American presidents have always been the collective representation of its citizens and the society of his era. Symbolism, therefore, has been one of the important characteristics of presidential authority, serving both as power and constraint to their policies. Barack Obama, who was a symbolic “transformational figure” from the beginning of his appearance in the 2008 election, embodied multiple forms of symbolisms. This paper shows how Obama’s symbolisms as “a Noble Peace Prize winner” and “the Pacific President” deviated from the traditional definition of presidential symbolism, entailing “transboundary” characteristics. It also analyzes how his symbolism affected his foreign policies.

INTRODUCTION

Symbolism has been considered one of the core characteristics of the American presidency in the area of presidential studies. While it is not a stated legal power on the Constitution, many studies on the power of the presidency state that symbolism is indeed a relevant component of the presidential authority. For example, James David Barber in The Presidential Character claims, “The Presidency is much more than an institution. The President is a symbolic leader, the one figure who draws together the people’s hopes and fears for the political future.”1 Another reinforces that “[a president is] the one whose actions convey not only his own personality [but also] a personality that has become a source of meaning for the people.”2 These show that a president has a role to be the collective representation of the citizens, in addition to other legal authorities granted to him by Article II of the U.S. Constitution.

Symbolism emerged as an important component of presidential power after 1932, under the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt.3 The rise of television also triggered media to start focusing on presidents’ speeches and behaviors, which strengthened the role of symbolism on presidential power.4 Since then, each president has embodied various form of symbolism.

4 Ibid.
However, the common ground of all presidential symbolism has been the fact that it has always been the collective representation of all American citizens and the American society.

Barack H. Obama, like his predecessors, was a symbol to America in many ways – he was the first African American president, a Nobel Peace Prize winner, and the first Pacific president, among other things. Furthermore, in most aspects, his symbolism aligned with the traditional definition of symbolism. That is to say, his symbolism reflected the American society and its people in the post-Bush era. A large factor that determined his victory in 2008 was that he himself was “a ‘transformational figure’ who could repair America’s tarnished global image and bring closure, catharsis and redemption to the recent history of pain at home and abroad alike.”

Considering that the traditional definition of symbolism is strictly destined to the American society and its citizens, however, Obama’s symbolism do not all fit that definition. His symbolism includes aspects of transboundary commitments, where he not only has to be the collective representation of America, but also of the wider international community. Specifically, his symbolisms as “a Nobel Peace Prize winner” and “the first Pacific President” hold such transboundary elements.

This paper focuses on Obama’s symbolisms as “a Nobel Peace Prize winner” and “the first Pacific President.” In the next section, it suggests that the two are in fact what could be called “transboundary symbolisms” and thus a new form of symbolism unseen in previous presidents. Then in the succeeding section, it analyzes the impact of Obama’s transboundary symbolisms on his foreign policies. Through such analysis, this paper hopes to identify a new aspect of presidential symbolism untapped in preliminary presidential studies and reinforce the idea that symbolism is one of the important factors to consider when analyzing a president’s policies.

**TRANSBOUNDARY SYMBOLISM**

In this section, I will first explain the traditional definition of presidential symbolism that has been used since FDR’s presidency. Then I will explain how Obama’s symbolism deviates from that traditional definition, and how his symbolism included transboundary elements.

*Traditional Definition of Presidential Symbolism*

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As mentioned previously, the traditional definition of presidential symbolism emphasized president’s collective representation of all American citizens and the American society. For example, FDR, symbolized largely as a unifier of all liberals, became the first example to show the power of symbolism. FDR became a national symbol of progressivism and liberalism because his New Deal reflected exactly what the American society and its people were longing for in the aftermath of the Great Depression – a light of hope and idealism. Another president with a notable symbolic power was Ronald W. Reagan, who was both a living example of “the shining city of the hill” and a “main street Republican.” Reagan as a symbol of “the shining city of the hill” accurately reflected the American society in the 1980s, where the racial, economical, and religious tensions that existed was being covered up by an idealistic rhetoric of “the shining city of the hill.” Hollywood was one of the main undertakers of this rhetoric, and having gone through a career in Hollywood himself, Reagan was able to successfully fulfill that image.

Obama’s Transboundary Symbolism

Obama’s symbolisms as “a Nobel Peace Prize winner” and “the Pacific President” bound him with a new form of expectation and responsibility unseen in previous presidents. While symbolism traditionally bound presidents with responsibilities to their American constituents, Obama’s symbolism also included responsibilities to a wider international community. I will review how each of Obama’s symbolisms included transboundary elements.

As “a Nobel Peace Prize winner,” Obama was expected to contribute to the peace of the global community. The press release by the Nobel Committee indicated that when they decided on the nomination, they were hopeful for Obama’s active contribution to strengthen democracy and human rights around world. Such hope was backed up by many of Obama’s public statements, including “a world without nuclear weapons” speech in Prague and the appeal he made in the UN that “Now is the time for all of us to take our share of responsibility for a global response to global challenges.” As Obama himself recognized it as “call to action,” the Obama administration also took this award and the symbolism it entailed

as a responsibility they would not be able to ignore.\textsuperscript{10}

Obama was one of the three incumbent American presidents to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, the other two being Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt.\textsuperscript{11} However, the latter two served before 1932 and therefore before symbolism became a crucial element of presidential power. Therefore, it can be said that Obama was the first president to have dealt with the symbolism as the “Nobel Peace Prize winner” during his tenure.

As “the Pacific President,” Obama gave high expectations to the international community, and more specifically to the Asia-Pacific region, that he would prioritize Asia-Pacific to a certain extent within his foreign policies. Although it did not receive as wide attention as his other symbolism as “the first African-American President,” this symbolism as “the Pacific President” was just as relevant to his presidency. In fact, it was a symbol attached to him since the beginning of his career in politics, even before his presidency. Obama’s personal history has partial roots in the Pacific. Although his birth father was Kenyan, Obama was born in Hawaii and raised partially in Indonesia. His mother remarried an Indonesian man, therefore making his sister half Indonesian.

Born in Hawaii, Obama also gained acceptance from and was naturally liked by Senator Daniel Inouye, who served as the senator of Hawaii for half a century. When Obama became a senator in 2005, Inouye showed him affection as if Obama was his own grandson.\textsuperscript{12} It can be seen from this anecdote that Obama was viewed as “the one from the Pacific” even before he rose to presidency. During his first election, Obama also published a report titled “Barack Obama’s Blueprint for the Change We Need for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs).” It was the first time that a report aimed at AAPIs was publicized during a presidential election. Soon after his tenure began, Obama continued to work to meet the needs of the AAPIs, including reestablishment of the White House Initiatives on AAPIs through Executive Order 13515, among others.\textsuperscript{13}

Obama upheld his symbolism as the first “Pacific President” not only within America but also internationally. In his Tokyo speech in 2009, Obama emphasized his roots in the Asia-Pacific region, and called himself “America’s first Pacific President” at the end of the

\textsuperscript{12} Watanabe Masahito, The Limits of American Politics (Tokyo: Iwanamishinsho, 2016), 167.
speech. He also used the same rhetoric when he visited Asia (Cambodia, Thailand, and Myanmar) after his reelection in 2012. When he extended his symbolism as “the Pacific President” from the domestic to the international community, he became the collective representation not only of the American citizens but also of citizens in the Pacific region. This is how the symbolism as “the Pacific President” transcended the traditional definition of presidential symbolism and became a “transboundary symbolism.”

As can be seen, of many kinds of symbolism Obama embodied, there were aspects that differed from those of previous presidents. While symbolism traditionally bound presidents with responsibility and loyalty to the American society and its citizens, Obama’s so-called “transboundary symbolism” extended the subject of representation to a wider population, whether it be the entire international community or just the Asia-Pacific region. This change in the character of presidential symbolism and the impact it had on the presidential authority are further investigated below.

**IMPACT ON FOREIGN POLICY**

The previous section showed how Obama’s symbolism transcended the traditional definition of presidential symbolism, thus yielding what this paper calls the “transboundary symbolism.” This section analyzes how that impacted his foreign policies. To begin with, it is important to note what kinds of impact traditional symbolisms had on presidents’ policies as a source of comparison. Traditional symbolism has been studied both as a source of power and a source of constraint for domestic policies.

First of all, symbolism has been identified as one of the key powers of American presidency. Although there has been a long debate over what exactly “the powers of the presidency” are, many advocate that the symbolic nature of the presidency and the impact it entails is worth academic examination. Powers of the Presidency (SAGE Publications, 2012) states, “[…] the symbolism of the chief of the state role does constitute a real power, because it enhances presidential authority and legitimizes and magnifies other presidential powers.” This aligns the power of symbolism equally with the president’s other powers as a commander and an administrator. For example, George W. Bush used his symbolism as a

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power to underline his other presidential powers when he announced “mission accomplished” on the deck of an aircraft carrier during the Iraq War. Bill Clinton used his symbolism to remedy his faltering presidential authority during his State of the Union Address in 1999.17

On the other hand, symbolism has also been identified as a source of constraint for presidents. In *The Performance of Politics* (*Oxford University Press, 2010*), Jeffrey C. Alexander argues that “to struggle for power in a democratic society one must become a collective representation – a symbolic vessel filled with what citizens hold most dear.”18 In order to become a president and exercise the power as a symbolic figure, one must first present one’s self as “the symbol for all.” Moreover, in the current American political system that allows up to two terms of consecutive presidency, a president needs to abide by the expectation laid out by symbolism even after the first campaign. The distress caused by symbolism can be seen from Obama’s words in his book, *The Audacity of Hope* (*Vintage Books, 2008*), “For the broad public, I am who the media say I am. I say what they say I say. I become who they say I’ve become.”19 Barber also shares this view by stating, “On top of all his routine duties, he has to carry that off (being a symbolic leader) – or fail.”20

Traditional symbolism acts both as power and restraint toward presidents’ domestic policies. Considering how Obama’s transboundary symbolism extended from being a collective representation of the American society to being that of the larger international community, it could have influenced not only his domestic policies but also his foreign policies in a similar way. That is to say, at times transboundary symbolism could have aided the success of a foreign policy and at other times, it could have limited the success of a foreign policy. Below is the analysis of the two aspects of Obama’s transboundary symbolism and how each affected his foreign policies.

*Being “A Nobel Peace Prize Winner”*

Being “a Nobel Peace Prize winner” gave Obama the power to achieve one of his major legacies in foreign diplomacy: the Hiroshima visit. Simultaneously, the symbolism led to disappointments from the international community for Obama’s lack of achievements in many of the areas he was expected to work on. It is important to note, however, that although disappointments occurred, the symbolism did not act as a restraint to Obama’s foreign

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17 Ibid.
20 Barber, *The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House*. 
policies.

Actualizing the visit to Hiroshima was not an easy task for Obama. He had been preparing for it since the beginning of his tenure. After advocating for “a world without nuclear weapons” in April 2009, Obama announced his intention to become the first incumbent president to visit Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Secretary of State John Kerry and Secretary of Defense Charles Hagel’s visit to Chidorigafuchi National Cemetery in October 2013 was publicly viewed as a containment reaction to Prime Minister Abe’s controversial visit to the Yasukuni Shrine; however, according to officials in charge of U.S.-Japan relations, their visit was actually intended more as a preparation for Obama’s eventual visit to Hiroshima.21

The biggest challenge Obama faced in trying to make the visit happen, was gaining the understanding from his American citizens and American politicians. Ever since the end of World War II, it has been a long controversy within the United States whether the dropping of the atomic bombs could be justified or not. Although the view that it was unjustifiable is recently rising in popularity, the opposing view that it was necessary to end the war remains dominant. Due to such deep-rooted controversy, any president’s visit to Hiroshima and Nagasaki was a great challenge. The lack of full reconciliation in this matter has been the cause of a historic gap between the United States and Japan, despite the two being called “the most important bilateral relations in the world.”22

In the end, what enabled Obama to cross that controversial line and become the first incumbent president to actualize the visit was his symbolism as “a Nobel Peace Prize winner.” Because Obama embodied the symbolism, he was able to bring the importance of nuclear disarmament to the forefront as a universal goal, and successfully advanced past the sensitive and emotional dimensions of this issue. His prior discussion with the Japanese government that he won’t be “apologizing” about the historic event and that he rather intends to “send a future-minded message” about nuclear disarmament also worked effectively with his position as a “Nobel Peace Prize winner.” By setting a tone that his visit to Hiroshima is mainly for humanitarian purposes, he skillfully gained understanding of the U.S. veterans as well, a population that has been the sternest toward the U.S. government’s stance against the dropping of the atomic bombs. Thus, his symbolism granted him the authority to be the representative of the wide international community for the issue of nuclear disarmament.

While Obama emphasized the universal benefit of his visit rather than the benefit toward the U.S.-Japan relations, the visit had an important impact on the latter as well. His visit

21 Watanabe, The Limits of American Politics, 231.
encouraged Japanese Prime Minister Abe’s visit to Pearl Harbor shortly after in January 2017, an equally controversial move within Japan. The two visits together put an end to the historic dispute regarding responsibility issues of World War II, and enabled the bilateral relationship to resume to a new step. Although there are both sides to the argument regarding whether President Obama and Prime Minister Abe’s “future-oriented” approaches lacking formal apologies were the most appropriate, the United States and Japan achieved a form of bilateral relationship that differs from that of China–Japan or ROK–Japan. Obama stated during Abe’s visit to Pearl Harbor that “Wars can end. The most bitter of adversaries can become the strongest of allies,” indicating that the United States and Japan have formerly moved past the historic dispute of war responsibilities and atonement. Obama’s symbolism as “a Nobel Peace Prize winner” gave him the power to actualize this diplomatic legacy that other presidents could not, and gave him the opportunity to both advocate for world peace and progress the diplomatic relationship with Japan.

The symbolism also had a negative impact toward Obama’s presidency. For Obama himself, the prize was more of a daunting responsibility than a hopeful encouragement. Obama often supported multilateralism, but it is important to acknowledge that his basic principle behind multilateralism was the belief that America should work together with those countries with common threats, and not necessarily that America should work with other countries on purely humanitarian issues. Considering that the prize puts a closer emphasis on the latter, Obama had to deal with the gap between executing his own foreign policies and meeting expectations of the prize. His confusion was apparent from anecdotes such as, after being informed of his winning, Obama allegedly sighed saying he “just wanted to focus on health care reform.” His staff even “investigated whether other winners had skipped the prize ceremony in Oslo,” showing little enthusiasm for the award.

Consequently, after eight years of presidency, Obama achieved little of what was expected of him in regards with the Nobel Peace Prize. Rather than promoting peace, he escalated the American military involvement in Afghanistan shortly after the ceremony. He was unable to close the Guantanamo Bay detention camp as envisioned in his speech in Prague. Overall, he

24 Yamagishi Takakazu and Nishikawa Masaru, “Post Obama” America (University Education Press, 2016), 182.
25 Watanabe, The Limits of American Politics, 140.
26 “Former Nobel boss reveals Obama didn’t want to pick up his 2009 peace prize and claims it was a MISTAKE to award it to him,” Mail Online, September 16, 2015, accessed January 26, 2017.
“never really used the eight years of presidency to push forward the Prague vision.”

It is worth noting, however, that instead of being restrained by the symbolism, Obama ended up sticking to his own foreign policies and ended up hurting the symbolism. This is different from what would be expected from the traditional presidential symbolism, which also restricts a president’s policies because going against the symbolism means failing to be the collective representation of the American citizens.

**Being “The Pacific President”**

Unlike his symbolism as “a Nobel Peace Prize winner,” being “the Pacific President” acted neither as power nor restraint to Obama’s foreign policies. Obama hoped that by becoming “the Pacific President” and emphasizing his “pivot to Asia” policy, he would be able to distance himself from his predecessor, George W. Bush, and shift from the quagmire in the Middle East to the engagement tactics in the Pacific. Although it is often said that “Obama Doctrine” never existed in his foreign policy, one consistency seen in his policy was “the need to strengthen alliances and international institutions to tackle shared global challenges,” or in other words, strategic “engagement.” His symbolism as “the Pacific President” was expected to heighten credibility in the Asia-Pacific, and thus work as a support to his engagement tactics.

In reality, however, the symbolism only raised expectations of the Pacific countries and did little to yield results. Without ever concretely explaining what his plans to “pivot to Asia” were, such policy was more known for its name than its actual achievements. Obama, until the end, could not stop China’s illegal advancement in the South China Sea, or constrain North Korea’s nuclear weapon program. He also canceled many of his meetings with Asian countries, causing tensions with countries including India, Indonesia, Singapore, and Japan.

There were two factors that caused this outcome. First was the simple truth that America could not easily pull out from the situation in the Middle East. Due to the rise of the Shia, increasing anti-Americanism in the Middle East, and ongoing military deployment in Afghanistan, among other things, Obama could not prioritize the Pacific region in many cases. Although Obama counted on his “Pacific President” status and the “pivot to Asia” policy to help him move on from the Middle East crisis, those inevitably got bogged down due to the

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28 Singh, Barack Obama’s Post-American Foreign Policy: The Limits of Engagement, 41.

rising need in the Middle East.

Second factor that depowered Obama’s symbolism as “the Pacific President” was, in fact, his other symbolism. In his analysis in the book *The Limits of American Politics*, Masahito Watanabe argues that in many cases, Obama had to be the “first African-American president” first and foremost within the United States. With his unique background representing both the African-American and the Pacific communities, some believed at the beginning of Obama’s term that he would represent true multiculturalism, bridging between and going beyond the divisions that existed among the white, black, and the Pacific cultures. However, Watanabe points out that there is “an invisible wall” within the allegedly colorblind and multicultural America. The wall establishes that the hardships African-Americans had gone through historically, such as slavery and racism, require full attention; therefore, being “the first African-American president” and “the first Pacific president” simultaneously could cause strife between the two. Under such unspoken pressure, Obama’s symbolism as an African-American had always been emphasized over that as a Pacific islander within the United States. Consequently, just as the Middle East crisis was prioritized over Obama’s “pivot to Asia” policy, the domestic issues regarding diversity and rights such as the issue of same-sex marriage and Planned Parenthood was often prioritized over the Pacific policy as well.

**CONCLUSION**

Symbolism has been an important factor of presidential authority since Franklin D. Roosevelt’s term in 1932. Up until Obama, all presidents had symbolized the American citizens and the society of their era. Being a collective representation of the country granted them power at times to advance their policies; at other times, however, it also bounded them with responsibility, and symbolism became a source of constraint to their policies.

Obama, like his predecessors, embodied multiple forms of powerful symbolism. He was “the first African-American president,” “a Nobel Peace Prize winner,” and “the first Pacific President,” among others. The latter two forms of symbolisms, however, deviated from the traditional definition of presidential symbolism. Instead of being a collective representation of America, being “a Nobel Peace Prize winner” and “the Pacific President” also came with commitments to the wider international community. As “a Nobel Peace Prize winner,”

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Obama was expected to work on the universal humanitarian issues, most notably the nuclear disarmament. As “the Pacific President,” he gave high expectations to the Pacific countries that America would focus on their region as far as its foreign policy was concerned. Because these two forms of symbolism had extended effects outside of America’s boundaries, this paper coined them Obama’s “transboundary symbolism.”

Obama’s transboundary symbolism had unique impacts on his foreign policies, proving that it does not hold the same characteristics as the traditional presidential symbolism. Being “a Nobel Peace Prize winner” did grant Obama the power to actualize his Hiroshima visit, one of his major diplomatic legacies. However, other than that exception, his transboundary symbolism worked neither as power nor constraint. Being “the Pacific President” had little impact in implementing Obama’s “pivot to Asia” policy. Moreover, neither forms of symbolism ever acted as a constraint to his foreign policies. Despite the fact that Obama had commitments to the international community through his transboundary symbolisms, Obama chose to hurt the symbolism and prioritize his domestic policies instead of arranging his foreign policies around his transboundary symbolism.

It can be seen from Obama’s case that transboundary symbolism comes after the traditional domestic symbolism in importance. Transboundary symbolism includes diplomatic promises and commitments to the community outside of the United States, whereas the traditional symbolism strictly represents the American community. Therefore, as the president of the United States, traditional symbolism bears stronger significance – transboundary symbolism could work as power when it aligns with the domestic needs, but it would never work to constrain a president. Additionally when a transboundary symbolism crashes with other symbolism, as seen in the case of Obama being “the Pacific President,” traditional symbolism seems to precede transboundary symbolism in importance.

Also especially with Obama’s case, transboundary symbolism might have been a tough tool to utilize given the timing of the post-Bush era. It was when American citizens shifted and became inward minded, calling for isolationism, unilateralism, and away from the role as “the world’s policeman.”31 To emphasize his commitment to overseas matter in such a time would have been difficult to gain public support. This is also backed up by the wide support Donald Trump gets from his assertion of “America First.”

Lastly, it is important to point out that even with all the limits it holds and the lack of support from the American citizens, transboundary symbolism is still a crucial tool that is

31 Singh, Barack Obama’s Post-American Foreign Policy: The Limits of Engagement, 43.
needed in America’s foreign policy today. As Obama envisioned, today’s complex and multi-layered world needs a post-doctrine approach, and transboundary symbolism helps America to create stronger diplomatic relationships with other countries in this “post-American” era.\(^{32}\) Obama might have not fulfilled his symbolic expectations as “a Nobel Peace Prize winner” or “the Pacific President,” but he was able to build an important foundation in strengthening diplomatic ties with the Asia-Pacific region. The challenge his successor faces is the need to fill in the gap between what the American citizens wants – whether it be isolationism or “America First”– and what America’s foreign policy needs in order to address the major shift in the international political structure.

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