

## BOOK REVIEW

***Obama at War: Congress and the Imperial Presidency.*  
Ryan C. Hendrickson. Lexington Kentucky: The University  
Press of Kentucky, 2015. Pp. 192.**

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The coercive US approach in world politics particularly the troops deployment in other countries has impacted the global environment. Some see the US military endeavours as contributing to peace. Others view the US military overtures as part of an aggressive policy and expansionist agenda. The US pre-emptive doctrine was in response to the September 11 terrorist attacks. Since then, the US has been actively pursuing counter-terrorism operations. The use of military force has been an active component of the US-led War on Terror (WoT). *Obama at War: Congress and the Imperial Presidency* by Professor Ryan C. Hendrickson, discusses the US-led wars, and highlights the interplay of Congress and Presidential powers in these wars. The author's research interests include American military action abroad and congressional-executive relations over the use of force.

As stated in Article 1, Section 8 of the US Constitution: "Congress – not the President – has the authority to declare war" (p.7). The Constitution provides the President the power to act as the country's Commander in Chief, but this power is balanced by Congressional powers that speak directly to the use of force abroad. In line with this, the use of military force cannot be undertaken without prior approval by the Congress (p.21). In the US military interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria, the Presidential powers seemed to have overtaken the Congress' activism. During former President Bush's tenure, Iraq was attacked on account of possessing, allegedly, Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs). President Bush did consult Congress, but Congressional approval was not sought (p.11).

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After the war, who was the winner? The terrorists, Saddam Hussein or the US? The ground reality of Iraq provides the clear answer. Neither the WMDs were found, nor the country could be freed of terrorists; rather, the Iraqi military was divided and the country continues to be in chaos. In Afghanistan's case, the Congress allowed the use of force. However, the later policies such as the troop surge (2009) and the use of drone-strikes had little Congressional say. Like Iraq, Afghanistan is insecure. A more systematic wave of terrorism has emerged, and not only Afghanistan, but other regional states also are faced with this threat. Drone attacks were also carried out in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia (pp. 25-30).

The targeting of terrorists by drone technology did prove instrumental in restricting the terrorist movement. However, the civilian deaths and the collateral damage caused due to drone strikes turned out to be a grave concern for the locals. This also provoked anti-West sentiments. According to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, an estimated 2,428 to 3,929 people have died as a result of US drone strikes in Pakistan since 2004, while well over 1,000 others were injured. An enhanced Congressional role in policies like drone strikes could have been useful in controlling the damage.

As regards the use of force in Libya, the Congress prohibited the deployment of the US troops in the country as well as aid for anti-Qaddafi forces. Further, the author has referred to media reports, which revealed the presence of CIA operatives in Libya. These operatives identified targets for NATO strikes and exchanged information about anti-Qaddafi forces. This intelligence sharing activity assisted the rebels and provided the ground for US troops' deployment in Libya (pp. 56-69).

Whether it was a Republican or a Democratic President, the Presidential say had been a dominating factor in the US military deployments abroad. The Presidents have continued to create red lines, suggesting an independent military power decision. The US Presidents, in order to justify and strengthen their stance for unilateral Presidential military authority, have also employed the UN and NATO endorsements. On the other hand, the Congress' constitutional and oversight role in the

US wars had been quite limited. It has been argued that the Congress' avoidance of constitutional responsibility for the US military actions abroad has (indirectly) empowered the President. In this context, the author has referred to the role of senior members of Congress. Senators John McCain and John Kerry had been the staunchest supporters of the unilateral executive-branch military decisions (p. 114).

The book gives an understanding of the dominating role of the Presidential power and the failure of the Congress to exercise its legislative authority, which has resulted in an imbalanced power equation. This skewed warmaking power needs to be put right and a more elaborate decision-making process for wars, in line with legislative authority, needs to be employed, so that wars with huge economic, strategic, political and moral consequences can be avoided.