

Gergely VARGA:¹ Evaluating Barack Obama's Middle East strategy

- For decades, the strategic objectives of the U. S. in the Middle East were centered on two main goals: to ensure American dominance in the Persian Gulf and robust support for Israel to maintain its military edge in the region. After the terrorist attack of 9/11, counter-terrorism gained an equally important strategic objective.
- The first term of President Barack Obama did not bring about any major changes to these core strategic objectives, nor in the way America sought to pursue them.
- Since the Arab Spring broke out, the Obama administration has been trying to navigate its policies between promoting change and maintaining stability. The Iranian nuclear deal is also to a large extent about maintaining the military edge of Israel and securing the Gulf allies.
- A disconnect between the American strategic priorities and the premier strategic challenges of the region – state failures, civil wars, sectarian violence and increasing regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran – can be observed.
- Both in Libya and in Syria the administration should have pursued an approach guaranteeing an equilibrium on the battlefield, articulating objectives much more in line with the local balance of power, and backing U.S. policy with credible military force.

In light of the developments unfolding in recent years in the Middle East and Europe, the civil wars, the threat of terrorism and the growing influence of Russia, Barack Obama's foreign policy doctrine – or the lack of it – has been recently at the center of scrutiny. As the President is approaching his final months in office, this paper seeks to give an evaluation of the main strategic objectives and means of his Middle East strategy.

Barack Obama's foreign policy doctrine has been most often described by such terms as *leading from behind*, *strategic restraint*, *strategic patience* or *multilateral retrenchment*. Nowhere do these descriptions seem to be more valid than in the Middle East. The retreat from Iraq in 2011, the lack of follow-up after the Libya intervention, the compromise with Iran on its nuclear program and most of all the passivity concerning the Syrian civil war all seem to back up this notion. Daniel Goldberg's recent article in *The Atlantic* magazine² gave an in-depth coverage on the basic motivations and perceptions behind this strategy, which stirred a lively debate among experts. Much of the criticism is centered on the notion that there has been a huge gap between policy objectives and actions on behalf of the administration's foreign policy, which undermined U.S. credibility. Another common theme of the critics is that the United States has been retrenching from the very beginning of President Obama's first day in office in 2009. However, a more careful elaboration of President Obama's Middle East strategy could lead us to more nuanced conclusions.

Before the Arab Spring: business as usual

For decades, the strategic objectives of the United States in the Middle East were centered on two main goals: to ensure American dominance in the Persian Gulf and robust support for Israel to maintain its military edge in the region. After the terrorist attack of 9/11, counter-terrorism gained an equally important strategic objective regarding the region. Democracy promotion and the Iraq war also could be understood as a way of strengthening American influence in the region, as it was believed that

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² Jeffrey GOLDBERG: [The Obama Doctrine](#) [online]. April 2016, Source: Theatlantic.com [2016.03.24]



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democratization would overall help advance American interests. Despite new approaches and a noticeable change in diplomatic rhetoric, the first term of President Barack Obama did not bring about any major changes to these core strategic objectives nor in the way America sought to pursue them. Maintaining an American dominance in the Persian Gulf by containing Iran and its nuclear program, continued strong military and financial support for Israel to keep its military edge, expanding defense cooperation with the Arab countries in the Gulf and a robust counterterrorism program throughout the region were the core pillars of the administration's strategy. Although there were genuine and strong diplomatic efforts by the administration to move the Israeli-Palestinian peace process forward by applying greater public pressure on the Israeli government, the American efforts lacked persistence and the necessary political will for a breakthrough.³ Similarly, initially there were diplomatic gestures towards Iran, but in substance the administration was using primarily coercion and threats as its main instruments concerning the nuclear issue,⁴ while signaling minimal room for possible concessions. The first substantial sign that President Obama was serious in making a deal with Tehran was during the summer of 2009 when massive protests took place in Tehran against the regime in connection to the presidential election. At that time President Obama refused to show meaningful public support for the protesters, signaling to Tehran that his aim is to reach a nuclear deal and not regime change. However, it would take another five years until the circumstances for the beginning of successful negotiations were all set. During this period the administration built a broad international cooperation to contain and pressure Iran through tough economic sanctions.

Concerning American military presence and operations in the region during the first years of the Obama administration, the picture is mixed at best. Although Obama followed-up on the Bush administration's plan to withdraw U.S. forces from Iraq, it vastly expanded the American – and NATO – involvement in Afghanistan during the years of his first term under the premises of his broad counter-terrorism strategy. Furthermore, the administration expanded counter-terrorism operations through targeted killings by drones and other special operations.⁵ Overall, President Obama did make the American military footprint lighter in the region, however, he rather changed the nature on how military force was applied, than minimizing the role of it.⁶ Meanwhile the American support for long-time allied and partner authoritarian regimes in the region remained basically uninterrupted. These features pointed to a continuation of the basic pillars of American strategy rather than towards change, despite President Obama's initial promises and rhetoric. On the eve the Arab Spring broke out public perceptions on American foreign policy in the Arab world were similarly negative as during the Bush administration's years.⁷

The Arab Spring and a shift in strategy

Since the Arab Spring broke out, the Obama administration has been trying to navigate its policies between promoting change and maintaining stability. The Libya intervention and the forced ouster of Gaddafi brought change, but one which created enormous security challenges with the collapse of the Libyan state. In Bahrain the United States clearly sided with the forces of the status quo by supporting the Saudi intervention. In Egypt during the revolution and counter-

³ The United States continues to provide annual military aid of up to 3 billion dollars to Israel in a form not available to any other country, and in addition, Israel also receives funds from annual defense appropriations bills for rocket and missile defense programs which have expanded under President Obama.

Jeremy M. SHARP: [U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel](#), [online]. June 10, 2015, Source: fas.org [March 20, 2016]

⁴ The Obama administration even launched extensive cyberattacks against Iran during 2009.

See: David E. SANGER: [Obama Order Sped Up Wave of Cyberattacks Against Iran](#), [online]. June 1, 2012 Source: [TheNewYorkTimes.com](#), [March 23, 2016]

⁵ See: Michael J. BOYLE: The costs and consequences of drone warfare. *International Affairs* 89: 1, Jan. 2013, pp. 1–29

⁶ Andreas KRIEG: Externalizing the burden of war: the Obama Doctrine and US foreign policy in the Middle East. In: *International Affairs* 92: 1 (2016) 97–113

⁷ Jason UKMAN: [Arab world's views of U.S., President Obama increasingly negative, new poll finds](#), [online]. July 12, 2012 Source: [Washingtonpost.com](#), [March 30, 2016]

In another 2010 Arab Public Opinion poll, only 16% of respondents were hopeful, while a majority - 63% - was discouraged about President Obama's administration. [2010 Arab Public Opinion Poll: Results of Arab Opinion Survey Conducted June 29-July 20, 2010](#), [online]. August 5, 2011, Source: [Brookings.edu](#), [March 30, 2016]



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revolution the U.S. administration largely followed events on the ground but was usually late in articulating a clear position, which in the end created great mistrust towards the U.S. from all sides. However, his abandonment of President Mubarak signaled a significant shift in U.S. policy, and the monarchies in the Gulf, also fearful of domestic unrest, took notice.⁸

The Obama administration was perhaps most ambivalent in Syria. Since large scale violence erupted against President Bashar al-Assad's regime President Obama has set two red lines, the first by demanding the departure of Assad in August 2011, and then on the illegal use of chemical weapons, but neither of them were taken seriously. Instead, President Obama decided to avoid direct intervention, and let his regional allies, Turkey and the GCC countries lead the efforts against Assad. As the risks and costs of this policy became clear with the rise of ISIS as well as other extremist organizations and the practical disintegration of Iraq, the United States slowly began to expand its military engagement in Iraq to counter ISIS.⁹ However, the administration remained largely passive in Syria¹⁰ despite the increasing humanitarian toll, the refugee crisis threatening also the EU, and even after the Russian military intervention in the fall of 2015.

Meanwhile, early on from the beginning of his second term, President Obama renewed efforts to conclude a landmark diplomatic deal with Iran over its nuclear program. Despite the opposition of America's traditional allies such as Israel and some Arab states in the Gulf, the nuclear negotiations were successfully concluded in the summer of 2015. Taken together, the United States was indeed moving towards a position President Obama envisioned, in which the United States is less committed to the region politically and militarily and has more balanced relations towards its traditional allies – Israel, Egypt, Arab monarchies – and its long-time regional foe, Iran. The question is however, at what cost, and what are the potential benefits and downsides of his strategy?

The significance of the Iranian nuclear deal

If one examined where the true current focus of American strategy in the Middle East is in terms of resources and taking political risks, it is still counter-terrorism, maintaining the stability of the Persian Gulf and securing the military edge of Israel. The massive military aid programs supporting Israel and the deep defense ties towards the GCC countries¹¹ reflect the core nature and objectives of American strategy in the region. The most notable foreign policy accomplishment of the Obama Presidency, the Iranian nuclear deal is also to a large extent about maintaining the military edge of Israel and securing the Gulf allies. At least that is the view of President Obama, even if the governments in the Gulf and Israel do not agree with this analysis. While the United States still sets its priorities in the Middle East defined by these three strategic objectives, the premier political and security challenges of the region became state failures, violent sectarianism and the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. Although terrorism is a massive challenge for the countries in the region, it is only a consequence of state failure and poor governance, as it was already clear during the American occupation of Iraq a decade ago. The effects of the disconnect between the American strategic priorities and the premier strategic challenges of the region can be observed in both the Iranian nuclear agreement and the Syrian crisis.

The international sanctions regime with its mounting economic costs for Iran and the American administration's willingness to engage in substantial negotiations and forge a compromise were both essential in successfully concluding the nuclear negotiations between Iran and the P5+1.¹² Although the Iranian nuclear program was primarily viewed by President Obama through the lens of the international non-proliferation regime, the regional security landscape was always a crucial concern. The fact that no country from the region could sit at the negotiating table is worth to note,

⁸ Martin INDYK: [The End of the U.S.-Dominated Order in the Middle East](#), [online]. March 13, 2016 Source: Theatlantic.com, [March 22, 2016]

⁹ Elizabeth QUINTANA and Jonathan EYAL: [Inherently Unresolved: The Military Operation against ISIS](#), [online]. October 2015, Source: Rusi.org - Occasional Paper [March 22, 2016]

¹⁰ The Obama administration's half measured policies in Syria is best symbolized by the failed rebel-training program, which cost 500 million dollars but the program completely failed. Paul MCLEARY: [Under Fire, U.S. Suspends Part of Syrian Rebel Training Program](#), [online]. September 7, 2015, Source: Foreignpolicy.com [March 22, 2016]

¹¹ Arms transfers between the United States and Saudi Arabia reached around \$90 billion US Dollars between 2010 and 2014. For a comprehensive overview of US – Gulf defense ties, see: Anthony H. CORDESMAN: [The Arab-U.S. Strategic Partnership in the Gulf](#), [online]. May 7, 2015, Source: csis.org, [March 22, 2016]

¹² The five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany.



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especially if we consider that the long-term viability and value of the nuclear deal rests to a large extent on Iran's relations with other countries in the Middle East. As mentioned before, the Obama administration wanted to mitigate the regional fears surrounding Iran's nuclear program with the help of the Comprehensive Plan of Action. The agreement comprehensively and adequately addresses the issues of setting barriers to the enrichment capabilities, the nuclear infrastructure and verification mechanisms,¹³ and given the history of the negotiations, it is unlikely that an agreement substantially more favorable for the United States and its allies could have been reached. As the President has pointed out on numerous occasions, the agreement is only intended to address the nuclear issues of Iran, not its regional policies, and on that issue it seems to be working so far.¹⁴ However, it was obvious that Iran's adversaries in the region would be looking at it through the prism of the totality of their relationship with Iran, including regional conflicts. The opposing voices from Israel and from Arab states in the Gulf regarding the Comprehensive Action Plan stem only partly from the substantial issues of the agreement itself, and they are also based upon the fear of what any kind of rapprochement or deal – from which they are left out – between Washington and Tehran might bring for the future.

Critics of the Obama administration point out that the nuclear deal has only bolstered Iran to act more aggressively and alienated Washington's traditional allies even more at a time when greater cooperation would be necessary in resolving key conflicts in the region. However, the past decade proves that just by trying to coerce Iran into submission and to contain it would produce not less but more counter-measures by Iran.¹⁵ Iran's staunch support for Hamas for over two decades, its support for Hezbollah, and the Shia militias during the American occupation of Iraq were all partly answers for the Bush administration's hostile policies towards Tehran. There is no reason to believe that if a nuclear agreement had not been reached Tehran would not be doing as least as much in the region as today to advance its interests.

However, President Obama partly contradicts himself about the role of the nuclear agreement, as he has previously acknowledged his hope that ending the isolation of Iran through a nuclear agreement could help moderate its actions in the region.¹⁶ Looking at this statement and other actions – or a lack of them – the administration strengthens the notion that Obama has been seeking to move towards a balance of power scheme for the Middle East in contrast to the past two decades of American hegemony based on heavy U.S. military presence and a staunch support of its allies. According to Obama, his strategy would adjust to the realities brought about by the failure of the “heavy footprint” strategy, the limits of American power and domestic politics. Indeed, President Obama's biggest foreign policy bet is the nuclear deal with Iran, which bears much more significance than any of his actions in Syria or other parts of the region. If the nuclear deal is successful in keeping Iran, one of the largest, most populous and politically stable country in the Middle East a non-nuclear weapons state and help it to modernize and open up to the world, that would have a transformative effect on the region.

Obama confronting chaos in the Middle East

The central tenet of President Barack Obama's realist approach is that American military power should only be applied if core national interests were at stake, otherwise the costs and risks of action would outweigh the gains, - and there are only very few such real red lines in the Middle East for U.S. national security interests. Furthermore, according to the President, the United States should focus on the “big picture”, – the long-term global trends of globalization, climate change, the nuclear non-proliferation regime, the rise of Asia –, and not on the Middle East.¹⁷

However, in light of the turmoil in the Middle East – state failures, civil wars, sectarian violence and increasing regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran – and how much these are consuming American attention, this strategy

¹³ Jeffrey LEWIS: [It's a damn good deal](#), [online]. July 14, 2015, Source: Foreignpolicy.com [March 22, 2016]

Robert EINHORN: [Debating the Iranian nuclear deal](#), [online]. August 15, 2015, Source: Brookings.org, [March 22, 2016]

Colin POWELL: [Iran Deal Is a 'Pretty Good Deal](#), [online]. September 6, 2015, Source: NBC.com, [March 22, 2016]

¹⁴ Larry HANAUER: [Iran nuclear deal is working, but challenges persist](#), [online]. January 19, 2016, Source: thehill.com, [March 22, 2016]

¹⁵ István BALOGH: [The Theory of Strategic Blowback: US Strategy Towards Iran 1993-2010](#), [online]. September 2013, Source: uni-corvinus.hu, [March 22, 2016]

¹⁶ David RENMICK: [Going the distance](#), [online]. 27 January. 2014, Source: Thenewyorker.com, [March 22, 2016]

¹⁷ GOLDBERG: [The Obama Doctrine](#)



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seems to have undermined American interests. As things stand at the beginning of 2016, President Bashar al-Assad will be able to remain in power, Sunni extremism, Shia militias and terrorist networks will remain to be important forces in Syria, Iraq, Libya and other countries in the region, while the quality of the relationship with America's allies in the region has significantly deteriorated as Iran and Russia gained more influence in the Middle East. While it may be true that Russia's intervention in Syria was costly for Russia's economy in the long run and complicated its relationship with Sunni Arab states, in the end, Russia seems to have been successful in its objective of preserving and securing its influence in Syria, while expanding it also in Iraq and elsewhere in the region.¹⁸

The realist approach Barack Obama envisioned could have been more effective in terms of advancing American interests in a region where state authority is less contested, large scale civil wars are absent and the traditional rules of balance of power among states are more valid. Although the pre-Arab Spring Middle East was far from free from these features, it was still much more stable in comparison to today's security environment. In the era of failed states, civil wars, terrorist organizations establishing quasi-states, and post-revolution domestic instability, the realism that Obama envisioned would have worked for American interests only if the United States had had far less ambitious objectives and roles in the region, as there is much greater unpredictability and the traditional rules of deterrence do not work against numerous stakeholders.

However, it was not the partial disengagement of the United States from the region that caused these destabilizing phenomena. If anything, it was the Iraq war which was one of the root causes of bringing these conflicts to the surface. Of course ultimately forces and trends in the region itself shaped this outcome, as it could be seen during the Arab Spring. Furthermore, the United States actively contributed to the destabilization of Libya by forcefully initiating regime change, then leaving Libya on its own. Meanwhile, in the case of Syria, the administration's stated policy objective of driving Assad out of power and giving a green light for Sunni allies to support the rebels¹⁹ – and extremist groups – helped fueling the rebellion to topple Assad, leading to a civil war of massive scale.

To summarize, President Obama first launched a war aimed at regime change in Libya which he himself doubted would leave it better off in the end. Then he basically encouraged an armed conflict in Syria to topple Assad, but refused for a long time to invest sufficient diplomatic and military efforts to help resolving the civil war. Of course there were legitimate moral justifications for military intervention, but encouraging and covertly supporting armed rebellion to overthrow Assad and then basically stepping aside contributed to the devastation Syria went through and to the broader security risks the conflict caused. By the end of 2015, the effects of the war in Syria, especially the refugee crisis and the war's potential to stir direct armed conflict between states, lifted the Syrian conflict up to the threshold of becoming a first-tier American national security challenge. President Obama was an idealist at best in both cases, and not a realist, which would have required a careful consideration of American objectives, risks, available tools and possible outcomes.

False objectives, false choices

The Obama administration argues that in the case of Libya the only alternative to the chosen policy path would have been doing nothing, and in Syria it would have been another large scale American military engagement with a possible war with even Russia, is misguided. In both cases the United States overreached beyond its central objective. In Syria this policy overreach was for a long time the demand of the immediate departure of Assad and his regime. In the case of Libya it was the hope in the establishment of a unified, effective and capable government after Western powers toppled the regime. Furthermore, the Obama administration also overreached beyond its objectives in Iraq with the pull-out of American forces in 2011, as it was hoping that the Maliki government would be willing and capable to address legitimate Sunni concerns and contain the sectarian divisions within the country without considerable U.S. pressure.

Both in Libya and in Syria the administration should have pursued a Bosnia-like approach: guaranteeing an equilibrium on the battlefield, articulating objectives much more in line with the local balance of power, and backing U.S. policy

¹⁸ Nikolay KOZHANOV: [Russia's 'Withdrawal' from Syria is Nothing of the Kind](#), [online]. March 21, 2016, Source: Chathamhouse.org, [March 22, 2016]

¹⁹ Christopher M. BLANCHARD, Carla E. HUMUD, Mary BETH, D. NIKITIN: [Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response](#), [online]. October 9, 2015, Source: fas.org, [March 23, 2016]



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with credible military force. In Libya the United States should have limited its military intervention to humanitarian protection in line with the U.N. Security Council resolution instead of regime change and the complete destruction of the Gaddafi regime.²⁰ In the case of Syria it should have articulated a policy for compromise – with Assad remaining in power but with decentralization and power-sharing arrangements – along the lines of the current stalemate, which has always been the most likely scenario for the outcome given Iran's and Russia's interests in the Levant. Furthermore it should have backed up this policy with intensive diplomacy, financial assistance and credible military threats, if the Assad regime had shown no will to compromise.

It is obvious that numerous risks and obstacles still would have stood in the way for American diplomacy to succeed. The opposition, rebel forces, Turkey and Arab Gulf supporters would have still demanded regime change,²¹ but ultimately it is still these countries who depend more on the United States than vice versa, therefore it has a huge leverage over them. Moreover, declaring a clear but limited objective and following it through would have been better for U.S. credibility even if it did not match up with the objectives of regional allies in comparison to the record of overpromising and then not delivering. Furthermore, preserving the Syrian and the Libyan state structures should have been a priority for U.S. and Western countries in light of the threat posed by terrorist organizations and militias in ungoverned territories, not to mention the immediate humanitarian consequences in terms of the breakdown of basic social services, lawlessness and mass migration. It is worth here mentioning that the United States failed in a similar way in Ukraine. It overpromised and encouraged local forces which were not up to the task in properly facing Ukraine's challenges, and then it was surprised by the forceful Russian response in Crimea and in Eastern Ukraine.

Setting the right strategic objectives

President Barack Obama was right that neither Syria nor especially Libya crosses the threshold to be in the sphere of vital American national interests. Reflecting on President Obama's view of American interests, it is true that the United States' long-term future rests more on global issues such as globalization and climate change than on the outcome of Middle East conflicts, more on its relations with Asia than with the Middle East. Concerning the allocation of resources and political attention, he mostly acted accordingly in these two conflicts, however, he articulated policy objectives publicly and initiated half-way measures in both cases as if these were first-tier American interests at stake. One reason why Russia has recently been more successful in Syria is not simply because it applied military force to its ends, but because its objectives were much more narrow and more realistic to reach. Furthermore, it did not have such a wide range of regional commitments as the United States. To highlight the problem, during the first two years of the Syrian uprising, the United States indirectly fueled radical Sunni insurgency in Syria against Assad, while in Iraq it tried to pressure various Sunni groups as well as the dominant Shia forces to keep the country together, simultaneously seeking to keep up the pressure on Iran – a crucial player in both Iraq and Syria – especially on the nuclear issue. All these contradictory policy objectives contributed to the rise of ISIS, the brake-down of the Iraqi state and the growth of Iran's regional influence. The first lesson here is not that the resources and the tools should match the objectives – that is also important –, but that it is necessary to properly define the objectives in a comprehensive fashion, in line with a realistic assessment of what is achievable and minimizes risks of large-scale violence and endless wars.

When defining more narrow and specific strategic objectives for the United States it is unavoidable that certain countries will protest and in response may take steps which are contrary to U.S. interests. One cannot overlook the risks of partial retrenchment as the primary and unique position of the United States in the international system, which largely rests on its extensive alliances and partnerships throughout the globe. Firm support of allies in terms of defending their territorial integrity and sovereignty, timely consultation and deepening political, economic and military ties is essential for mitigating these risks. However, the United States should primarily demonstrate its leadership in initiating global cooperation, reducing international tensions and forming a functioning international system which is suitable to the changing geopolitical and security landscape.

²⁰ GOLDBERG: [The Obama Doctrine](#)

²¹ Muriel ASSEBURG: [Syria's Civil War: Geopolitical Implications and Scenarios](#), [online]. 2013, Source: IEMED.org [March 23, 2016]

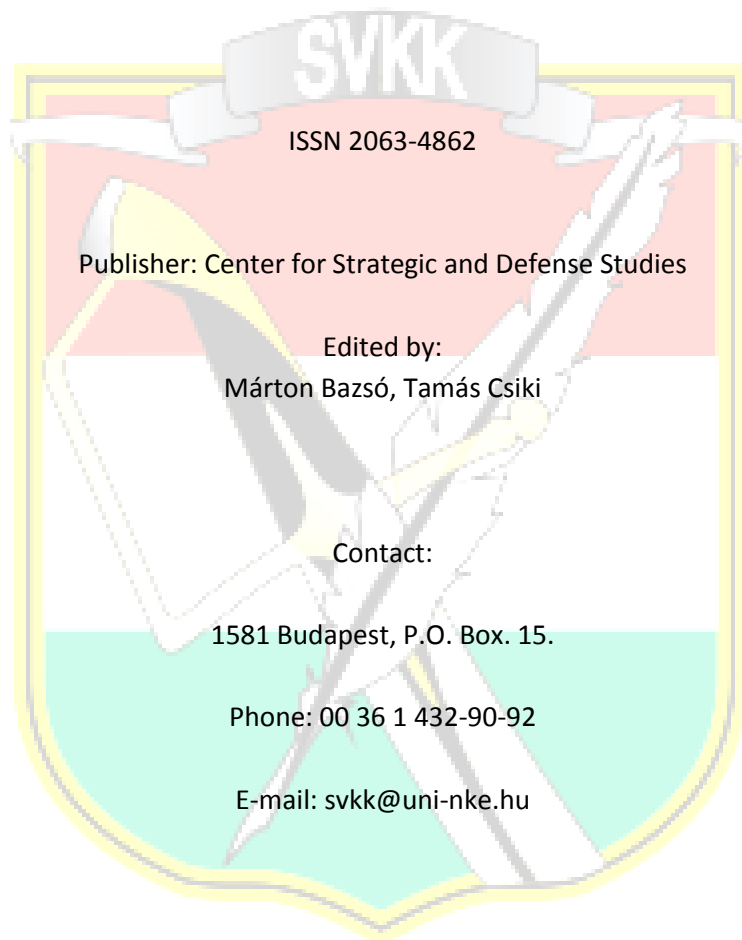


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