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Changing foreign policy: the Obama Administration's decision to oust Mubarak

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1590/0034-7329201700121>

Rev. Bras. Polít. Int., 60(1): e020, 2017

Abstract

This paper analyses the decision of the Obama administration to redirect its foreign policy towards Egypt in the wake of the Arab Spring. It attempts to highlight the issue of how governments deal with decision-making at times of crisis, and under which circumstances they take critical decisions that lead to major shifts in their foreign policy track record. It focuses on the process that led to a reassessment of US (United States) foreign policy, shifting from decades of support to the autocratic regime of Hosni Mubarak, towards backing his ouster. Specifically, the paper attempts to assess to what extent the decision to withdraw US support from a longstanding state-leader and ally in the Middle East can be seen as a foreign policy change (FPC). A relevant research question this paper pursues is: how can the withdrawal of US support to a regime considered as an ally be considered, in itself, as a radical FPC?

Keywords: Foreign policy analysis, Foreign policy change, Barack Obama administration's foreign policy, Hosni Mubarak, Arab spring.

Received: May 9, 2017;

Accepted: August 3, 2017

Premises and the Article's Research Problem

The popular uprisings - dubbed the Arab Spring - overthrew long-standing autocratic rulers in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, and shook the rulers in Syria, Morocco, and Jordan. In the wake of 18 days of mass demonstrations in Egypt, the Obama administration took the momentous decision of advising President Hosni Mubarak to resign, handing the control of the country over to the military. The removal of Mubarak was one of the most controversial foreign policy decisions of the Obama administration, since the United States support to Egypt never had faltered ever since the time of Anwar Sadat. Determined to be 'on the right side of history', Obama put pressure on Mubarak to hand over power, and to begin what he believed to be a transition to a more democratic and stable country.

This article dwells on the issue of Obama's risky move of abandoning a trusted ally, allowing an Islamist-dominated regime

to rise to power through democratic elections. In facing popular challenge against Mubarak, the US accepted to forgo a close, trusted, long-standing ally, who had consistently accommodated the United States' interests, in exchange for a situation of uncertainty towards an area of the world that the US had regarded as vital to its interests. That change might have entailed a dramatic shift in the architecture of US alliances in the Arab world. The demise of Mubarak was a major turning point of US policy in the Middle East (Brownlee 2012, 2), perhaps one of the most significant ever since World War II (Diehl 2011). This change may undermine its international role in the area, as well as its capacity to shape and influence events, and protect its interests, as later events have demonstrated.

The main aim of this article is to ascertain to what extent that risky decision of the Obama administration, demanding that Mubarak step down, did lead to a foreign policy change. Secondly, this paper aims to determine the extent of the actual change, from the perspective of how the change of leadership impacted Washington's overall policy towards Egypt.

The theoretical foundation of this study lies within the larger field of Foreign Policy Analysis, and in particular, of FPC. This paper speaks to broader themes in FPA about the conditions under which dramatic changes in foreign policies take place; the conditions under which states take a bold new direction that may challenge their immediate interests, the differences and commonalities between large-scale, dramatic change, and less radical forms of FPC, and the implications which these can have in the domestic arena, as well as their external consequences.

This paper will track the evolution of the United States' position regarding the events of the Arab Spring unfolding in Egypt, from the beginning of the protests, until the downfall of the Morsi government in August 2013. In particular, it will zoom-in on US policy throughout the revolutionary period, until the fall of Mubarak (January 25 – February 11), and on the new US stance towards the short-lived Islamist-led regime of the Muslim Brotherhood (from June 30 2012 to July 3 2013). With the hope that, in doing so, it will be possible to ascertain (1) how Washington coped with the crisis against the framework of a fast-moving and uncertain background scenario, especially the grim prospect of dispensing Mubarak, and (2) in what sense there was an actual redirecting of US foreign policy under the rule of Morsi.

The essay is organised as follows: The first section lays out the theoretical background, and discusses the literature available on FPC, including the approach used to analyse this episode. Section two explains the research puzzle that drives this case study, especially in explaining Obama's change of heart in light of the traditional US policy on Egypt, and Obama's track record on promoting democracy in the Arab world. The third section details the case study pertaining to the January 2011 crisis in Egypt, and the most relevant dynamics of the decision-making process in the White House. Section four discusses the process outcomes in terms of foreign policy change. The paper concludes with the research questions that guide this paper.

Foreign Policy Analysis and Foreign Policy Change

Foreign policy change is a narrower area within Foreign Policy Analysis, an area that is still developing (Alden, and Aran 2012, 92). Foreign policy can be defined as 'a set of goals, directives

or intentions, formulated by persons in official or authoritative positions, directed at some actor or condition in the environment beyond the sovereign nation state, for the purpose of affecting the target in the manner desired by the policymakers' (Cohen and Harris 1975, 383).

Studies of the dynamics of foreign policy change gained new life with the new theoretical and analytical focus brought about by the end of the Cold War (Alden and Aran 2012, 92; Eidenfalk 2009, 3; Gustavsson 1998; 1999). A number of authors have shown an interest in addressing this issue from very different theoretical angles (Blavoukos and Bourantonis 2014; Carlsnaes 1993; Checkel 1993; 1997; Goldmann 1988; Gustavsson 1999; Hermann 1990; Rosati et al. 1994; Rynhold 2007; Walsh 2006). Still, there is relatively little research on FPC (Alden and Aran 2012, 92).

Usually, states' foreign policy is characterised by stability and continuity (Kleistra and Mayer 2001, 383), as change is seen as disrupting: '[R]elations between nations are established, and progress based on what is understood to be patterned behaviour. When those patterns are broken, interrupted, or reversed, the effects can be felt throughout the system, generating greater conflict and uncertainty between states most affected by major changes in the status quo' (Hermann 1990, 4; Holsti 1982, 215; Volgy and Schwartz 1994, 24). Holsti and Rosenau have illustrated how many cases of foreign policy restructuring can generate wars, and major tensions in the international system. A significant alteration of a state's foreign policy can entail the change of alliances, the severance of diplomatic ties, and the acquisition of new military capabilities (Holsti 1982, 215-218; Rosenau 1981, 44).

On the other hand, and as highlighted by Hall, in foreign affairs, foreign policy is less prone to change than other policy issues, because traditionally the topics are more inconspicuous for the public (Brenner and Hershberg 2014, 44). Another assumption in the literature that pleads for stability is that foreign policies tend to be rigid: once a particular policy has been implemented, the effect of institutional inertia and stakeholders' interests tend to entrench it (Gustavsson 1998, 3). Hall also argues that policymakers usually use 'policy paradigms', which are particularly resistant to change, even amidst glaring evidence of policy failure (Hall 1993, 279). He also suggests that while 'a policy paradigm can be threatened by the appearance of anomalies, namely by developments that are not fully comprehensible (...) within the terms of the paradigm,' paradigms are often adapted to assimilate such deviations (Hall 1993, 280).

Concurrently, Legro states that sweeping changes in FP are rare, as 'it is difficult for individuals to overcome the inertia of entrenched national mentalities' (2005, 34). Legro's analysis of FP change is also relevant in light of the framework which he employs to identify superficial levels of change (2005), akin to Hermann's adjustment and program changes. Legro employs a constructivist framework and focuses on policy orthodoxies, and on how ideational change drives transformation in the nature of FP conduct. Legro argues that change in collective ideas evolves in two analytically separate stages. Policymakers embrace new ideas only when exogenous shocks spark the collapse of the prevalent orthodoxy ('collapse'), and when a small number of viable alternatives are available, allowing the 'consolidation' of a new orthodoxy.

However, 'even when ideational collapse occurs, failure to reach consensus on a replacement could still produce continuity, as society reflexively re-embraces the old orthodoxy' (Legro 2000,

424). Even when policy failure and ideational collapse occur, there is no guarantee that new ideas will become policy. This is because, in addition to political palatability, new policy ideas must be administratively and bureaucratically feasible.

Our analysis draws especially on Charles F. Hermann's model of foreign policy change. The dominant scholarship deems that a FPC will take place as the result of the interaction between the independent (sources of change) and intervening variables (actors). FPC usually derives from three contexts: from regime changes or state transformations, from changes that occur when a government purposely decides to redirect a specific policy (Hermann 1990, 5), or from systemic changes. They can lead policy-makers to prepare a new assessment of existing threats and challenges, and to a subsequent calibration of foreign policy objectives (Doerer and Eidenfalk 2013; Gustavsson 1998; 1999; Kingdon 1984).

This paper focuses on an episode of abrupt foreign policy change, which is rapid, non-incremental, and drives a reorientation of a foreign policy strand, in opposition to more routine and progressive FPCs. Its denomination may vary according to the author: 'change', 'restructuring', 'redirection', or 'adaptation'. In the case of the Obama administration's position to discard Mubarak, this paper uses the term 'foreign policy change', but in a definitively more restricted sense than in Holsti's definition as 'the dramatic, wholesale alteration of a nation's pattern of external relations' (Holsti 1982, ix).

The redirection of US policy towards a pivotal American ally takes place within a context of acute adversity akin to the notion of crisis. Crises give room for extraordinary political actions, and appear to share certain key features: they create an acute sense of threat, uncertainty, and hurry to fulfill (Hermann 1972, 187; Rosenthal and Charles 1989, 9). Often, one must add the surprise factor to all this, which increases the impact of time pressure (Hermann 1990, Rosenthal et al. 1989). The unsettling effect can produce different outcomes, such as changes in alliances, tension among states, or, in most extreme cases, warfare.

Crises also follow from what Hermann (1990, 12) has labelled as 'external shocks', which in turn follow from 'dramatic international events' (see also Legro 2000). Leading theoretical models (Gustavsson 1998) assumed that FPCs are the results of shifts in structural conditions. Because they are visible and unchain powerful forces for change, 'they represent the kind of feedback that would trigger foreign policy system regulators for monitoring and coping with discontinuous change' (Hermann 1990, 12).

One could consider the Arab Spring uprisings to be external shocks, because they led to the replacement of leaders, to regime changes (Hermann 1990, 12), and to three wars. Secondly, the revolution in Egypt duly elicited a policy position from the Obama administration, due to the relevance of that country to US interests in the Middle East. Furthermore, the events in Egypt sent shockwaves throughout the region, and were reinforced by similar occurrences in neighbouring Arab countries, expanding the picture of regional unrest and instability, and thus, of a mounting threat to US security.

Hermann's contribution to the study of FPC is particularly useful for this analysis. Through his endeavour, he tried to address the following questions: 'Under what circumstances do these kinds of change occur in which an existing government recognizes that its current course is

seriously inadequate, mistaken, or no longer applicable? What are the conditions under which self-correcting change may arise?’ (Hermann 1990, 5).

Once change becomes a reality, Hermann proposes a typology of change, through a four-level graduation, to help discern the depth of foreign policy change (Hermann 1990, 5-6): (1) ‘adjustment change’, (2) ‘programme change’, (3) ‘problem/goal change’, and (4) ‘international orientation change’. The first three levels of change do not correspond to Holsti’s definition, mostly representing minor transformations, and not the dramatic, extensive alteration of the state’s orientation internationally. Adjustment and programme changes represent changes at the tactical level: the policy gist or the policy objectives remain the same (Blavoukos and Bourantonis 2010, 2).

Adjustment change is the most limited foreign policy shift, requiring only a quantitative change in the levels of effort and/or in the scope of recipients addressed by a policy (such as in the class of targets), while policies remain unchanged.

Programme changes require an adjustment in the appropriate instruments and means associated with a particular policy. It most likely occurs when previous policy instruments prove ineffective or ineffectual under new circumstances, thus requiring new instruments of statecraft that are qualitative in nature (Hermann 1990, 5).

Problem/goal and international orientation changes refer to more strategic and profound changes in the framing of a foreign policy issue/objective. Problem/goal changes imply that, when external developments recurrently challenge a shared understanding or idea, the initial policy or goal addressed by the policy is replaced or simply forfeited. It may arise when a new policy challenge calls for the definition of additional goals and roles. Thus, a distinct set of purposes and instruments emerge to replace or complement the existing set of roles.

International orientation changes may consequentially lead to alterations in a country’s position regarding major issues of its external relations, as well as its interactions in the international system. This type of change is most likely to occur when a country is at a critical juncture, facing a major FP event, which calls for shaping new considerations about the state’s objectives in international affairs. Such changes may also entail - as a necessary accompaniment or result - that initial FP aims are reformulated or set aside, which ultimately may entail a ‘basic shift in the actor’s international roles and activities’ (Hermann 1990, 5-6).

Our hypothesis is that the Obama’s administration acceptance of a regime change in Egypt was an adjustment change, which maintained the basic goals unvarying. It entailed tempering or refining the level of effort towards the new Egyptian regime, as well as the range of recipients/targets, that is, the new leadership in Cairo.

The Making of the Foreign Policy Issue: the 2011 Egyptian Crisis

The particular foreign policy issue for US policymakers discussed in this section involves the decision taken in response to the uprising against the Mubarak regime. The general issue arose from the need to take a decision: whether to bet on the reform of the Mubarak regime, or to

remove the Egyptian leader, prompting the beginning of an open-ended transition. Eventually, a strategic decision was taken in favour of a particular action (Hermann and Hermann 1989).

The Egyptian revolution followed after the popular uprising that began on January 25, 2011, the 'Day of Rage', when tens of thousands of marchers occupied Cairo's Tahrir Square, protesting against Mubarak's rule.

In the wake of the protests, the administration proceeded slowly to seriously examine the possibility of profound instability for Mubarak's government in Egypt (Cooper et al. 2011). Through the early stages of the crisis, the Obama administration initially pursued the reform of the regime. As days passed, Mubarak's regime faced increased criticism from Washington: the administration condemned the violence wielded against demonstrators, and called for a faster transition. Obama eventually came to the conclusion that stability could only be quickly restored in Egypt if Mubarak would depart. The swift departure of Mubarak - of his own accord - followed by an orderly transition to a reformed democratic system, became the preferred scenario.

Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, tried to convince the newly designated Egyptian Vice-President, General Omar Suleiman, to exhort Mubarak to leave office, so he could work out a transition government with a compact of opposition politicians, including the Muslim Brotherhood (Miller 2011). As the crisis in Egypt unfolded, the Egyptian military emerged as the most important rival power-center to Mubarak: the demonstrations seemed to swing the institution's support in favour of the protesters' demands, and against Mubarak. On January 31st, the military promised not to fire on any peaceful protests, recognised 'the legitimacy of the people's demands,' and refused to resort to the use of force to disperse them (despite their protest being illegal under existing laws) - a sign that the Army's support to the president was collapsing. With that, any remaining legitimacy of the Mubarak government suddenly crumbled. By the end of the day, the Armed Forces convinced the president to step down. Top military commanders allegedly urged the president to step down (Lilli 2016, 114; Lutterbeck 2011, 29).

On that very same day, Obama declared in a televised speech that a transition to a new Egyptian government should begin straight away: 'an orderly transition must be meaningful, it must be peaceful, and it must begin now' (Dorning and Goldman 2011). With Obama's announcement, the policy on Egypt entered a new stage, with Obama's carefully phrased public statements signalling, nonetheless, a clear desire for Mubarak to step aside.

In the following days, in face of Mubarak's intransigence, the administration kept discussing a transitional government with Egyptian officials, which would be headed by the Egyptian Vice-President, and supported by the Egyptian military (Cooper and Sanger 2011).

The Obama administration tried to perform a high-wire act, 'between positioning itself "on the right side of history", and not unceremoniously dumping a leader who had supported American policy on key regional policies' (Miller 2011). For several days, there were discrepancies between the messages exchanged in private and in public declarations (News Wires 2011): it was due to the government's own confusing appraisal of the situation (Miller 2011). As a result, at certain points, the message that came through often sounded half-hearted and muddled.

On February 11, Suleiman announced that the president had relinquished his office, while empowering the Supreme/Higher Council of the Egyptian Armed Forces (SCAF) to manage the state's affairs. This outcome became inevitable when Egypt's military leadership declared that it would not repress the demonstrators (Lilli 2016, 113-114). For the SCAF, the intervention contained the protests and safeguarded its ties to the US (Brownlee 2012, 2). From Washington's viewpoint, links with the Egyptian military were the main concern: their long-term interests rested more with the institution with which it had maintained longstanding ties, than with the Mubarak government (Lilli 2016, 108). For US policymakers, the Egyptian military was the primary source of influence over what would happen (Clinton 2014, 343-345). Continuing support to the Egyptian military was crucial to maintain US influence, and for an evolution in Cairo that could meet the US' interests.

Obama's decision on February 1st to stand with the protesters and hasten Mubarak's departure was taken against the advice of some of his senior advisers, led by Clinton, Biden, and Defence Secretary Robert M. Gates (Bennett 2016; Clinton 2014, 289). On the other hand, some of Obama's White House junior foreign policy advisers regretted that Obama did not act at all in 2009, actually standing aside while the Iranian regime brutally crushed the Green Revolution in Tehran (Lizza 2011). They felt that the situation in Egypt offered a second chance for the democratic surge of the Arab Spring (Cooper et al. 2011).

US Policy in the Wake of Mubarak's Demise

In the early stages of the crisis, the Obama administration initially tried to pursue the reform of the Mubarak regime. Subsequently, faced with the evidence that events were in Washington's control, and, to ensure a peaceful transition without dramatic breaking points, it advocated the changing of the guard. This seismic shift brought about a completely new reality in US-Egyptian relations: a democratically elected Islamist government in a friendly Arab country. The decision of the Obama administration to support a democratic transition ran the risk of empowering forces that could prove hostile to US interests (Nasr 2013, 169), while side-lining the very reformers it wanted to support. Indeed, Obama was perceived by many analysts and Egyptians, as actually backing the Muslim Brotherhood's ascent to power (Newton-Small 2013).

The result was an unwonted breakthrough for the Islamists who emerged from decades of persecution and being banned from politics, to acquiring unprecedented predominance in Egypt's politics. In early 2012, they were in control of the first freely elected parliament, dominating the committee drawing up a new constitution, and their candidate, Mohamed Morsi, won the June presidential elections. Egypt's first democratically elected president remained only one year in power, before being pushed aside by the military on July 3, 2013 (BBC News 2013).

Obama's policy throughout the Morsi government was quite consistent with his pledge to stand 'on the right side of history' in supporting a democratic government. When Morsi was elected in June 2012, Obama called him to congratulate him on his victory, and underscored that

the US would keep supporting Egypt's transition to democracy. The administration engaged in dialogue with the democratically elected government which it had pledged to accept, and 'sought to develop a good working relationship with the new regime' (Mandelbaum 2016, 299). When anti-government protesters in Egypt demanded that Morsi step down, Obama's answer was: 'It's not our job to choose who Egypt's leaders are' (The White House 2013a).

By and large, the administration attempted to devise a policy towards Egypt that continued on the path of military and intelligence cooperation, without condoning the regime's crackdown against dissents. Actually, Obama condemned the regime's brutal crackdown on protesters (SkyNews 2012) and sent pointed sharp messages on the need to protect minorities and to engage in dialogue with all opposition forces without preconditions.

Still, Obama clearly tried to support the government that emerged from the Arab Spring uprisings. It felt the partnership should work to facilitate the political transition, and to empower the leadership on its way to building a democracy. In September 2012 - just weeks after Egyptian security forces allowed a mob to breach the Embassy walls and replace the US flag with a black one associated with the Islamic State extremist movement - the administration notified Congress of its intent to provide emergency aid in the amount of \$450 million to the Morsi government (Myers 2012). In early 2013, a previously scheduled transfer of F-16s went ahead, in the midst of the worst protests Morsi had faced.

Morsi proceeded to orchestrate an undemocratic power grab by granting himself broad powers above any court contestation, and muscle through a controversial constitution. He issued a temporary constitutional declaration that in effect afforded the president unlimited powers by placing his actions above judicial scrutiny, and significantly weakening the Egyptian judiciary's oversight of the presidency (Egypt's Independent 2012). In the meantime, the Obama administration provided \$1 billion in debt relief, and backed a \$4.8 billion International Monetary Fund loan to Egypt (Dagher and Bradley 2012). The Obama administration was slow to criticize Morsi's increasingly autocratic rule, and his failure to address Egypt's mounting economic woes. This came just days after the White House showered praise on Morsi for his role in helping broker a ceasefire between Israel and the Palestinian militant group Hamas, in Gaza. That was the major instance of a positive working relationship with Morsi (Mandelbaum 2016, 299), a cooperation born out of necessity and driven by national interests, but where real sync emerged.

In May 2013, President Obama overrode a Congressional attempt to withhold military funding to Egypt, issuing a waiver authorizing the grant of aid over restrictions imposed by Congress, which had attempted to tie the assistance to advances in human rights. To be true, US military assistance to Egypt, which earnestly began after the 1979 Camp Accords, has regularly touched off quite bitter and lengthy debates in Congress. The administration maintained strategic cooperation with Egypt to enable it to respond to security threats, namely the growing terrorist militancy on the Sinai (The White House 2014), but also in hopes of helping to stabilize the political situation, and deal with a faltering economy and deteriorating governance.

In July 2013, Morsi was ousted by the Egyptian military, and was replaced by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Chief of the Egyptian Armed Forces. At the time, the Obama administration refused to

refer to it as a military coup, mostly to circumvent its legal obligation that aid be suspended when the military overthrow a democratically elected government. However, faced with increasing pressure to take a forceful position on the bloody crackdown on dissidents, in October 2013, it announced that it would hold back some aid-funded military equipment, until the Egyptian government demonstrated progress towards democratic governance through upholding civilian rule (US Department of State 2013; Trager 2015). A year and a half later, the administration softened its stance towards al-Sisi's government by reinstating economic aid, and releasing certain large-scale military systems (Trager 2015). The full resumption of military aid to Egypt was an admission that the policy of displeasure with the new Egyptian government's violent repressive policies fell flat. The relationship returned to 'business as usual,' after Morsi's brief interlude. Counter-terrorism, intelligence-sharing relationships, and the need to retain this strategic ally prevailed to restore lost trust and influence, despite concerns about the new president's repressive stance on human rights.

Process Outcome: the Extent of Foreign Policy Change

In explaining the rationale for accepting foreign policy change, Hermann states: 'For major foreign policy change to occur, it is necessary for authoritative policy makers to conclude that their prior formulation of the problem, their mode of dealing with it, or both, no longer accommodate information received from the environment' (1990: 16). In order to reduce the problem, policymakers can either make changes in the policy intended to address the problem or change the definition of the problem itself (Hermann 1990, 7). Obama's decision to press Mubarak to leave office corresponds to a change in the definition of the problem it faced. The predicament of whether to allow Mubarak's ouster took a different twist: the issue was no longer about maintaining the Egyptian leader, but the country's stability and US leverage throughout the process.

A point worth exploring is the actual extent of the administration's real influence on the process, that is, its ability to have an impact on the ground regarding the decision to maintain or discard Mubarak. Was the administration the real driver of the process, or was it the Egyptian military and the demonstrators? With whom did political agency rest? Several analysts heavily criticized the administration's lack of strategy, just reacting to events and not actually shaping them (Lilli 2016, 115-116). The United States' ability to have an impact on the ground - especially of the sort that would salvage Mubarak's rule - was most likely minimal by the time Obama made his televised speech regarding a 'meaningful transition' on February 1st. Lilli argues that the US' role in Mubarak's dismissal was 'secondary' (2016, 115-116). Arguably, Obama had to accept the developments on the ground - often against its preferences - and come to terms with them (Lilli 2016, 115). As Lizza noted, that course of action represented less of an Obama's doctrine, and more of a choice 'based on a realistic assessment of the sobering facts on the ground' (Lizza 2011).

It could thus be argued that Obama faced a 'non-choice', and thus the 'adjustment change' in foreign policy was merely an instance of the administration reacting to the situation on the

ground in the only feasible way.¹ This events-driven policy corresponds to Yetiv's theory, applied to the Persian Gulf, where US policy attests to the absence of a grand strategy. They show a pattern of 'reactive engagement,' which is based on ad-hoc, improvised responses to unanticipated, unpredictable events and threats (Yetiv 2008, 192-197).

The administration's overriding concern was that continued turmoil could create a power vacuum in the country, hampering an orderly transition. Obama's misgivings was avoiding political mayhem, and effectively managing the crisis by fostering a smooth political transition (Hamid 2012, 106). Initially, the administration held to the idea that Mubarak could survive the protests and oversee a reform process. Subsequently, as Mubarak dugged down, the president and his team nurtured a Plan B: a stable transition engineered by the Egyptian military. The underlying assumption was that, despite the change of leadership, it would be possible to continue with the relationship. Therefore, it could be argued that the strength of military-to-military links between the US and Egypt assuaged the depth of uncertainty as regards the post-revolutionary outcome, militating against any drastic foreign policy change. It is reasonable to assume that having gone through 30 years of close relations with the Egyptian military and intelligence community, the US was relatively well-acquainted with the main actors who would serve as interlocutors on the Egyptian side in the immediate post-Mubarak situation, and would carry on protecting US interests (Brownlee 2012, 2).²

Critical are US links with the Egyptian military – Washington's primary source of influence over what will happen. Continuing support to the Egyptian military would be crucial for US influence and for an evolution in Egypt that could meet the United States' interests. Cutting off this aid, or threatening to do so, could be a body blow to US policy. That was why the administration felt that a top-down negotiated transition, led by Mubarak's appointed Vice-President General Suleiman, could ensure the continuation of the US-Egyptian relationship.

Thus, as far as Hermann's model of FPC is concerned, Obama's acceptance of a regime change in Egypt was an adjustment change. That decision required changing the level of effort and the kind of recipients addressed by a policy, although the basic goals remained unaltered: maintaining the diplomatic status quo in Egypt. The administration did not change its goals, but the fact is that retaining a friendly leader in power became secondary to avoiding a scenario of prolonged unrest and civil war. In this case, letting go of a reliable ally was a price that could be paid, in order to ensure a peaceful transition and avoid a descent into chaos. In fact, maintaining a relationship with whomever came into power, as long as mediated by the military, became the lowest common denominator.

Secondly, in several rounds of consultation with his advisers and team of experts, Obama was assured that the Muslim Brotherhood had tempered its Islamist ideology over the years (Dueck 2015, 78), becoming a 'moderate' and 'largely secular organization' that 'eschewed violence'

1 I am indebted to one of the anonymous reviewers for this insightful comment.

2 I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for this observation.

(Gerstein 2011; Mohammed 2011). The US Ambassador to Cairo, Anne Patterson, and high-level American envoys met with Brotherhood members shortly after the Revolution, and Washington hosted a delegation of the movement in April 2012 (Nasr 2013, 169; Sanger 2012, 332). Obama was determined to take a chance on a Muslim Brotherhood rise to power, hoping that it would follow the 'Turkish model', a combination of moderate Islam with democracy and capitalism (Nasr 2013, 176).

In this case, we concur with Hermann when he theorized a hypothetical scenario of difficult policy choices, whereby 'a new set of goals will be replaced by only vague ideas about the preferred new direction' (Hermann 1990, 18). Arguably, the choice for policy change carried with it a risk: the net result of a US push for democracy in Egypt might be the rise of an unfriendly kind of political Islam. In fact, many observers were wary of an Islamist dictatorship in Egypt, should the Muslim Brotherhood take over (Nasr 2013, 176). Fear that Egypt's uprising would develop into an Islamist revolution along the lines of that of Iran in 1979 would constitute the worst possible scenario for both Washington and Tel Aviv.

In terms of the level of FPC identified as adjustment, the changes related primarily to the kind of recipients addressed by a policy, that is, the policy effort addressed to the new regime. More to the point, the new policy recipients in Cairo required a policy of engagement by the Obama administration (Bouchet 2017, 156). In truth, there were no quantitative changes in the levels of effort towards the new Egyptian regime: throughout it all, the administration waived restrictions passed by Congress on aid to Egypt, on the basis of the United States' national security interests. Under Morsi, the administration never tied any aid to Egypt to its record on human rights and the rule of law. The Obama administration put no tangible pressure on Morsi to end his undemocratic practices. However, despite a relatively conciliatory political façade, Washington's relationship with Morsi was strained. Although the administration did refrain from using aid to pressure Morsi to improve his record on democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, all along it continuously stressed the US commitment to the democratic process in order to keep tabs on its conduct. The administration was slow to criticize Morsi in public when journalists and other activists were prosecuted, but it grew increasingly frustrated that Morsi had not listened to or responded to the voices of the people. Obama eventually used the 2013 State of the Union speech and the address to the United Nations to question the Egyptian leadership's commitment to democracy (The New York Times 2013; The White House 2013 b; 2013c). Overall, some tweaks of presidential rhetoric stressing support for democracy, plus some occasional admonition, kept the relationship intact and the aid programme free of meaningful democracy conditions.

Obama took a 'wait and see' approach, managing the relationship on a short-term horizon basis. This ambivalent position can be ascertained from his statement in September 2012: 'I don't think that we would consider them an ally, but we don't consider them an enemy ... I think it's still a work in progress' (Cooper and Landler 2012). Interestingly, the Obama administration was more assertive regarding the al-Sisi administration: to signal its displeasure with the removal of

Morsi from office in the summer of 2013, it decided to launch a lengthy review of US foreign assistance policy towards Egypt, and withhold the delivery of certain items of military assistance.

The case in point shows that it is possible to navigate the FPC process, and shape it in order to reduce the potential scope of change, and the unpredictability that the process entails. As suggested by Hall, while a policy paradigm can be threatened – the reliability of Mubarak's rule –, anomalies that do not fit the terms of the paradigm can be 'stretched' or fine-tuned in order to incorporate them. As postulated by Legro, dramatic FP shifts rarely occur, as embedded mindsets and the 'ideational inertia' is magnified in the organizational culture of governmental agencies and bureaucracies.

Thus, as unpalatable and unpredictable as it might be, changing the leader was not akin to losing an ally altogether. As Brownlee puts it, 'the protesters replaced a ruler but not a regime' (Brownlee 2012, 1-2). The decision to acquiesce in regime change seemed feasible because the transition process was engineered by the military, which maintained significant political weight in the country's internal dynamics, even under Morsi (Shama 2014, 224-226). The relationship was continued, and Washington accepted the rulers and their *modus operandi*. That was true for Morsi, and for al-Sisi, who has had a remarkably bloody rule.

Conclusion

This paper is a case study of the Obama administration's choice of changing its relationship with Egypt's Mubarak regime, and whether it was a hazardous decision. We also examined whether the decision to support the regime change in Cairo brought about a fundamental reassessment of US foreign policy towards Egypt, shifting from decades of support to reliable autocratic allies, to backing political change.

The empirical findings test the research question of whether the withdrawal of US support to a regime considered to be an ally can, by itself, constitute a radical foreign policy change or, simply, a partial reorientation. We are aware that this case study applies to US policy during the short-lived period of Morsi's rule, when Egypt was undergoing transition, a process that needed more time to take root in order for the consequences to be more conspicuous. The actual scope of a policy change can best be gauged over a longer period of time, when external consequences to the policy can be apprehended. Clearly, further work is needed in order to gain a better understanding of FPC theory building, in particular on the question of how much change constitutes real change. One cannot be much too quick in treating temporary changes as relevant, and much too ready to ignore the possibility that the status quo is unchanged, except for a substantial lessening of US leverage in the relationship.

This study is also the starting point for a more thorough discussion of the instance of how a major power took a critical foreign policy decision. As is the case for most negotiation and crisis situations, crucial decisions - like the one analysed in this paper -, involve high levels of uncertainty about what may follow. In addition, these decisions involve value trade-offs for decision-makers,

especially in terms of managing complexity, accommodating competing values and interests, as well as various types of pressure made by several intervening actors, both domestic and international.

The brief period of Mohammed Morsi's presidency did represent a historic shift in foreign policy, as seen from Washington's perspective. It constituted an about-face, from its longstanding policy paradigm of supporting 'stability' in the Middle East and North Africa allies - even if they were authoritarian -, to a policy of allowing the rise to power of 'moderate' Islamic political movements. The new policy of engagement with moderate currents of political Islam in the Middle East was one of the most sweeping changes in US policy to date regarding the Arab world.

Secondly, this paper aimed to determine the extent of actual change. The Brotherhood's rise to power was neither calamitous, nor advantageous for US national interests. It did not turn Egypt into a theocracy. The Morsi government also did not terminate Egypt's treaty with Israel, and it even brokered a helpful ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, in Gaza. The 1979 Egypt-Israel peace treaty remained in place, and US-Egypt military cooperation was also continued.

This study's empirical case points to the possibility that alteration of a major foreign policy track record, and replacing a close ally, may not result in dramatic FPC. In such cases, it is important to look, not only at what changed, but also at what remained the same across those periods.

Obama's decision towards the Egypt of Mubarak demonstrates the ability of a policy to survive through a partial change (Goldmann 1988, 16). In his study on political adaptation, Rosenau fittingly defined it as a 'way of coping with changes in the external environment, while keeping its essentials and within acceptable limits' (Rosenau 1981, 38).

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