump administrations,

we can conclude existence of disparity in implementation of policies. It is noteworthy that President Trump is still in his first presidential term and this might have influence on his focus and sequence of priorities. As an American government official, academic and author, Stephen Sestanovich has shown American foreign policy has always oscillated between overreaching maximalism and retrenchment. In the cycle of retrenchment that had began well before the election of November 2016, Trump's National Security Strategy (NSS) of December 2017 expressed skepticism about the benefits of multilateral institutions and global commerce, refocusing attention instead on Great Power rivalry with China and Russia. In January 2018 Defense Secretary James Mattis proclaimed that "great power competition, not terrorism, is now the primary American focus". In the view of Economist, "Trump seems to reject both the Bush and Obama doctrines" and strategy's "transactional, zero-sum tone is dismaying". Obama's move towards universal liberalism, exchanged Trump's relevant standards of Hobbesian realism [1]. Irrelevant of ideological and doctrinal view of any individual, function of a US President is contracted with interwoven mosaic of institutional constrains and conciliation of plethora opposed interests. The discontent between nature of Obama's rhetoric and his centrist policies, largely adhering to the status quo, disappointed critics at home on both left and right who looked for ideological clarity and purity. The air is also thick with liberal disappointment because of Obama's unwillingness to close down Bush's 9/11 wars and heal the scars, including the US military prison at Guantánamo Bay. Even the sympathetic Zbigniew Brzezinski, a former National Security Advisor to President Jimmy Carter, noted the mismatch between rhetoric and the reality of the Obama administration: "I greatly admire his insights and understanding. I don't think he really has a policy that's implementing those insights and understandings". Brzezinski added: "He doesn't strategize. He sermonizes". Obama's priorities were domestic and primarily economic. Foreign affairs, including the Middle East did not rank high on his agenda [23]. Bind with contrasted, entrenched interest groups and ideological background which brought him to office, Obama's unhandy balancing brought to decline of US influence in the region, weaken strategic partnerships with no identical gain on the domestic side of policy. Trump's approach is definitely different, albeit it's yet to be seen what kind of result will be delivered. US political influence in region has eroded in the last decade as a result of inapposite Obama's policy and his disbalance between his ideological views and lacking geopolitical agenda. Obama's presidency was characterized with constant temptation between a radical change envied with his liberal world view and the need to action, expected from a world power which is trying to hold onto a number one world power status. In that prospective, a speech delivered by President Putin at the Valdai forum in Sochi in October 2018, saying that US dominance is ending after mistakes "typical of an empire" [27] bears even more irritation and should give US policy more intention to refocus the Middle East. It seems that Trump's policy is just on that agenda and his pragmatic, business-like approach is more likely to achieve results. Re-

gional political specter has change in recent years and Donald Trump does not have the same leverage as his predecessors. Nevertheless, change of approach and modus operandi seems to have changed, it is yet to be seen how much political and economic leverage his policy will achieve. It is crucial to decide on strategic agenda which needs to elect an ideological, operational and political method of action. US, as a world power cannot allow to be seen weak, nor out of focus, moreover it needs to have a pragmatic, realist approach to preserve its influence and geopolitical reach. President Obama's ambiguous policy derailed US strategic incentive. President Trump's adamant and pragmatic policy is a turn from his predecessor. Its yet to be seen with what benefit in new regional geopolitical constellation.

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Научная статья

## **Сдвиг политики США на Ближнем Востоке: политика администрации Д. Трампа**

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**Аннотация.** Ближний Восток – один из самых геополитически нестабильных и напряженных регионов мира. Подход администрации США к региону имеет решающее значение для геополитических отношений между великими державами, региональной стабильности и мира. Основная цель настоящей статьи – сравнительный анализ администраций президентов Барака Обамы и Дональда Трампа и их подходов к региону. Ключевая гипотеза статьи заключается в том, что внешнеполитический подход к региону Дональда Трампа радикально отличается от подхода предыдущего президента США – Барака Обамы. Автор задается вопросом: было ли влияние США на Ближнем Востоке более глубоким и значительным, в период администрации Б. Обамы и его концепции «универсального либерализма», или администрации Д. Трампа, придерживающейся политического реализма для новой геополитической констелляции власти. В данной статье определяются эффекты влияния различных концептуальных, личностных и операционных факторов на политические события на различных уровнях. Автор выявляет векторы и модальности отношений США с ключевыми странами региона в период администраций обоих президентов. Автор проводит анализ на основе школы реализма в международной политике и опирается на методологию сравнительного подхода в политологии.

**Ключевые слова:** Д. Трамп, Б. Обама, геополитика, Ближний Восток, Азия, Россия, Иран, Израиль, Саудовская Аравия, Турция

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