

**How Fracking Affects the
Application
of the Obama Doctrine**

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Introduction

When President Barack Hussein Obama entered office in 2009, his foreign policy priorities included reaching out to enemies as seen in the “Reset” with Russia¹ and the rapprochement with Iran. It also included retrenchment, as seen in his eagerness to withdraw US troops from Iraq and Afghanistan.² The shifting of focus away from the Middle East towards Asia, or the so-called Asia “Pivot”, was also a basic part of Obama’s foreign policy vision. (The Asia Pivot was later renamed the “Rebalancing” towards Asia to dismiss any concern that the United States was shifting away from the Middle East.)³ As events in the Middle East and Ukraine unfolded, other aspects of his foreign policy included caution,⁴ leading from behind,⁵ multilateralism to “regulate [American] hubris”, “restraint”,⁶ strategic absence which is “a belief that sometimes, in foreign affairs, it is better to be absent rather than present,”⁷ and (more amusingly) the so-called “Don’t do stupid sh*t” principle.⁸ All together, these points represent what could be called an “Obama Doctrine” which shapes the underlying principles of how Obama sees the world and how his foreign policy reacts to global events.

As events in the Middle East imposed itself on the global stage and on Washington’s foreign policy, the region and its place in the Obama Doctrine have been repeatedly discussed, especially with the withdrawal of troops from Iraq and Afghanistan, the so-called “Arab Spring”, the Syria “Red Line” statement (or threat) which Obama could not follow through, the rise of ISIS and the nuclear deal with Iran. The Obama Administration’s goals in the Middle East, as stated in the National Security Strategy of 2015, include the following:

We will dismantle terrorist networks that threaten our people, confront external aggression against our allies and partners, ensure the free flow of energy from the region to the world, and prevent the development, proliferation, or use of weapons of mass destruction. At the same time, we remain committed to a vision of the Middle East that is peaceful and prosperous, where democracy takes root and human rights are upheld. Sadly, this is not the case today, and nowhere is the violence more tragic and destabilizing than in the sectarian conflict from Beirut to Baghdad, which has given rise to new terrorist groups such as ISIL.⁹

Numerous authors argued that the Obama Administration has failed in the Middle East, as events unfolded and Washington could not influence them or effectively respond to them.¹⁰ Many other authors (discussed below) also mentioned the declining importance of the Middle East in Washington's foreign policy, due to the decreased dependence on Middle East oil thanks to the rise of domestic American oil production using hydraulic fracturing (fracking). Fracking is a new technology to extract oil and natural gas which was previously impossible to reach, as it was trapped inside shale rock formations which were previously impossible to extract oil from. One can say that fracking has (implicitly) imposed itself as an item on the Obama Doctrine and its effect on the Middle East.

However, these authors also mention that, despite the declining importance of Middle East oil, Washington would still have to remain involved in the Middle East due to other interests like the rise of ISIS and Israel's security. The Godfather III quote by Al Pacino ("Just when I thought I was out it pulls you back in"), which Obama and Jeffrey Goldberg jokingly mentioned in *The Atlantic* interview, is used as proof of the failure of the Obama Doctrine to influence the Middle East or even withdraw from it.¹¹ This analogy was referring to the Arab Spring and the rise of ISIS. But even without the Arab Spring and the rise of ISIS, the Godfather III analogy would still be true because of the importance of Middle East oil and its effect on the global and American economies, even if America's oil imports from the Middle East have declined.

The discussion of the link between fracking and the Obama Doctrine never goes beyond the idea that fracking has reduced the importance of the Middle East in Obama's foreign policy. This paper goes beyond this remark, and argues that fracking is not assured to be a long-term source of domestic energy for the United States, which means that the United States will eventually increase its dependence on Middle East oil once again. So fracking is probably not qualified, in the long run, to help Obama's goal of stepping away from the Middle East, as Middle East oil has great influence over global oil supplies and global oil prices, which, in turn, have a great effect on the American and global economies.

This is not the first paper to link the role of oil to the foreign policy doctrine of an American president. Mahdi, for one, has investigated the role of oil in George W. Bush's foreign policy doctrine. The Bush Doctrine was based on preventive strikes and imposing democratization in the Middle East to fight terrorism. Its success was too dependent on reshaping Iraq to turn it into a pro-American democracy to fight terrorism and to scare other Arab countries into submission. Mahdi argues that reshaping Iraq, in turn, was dependent on controlling Iraq's oil resources and using Iraq's oil revenues to rebuild Iraq into the mold which Bush wanted. Bush also aimed to use Iraq's vast oil supplies to influence the global geoeconomic/geostrategic landscape. When Bush failed to reshape or control Iraq, (because of the American failure to control Iraq's oil resources and the general American failure to plan for post-invasion Iraq), the Bush Doctrine collapsed, as Bush later failed to influence events in the Middle East or the world in general.¹²

Along the same line, this paper investigates the role of fracking in Obama's foreign policy doctrine.

The Declining Importance of the Middle East in Obama's Foreign Policy

Energy was on Obama's mind when he first came to office, because oil prices were a problem during the 2008 presidential election campaign, as prices rose to \$147 per barrel in the summer of 2008 due to events in the Middle East and elsewhere, then declined to \$35 per barrel in the fall of 2008 due to the Great Recession.

Thus, Obama repeatedly said that breaking America's addiction to foreign oil is one of the greatest challenges that Americans faced, and that, when he takes office, he will "eliminate the need for oil from the entire Middle East and Venezuela" in ten years. He said that achieving this goal will "take nothing less than a complete transformation of [the American] economy" and that he would achieve this goal by investing \$150 billion over ten years to establish a "new economy" which depends on renewable energy.¹³

Obama's promise to "eliminate" oil imports from the Middle East and Venezuela was meant to protect the American economy and

to secure America's energy supplies without dependence on foreign resources. But was it also a part of his vision to step away from the Middle East and reduce the importance of the Middle East in Washington's foreign policy? Neither Obama nor one of his aids actually ever said this, and no one has asked Obama about the link between this promise and his foreign policy vision or "Doctrine". However, the expansion in American fracking oil production and its vast effects on the American and global energy market may be an indication that such vision might have been on Obama's mind when he made this promise in 2008. (But there is no way to find out without directly asking him or one of his aides.)

The Middle East was not a priority in Obama's foreign policy when he took office in 2009, as he paid more attention to the rise of Asia and its challenge to US power. Benjamin Rhodes, one of Obama's deputy national-security advisers, said that, in the Middle East, Obama only wanted to fix the "inherited" issues of withdrawing troops from Iraq and Afghanistan and the war against al Qaeda, and focus on more global issues like Asia, nuclear non-proliferation and the global economy. Kurt Campbell, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, said in 2011: "We've been on a little bit of a Middle East detour over the course of the last ten years, and our future will be dominated utterly and fundamentally by developments in Asia and the Pacific region."¹⁴

The decline of American oil imports, particularly from the Middle East, has helped reduce the significance of the Middle East in Obama's doctrine.¹⁵ According to Jeffrey Goldberg, Obama thinks that "the Middle East is a region to be avoided—one that, thanks to America's energy revolution, will soon be of negligible relevance to the US economy."¹⁶ Indeed, Obama said in his State of the Union speech on January 20, 2015, that "we are as free from the grip of foreign oil as we've been in almost 30 years."¹⁷ However, Goldberg proceeds that "it is not oil but another of the Middle East's exports, terrorism, that shapes Obama's understanding of his responsibilities there."¹⁸ The Middle East "pulls you back in" despite the reduction in oil imports.

Several other authors agree that fracking has led to a decline in the Middle East's importance in US foreign policy, including Robert Kaufman¹⁹ and Michael Mandelbaum.²⁰ (Thomas Friedman says that because of fracking technology and the rise of US oil production, the Middle East has "gone from an addiction to a distraction".²¹ Chip Register argues that fracking has contributed to lower oil prices on the global level, and lower gasoline prices in the United States, and this has eased the public pressure on Obama to intervene in troubled regions.²²)

But Washington has to remain heavily involved in the Middle East

One unrealistic aspect about the Obama Doctrine is that the United States cannot withdraw from the Middle East or reduce dependence on the Middle East. This is because of two reasons. The first reason is that fracking production is projected to decline. The second reason is that Middle East oil will always have its effect on the global, and American, economies, which means that Washington has to remain heavily involved in the Middle East in order to secure the region and its oil resources, even if not for America's own use.

In the mid-noughties, before the expansion of fracking, oil experts like Michael Klare (2004²³ and 2008),²⁴ William Clark (2005)²⁵ and Ian Rutledge (2005)²⁶ argued that Middle East oil will remain vital for American global power for decades to come, since no other region in the world has ample or easily accessible oil supplies like the Middle East. Similarly, during the past few years, with the advent and expansion of fracking, oil experts like Daniel Yergin,²⁷ Michael Levy²⁸ and Gal Luft²⁹ argued that the fracking revolution in the United States will not lead to less American involvement in the Middle East, and will not lead to so-called "energy independence" for the United States.

Several authors have discussed the implications of fracking for Washington's general foreign policy. This includes Blackwill and O'Sullivan (2014)³⁰, Michael Levy (2013)³¹ and Gal Luft (2014)³². These authors argue that Washington will have to remain diplomatically and militarily committed to the Middle East despite the decline in American oil imports after fracking.

Robert Hefner presents one school of thought, as he argues that, thanks to the shale revolution, the United States “is coming close” to “insulating itself from the unpredictable fluctuations” of global oil prices.³³ But there is another school of thought which states the opposite. Analysts and oil executives have warned that even if the US becomes completely self-sufficient in oil, it will not be able to ignore the potential threat to the world economy created by increases in oil prices and disruptions in oil supplies, and so would still have an interest in sustaining production in the Middle East.³⁴ For the reasons to be stated later in this paper, I agree with the second school of thought.

Daniel Yergin, for example, argues that the US will have to remain militarily committed to the Middle East to protect its oil resources since prices are determined by the global oil market, and since America’s allies in Europe and Asia depend on Middle East oil.³⁵ Michael Levy (2012 and 2013) agrees that even if domestic oil production in the United States allowed the United States to eliminate all petroleum imports, “the country will not be energy independent in the meaningful sense.” This is because Washington will still have to rely on the Middle East to regulate global oil supplies in order to adjust the global oil markets which affect the US economy.³⁶ Robert Blackwill and Meghan O’Sullivan (2014) acknowledge that the United States will have to remain engaged in the Middle East, because any disruption in global energy supplies would still affect the American economy.³⁷ Gal Luft (2014) writes along the same lines, saying that the Middle East “continues to be a price setter” which affects the US economy, adding that an American pullout from the Middle East can allow a rival power like Russia or China to enter and fill the gap.³⁸

On the governmental level, a recent report by the International Security Advisory Board (ISAB), an American governmental agency which advises the US State Department, stated that “US energy independence is a myth” because “even if oil and gas production growth enables the United States to supply more of its own energy needs, global market and geopolitical trends will affect U.S. prices and the economies of our trading partners.” ISAB adds that Washington will remain involved in the Middle East because the

United States will continue to import oil from the Middle East, and because the Middle East will continue to have “an especially pivotal role in oil markets” because it affects global oil supplies with its spare production capacities and low production costs. Moreover, stated the ISAB report, the United States will still have to secure the oil routes which link the Middle East to Washington’s allies in Asia and Europe.³⁹

As stated earlier, I agree with the school of thought which says that the United States cannot isolate itself from the global effects of Middle East oil. I expand this argument to show further American limitation, as I use official reports which say that the US production of tight oil will actually reach a plateau in the 2020s, then decline. Such reports, as illustrated below, are available from various internationally renowned institutions. One institution which has produced such reports is the International Energy Agency (IEA), which is an intergovernmental organization based in Paris whose membership includes the main oil-importing countries in North America, Europe and the Far East. Another institution which has warned against over-optimism with respect to fracking is the Energy Information Administration (EIA), which is affiliated to the US Department of Energy and is responsible for collecting, analyzing and publishing information on the American and global energy figures and statistics. These reports, illustrated in detail below, show that the fracking boom is short-lived and warn against the overoptimistic views on fracking.

The Coming Decline of American oil production:

Are the advantages of fracking going to last for a long time? Several official reports forecast that American oil production is actually going to decline in the 2020s. For example, the International Energy Agency (IEA) 2012 report stated that the United States will surpass Saudi Arabia in oil production in 2020, then decline in 2030. “By around 2020, the United States is projected to become the largest global oil producer (overtaking Saudi Arabia *until the mid-2020s*)”⁴⁰ (Emphasis added).

“We do not expect [that the increase in American oil production] will continue after the 2020s,” said Fatih Birol, the Chief Economist at the IEA. “It will come to a plateau and decline as a result of the

limited resource base.”⁴¹ He added that “if no new resources are discovered [in the United States] and if the [oil] prices are not as high as today [in 2012], then we may see Saudi Arabia coming back as the first producer again.”⁴²

Similarly, the IEA’s World Energy Outlook report of 2014 forecasts that “United States tight oil output levels off in the early 2020s and its total production eventually starts to fall back.”⁴³ Furthermore, the IEA’s World Energy Investment Outlook report of 2014 stated that “in the oil sector... output from North America plateaus and then falls back from the mid-2020s onwards.” It also said that “meeting long-term [global] oil demand growth depends increasingly on the Middle East, once the current rise in non-OPEC supply starts to run out of steam in the 2020s.”⁴⁴

Moreover, the Energy Information Administration (EIA), which is affiliated to the US Department of Energy, stated in its *Annual Energy Outlook 2015* report that it expects “slowing growth in domestic production after 2020” and that “U.S. crude oil production starts to decline after 2020.”⁴⁵

Apart from the upcoming plateau in the 2020s, there is the question of type of oil being produced, and its energy content compared to crude oil. Indeed, one should take into account what the EIA calls “total oil supply,” which includes not just crude oil, but also includes natural gas liquids (NGLs, which are chemicals found in crude oil or natural gas), biofuels, and other factors which have less energy content than oil.⁴⁶ Furthermore, geologist Chris Nelder argues that it is wrong to say that US oil production will ever surpass that of Saudi Arabia. This is because, argues Nelder, the definition of “total oil” includes crude oil plus natural gas liquids (NGLs), which actually have less energy content or vehicular use than crude oil. Thus, concludes Nelder, “the United States will not overtake Saudi Arabia in actual oil production by 2020... or ever!”⁴⁷

Among the other question marks are the fast depletion rates of the fracking wells. According to some estimates, depletion rates may reach 80% within 36 months for oil wells where fracking is used.⁴⁸ Richard Miller, former geologist at BP, offers a different figure; the

wells where fracking is used have a depletion rate of at least 90% in the first five years.⁴⁹ This means that maintaining high output “will require continuous investment in drilling new wells to compensate for declines at existing ones.”⁵⁰

Thus, there are question marks about whether this American oil boom can actually last in the long-term, and whether the United States can maintain its high production rates which led to declining oil imports. This lack of vast or long-term oil resources in the United States shows, again, that Washington will have to remain engaged in the Middle East.

Conclusion

As a result of advances in the technology of fracking, the increase in oil production in the United States led to a reduction in American oil imports.

However, the United States has no choice but to remain engaged in the Middle East, given that the region is important for the global oil supplies which determine the global oil prices and, thus, affect the American economy. Furthermore, the economic security of America’s allies in Europe and Asia depends on oil supplies from the Middle East, so the American military has to remain committed to protecting the vital sea routes of oil tankers.

Moreover, the rise in American oil production is short lived, according to official estimates from the IEA and the EIA.

The advent of fracking is indeed a game changer which has influenced the global energy market. But we do not yet know its full extent on the future of American foreign policy and global energy supplies. There are uncertainties about future oil production in the United States. Given these uncertainties, it would be premature to make final judgments on its effect on Washington’s foreign policy towards the Middle East. Luft wrote in 2014 that “given the early state of knowledge and technology, it is premature to determine if the shale

boom is a temporary bubble or rather is a lasting event... Until more clarity is reached, the Middle East, despite its chronic problems, will remain the only large source of low-cost oil and the US will remain the chief guarantor of its security.”⁵¹ Michael Mandelbaum agrees that the Middle East is relatively less important today than it was between the late 1980s and the late naughties, due to developments in Asia and Europe which require more attention from Washington, and the decline of America’s oil imports from the Middle East after the rise of fracking. But he adds that “although new technology has made America less reliant on Middle Eastern energy resources, Japan and Western Europe still depend on them, so preserving US relationships with these close allies will likely require Washington to continue prioritizing the region's oil security.”⁵²

In the end, Obama cannot step away from the Middle East even if US oil imports declined. This would be another weakness of the Obama Doctrine.

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⁵⁰Luft, “Will energy-rich America depart from the Middle East and Eurasia?”: 77-84

⁵¹Luft, “Will energy-rich America depart from the Middle East and Eurasia?”: 77-84.

⁵²Derek Chollet, Michael Doran, Ellen Laipson, and Michael Mandelbaum, “Does the Middle East Still Matter? The Obama Doctrine and U.S. Policy”, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, April 14, 2016, accessed July 13, 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/does-the-middle-east-still-matter-the-obama-doctrine-and-u.s.-policy>.

Abstract

The Obama Doctrine is implicitly dependent on hydraulic fracturing to increase domestic oil production in the United States, as the increased American domestic production of oil would reduce dependence on Middle East energy resources and allow Washington to shift some focus away from the region. However, the Obama Doctrine will have to remain heavily engaged in the Middle East. This is because of the obvious reasons of the Arab Spring, the rise of ISIS, and the security of Israel. But another reason is that domestic American fracking oil production is set to decline in the coming few years. Furthermore, even if America becomes self-sufficient in energy, Washington will still have to remain involved in stabilizing the Middle East's energy resources because of the effect of Middle East oil prices on the American, and global economies.