



Breaking Down Obama's Grand Strategy



"The ongoing debate on American grand strategy will benefit from recognizing both the nature and the merits of the Obama grand strategy—as well as the challenges and dilemmas therein."

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[Does the United States have a grand strategy](#) today? Does it have a coherent set of

principles guiding its engagement with the world? These questions have been at the center of [recent debates](#) on American foreign policy. [In the wake of the president's widely panned speech at West Point late last month](#), critics have charged that the United States lacks an overarching design in global affairs; that the country has become rudderless in a stormy sea of international events.

The reality is somewhat different. The Obama administration *does* have a grand strategy in the sense that there are fairly clear strategic principles that structure its conduct overseas. Those principles revolve around the idea of maintaining American international leadership and primacy, but doing so at lower costs and in ways that better reflect the changing geography of global power. These concepts, moreover, are not obviously wrong or quixotic—given the combination of challenges and constraints that the country now faces, they actually make fairly good sense.

That's the good news. The bad news is that sensible strategies are not always successful strategies, and the particular grand strategy that the Obama administration has sought to pursue also contains within it a set of key tensions, challenges and dilemmas. These issues touch on some of the fundamental challenges of the grand-strategic endeavor—and they could prove quite serious in the years ahead.

What Is Grand Strategy, Anyway?

Before discussing what U.S. grand strategy is today, it is useful to address what grand strategy is in general.

[As I explain in my recent book on the subject](#), a grand strategy is essentially an integrated set of principles and priorities that give structure to a country's statecraft. It consists of a series of considered, interlocking judgments: about the nature of the global environment, a country's highest goals and interests within that environment, the primary threats to those goals and interests, and the ways that finite resources can be deployed accordingly. These judgments make up a sort of intellectual calculus that

informs policy, the various concrete initiatives—diplomacy, foreign aid, the use of force—through which states interact with the world. Put simply, a grand strategy is the basic conceptual framework that helps nations navigate a complex and dangerous international environment.

Having a grand strategy is, therefore, essential if states are to maintain focus and discipline in their statecraft, and effectively use their power. Yet getting grand strategy right is never an easy task. The very endeavor of grand strategy requires countries to prioritize among competing challenges and opportunities, and to make painful decisions about trade-offs between various goals and objectives. It forces officials to relate short-term policies to long-term interests, and to both exploit and preserve [the myriad sources of national power](#). Moreover, they must do all of this in a constantly evolving international environment, and amid the furies of domestic and bureaucratic politics at home.

For these reasons, a grand strategy can never be a road map with all of the twists and turns plotted out in advance, or a panacea that somehow wipes away the complexity of the global arena. At best, a grand strategy is simply a collection of generally coherent ideas about where a country seeks to go in the world and how it should seek to get there. These ideas need to be firm and focused enough to keep American policy anchored amid [the geopolitical squalls](#), but also flexible enough to allow adaptation and even improvisation in their implementation. Indeed, the ultimate test of a grand strategy is not whether it provides seamless coherence and flawless performance in a country's foreign policy; it is whether it simply offers enough coherence and performance so that a country can advance towards its highest objectives over time.

Understanding Obama's Grand Strategy

So what is President Obama's grand strategy today? Over the past several years, his administration has gradually assembled a grand strategy based on three overarching ideas, each of which is framed by one of the key geopolitical contexts in which American foreign policy is now operating.

The first of these is the post–Cold War context. By virtually any standard, the post–Cold War order has been extremely favorable to the United States. It's an order that has been

very stable and peaceful by any meaningful historical comparison. It's an order in which the democratic countries—particularly the United States—have enjoyed a clear preponderance of power. It's also an order that has been very favorable to the further advancement of free markets and democracy. In sum, the post–Cold War order is a world in which the United States can live very comfortably and very advantageously. And so, not surprisingly, the first principle of the Obama administration's grand strategy has been to preserve that order by sustaining the [American leadership and primacy](#) on which it rests.

This goal is hardly original to this administration—it dates back to the 1990s—but the Obama team has embraced this objective, restating it more or less explicitly in every [major strategy document](#) released since 2009. And that goal has been evident in policies that are so longstanding and ingrained, that Americans often forget how significant they truly are: maintaining the world's strongest military as the backbone of the international order; reaffirming alliance commitments and forward force deployments as a source of global stability; opposing nuclear proliferation and other threats that could disrupt the existing order; deepening the international economy through the pursuit of free-trade agreements; and others. As [Peter Feaver](#) and other analysts have pointed out, all of these policies reflect a commitment to preserving and extending a favorable international system. This commitment represents the first and oldest principle of America's current grand strategy.

The second guiding principle of Obama's grand strategy is newer, and it flows from a different context—the post-Iraq context. By the time Obama took power in 2009, it was becoming clear that [the United States was in a position of significant strategic and military overstretch](#), that the war in Iraq weakened U.S. power rather than strengthening it, and that as the conflict in that country wound down, American military spending was inevitably going to decline as well.

This context gave rise to a second grand-strategic principle—that the United States does indeed need to sustain American global leadership, but that it also needs smarter, cheaper and more prudent ways of exerting that leadership, particularly when the use of force is involved. This means avoiding prolonged stability operations that the country can no longer afford, and finding more discreet ways of applying force when it is

required. It entails encouraging allies and partners to bear a greater share of the load when military action does occur. Above all, it means erring on the side of caution rather than activism in military affairs—or as the president and his aides have so pithily put it, not doing the [“stupid sh*t”](#) that could turn into another Iraq and consume U.S. energies for a decade.

The policy applications of this idea are easy to see. They include the reliance on drone strikes as a primary and comparatively low-cost tool of counterterrorism, and the emphasis on [“leading from behind”](#) and keeping a very light footprint in the Libyan intervention of 2011. This idea is equally manifest in the administration’s deep and continuing reluctance to get involved militarily in Syria, and it was made perfectly explicit in the [2012 Defense Strategic Guidance](#)—the main thrust of which was that large-scale counterinsurgency and stability operations were out, and that restraint would be the watchword of U.S. defense policy in the coming years. Obama’s grand strategy emphasizes American leadership, in other words, but it emphasizes limited-liability leadership as well.

It also stresses refocusing American engagement to reflect the changing global dynamics of the present era. This third aspect of American grand strategy is framed against a third geopolitical context, [which is the dawning of the Asian century](#). The Asia-Pacific region is likely to be the cockpit of global-security competition and economic growth in the twenty-first century, [and the rise of China in particular presents the greatest long-term challenge for American foreign policy](#).

Obama’s grand strategy thus stresses the imperative of reorienting American strategy to keep pace with these changes. The administration has sought to extract the United States from its deep military entanglements in the Middle East and Southwest Asia—the region that has consumed American energies over the past decade—and to devote greater attention and resources to issues of greater long-term importance.

This was the rationale, for instance, [behind the much-touted](#) and [now much-derided Asia pivot](#). It has been the logic behind policies like the opening to Myanmar, plans to station Marines in Darwin, the upgrading of security ties with countries such as the Philippines, and others. Not least of all, it has been a powerful reason why this White

House has shown so little desire to significantly prolong American involvement in Iraq or Afghanistan, or to get immersed in another Middle Eastern war in Syria. If the Asia-Pacific is the future, the thinking goes, the bogging oneself down in the Middle East means getting stuck in the past. This is the third essential line of U.S. grand strategy today.

To call these three principles a grand strategy, of course, is not to say that they explain everything that the Obama administration has done, or that these ideas are flawlessly correct or cohesive. What it means is that these principles have generally anchored the administration's thinking about big-picture global issues, that they cut across key strategy documents and policy statements, they relate to one another in fairly coherent ways, and their influence can be seen across a broad range of actual initiatives. That is the essence of grand strategy—or at the very least, it indicates that there are grand-strategic concepts guiding American actions.

Is It a Good Grand Strategy?

At a broad level of analysis, this set of strategic principles makes a great deal of sense. It's undeniable that the post–Cold War order has been very good to the United States, and that America should want to maintain that order well into the future. [It's certainly correct to judge that the rise of China as a potential peer challenger is the most significant strategic problem that Washington faces over the long term](#), and that if the United States seeks to play the long game—which is what grand strategy is all about—then its geographical priorities have to shift accordingly.

The Obama administration's general emphasis on strategic restraint also has its strengths. The administration was certainly accurate in assessing that there was a degree of American strategic overstretch in 2008-2009, that avoiding huge mistakes is a worthwhile objective in its own right, and that the costs of American engagement have to be made bearable if that engagement is to be sustained over the long-term. Indeed, given [the downward trajectory of the American defense budget](#) and other resource limitations that the country currently faces, this emphasis on prudence seems quite compelling. On the surface, then, Obama's grand strategy seems altogether quite reasonable.

This is the upside of American grand strategy today—that there are grand-strategic principles anchoring U.S. policy, and that those principles have a good deal to be said on their behalf. The downside, however, is that grand strategies can be both reasonable and problematic. And that, unfortunately, is certainly the case here.

Obama's grand strategy may be plausible enough, but it also carries within it five important problems and dilemmas. Some of these issues reflect the way that the strategy has been implemented; some are inherent to the strategy itself; and some have to do with factors that policy makers can't fully control. Viewed collectively, however, these five dilemmas raise some fairly serious questions about the prospects of American grand strategy going forward.

No Rhetorical “Oomph”

The first dilemma, [which was clearly apparent from the president's West Point speech in May](#), is that this strategy simply lacks rhetorical punch. Preserving the status quo and avoiding big mistakes are worthy objectives, but there's nothing stirring or sexy about them. To put it another way, “Don't do stupid sh*t” is not an inspiring rally cry.

This may seem like a minor quibble, or a problem that can easily be solved through better rhetoric, but it is neither. All grand strategies rest on a foundation of domestic support, and domestic support is easier to come by when presidents can describe their strategies in terms that are intuitively appealing to Americans who don't spend much time thinking about foreign affairs. And all things being equal, strategies that can be justified in terms of achieving some great goal or defeating some massive, overriding danger tend to sell better than those that can't.

This was something that the Clinton administration discovered when it was seeking to devise a post-Cold War grand strategy in the 1990s, and it is something that the Obama administration is learning at present. A risk-averse, status-quo-preserving grand strategy is likely to be a rhetorically and politically punchless grand strategy, and this constitutes a first key dilemma for American officials today.

Means and Ends

A second and even more difficult dilemma is that while the ends of American grand

strategy are generally sound, the means simply may not be there anymore. In other words, the objectives of preserving American primacy and sustaining the post–Cold War order are valuable ones, but they are endangered by the climate of [fiscal austerity](#) in which the country increasingly finds itself.

This dilemma stems from the fact that the goal of preserving the favorable post–Cold War environment rests on having not just the world’s strongest military, but one that is dramatically stronger than its rivals’ militaries, and one that is so strong that it can shape events and maintain stability in regions around the world. That being the case, it is difficult to avoid worrying about whether this aspect of U.S. strategy will continue to be feasible if the defense budget remains on its current trajectory. Even existing budget cuts are forcing shifts in the defense strategy outlined as recently as 2012, and they are raising questions about whether there is any military substance to the Asia pivot. If the cuts go deeper and subsequent rounds of sequestration hit, these problems will only worsen, and the means-ends gap will continue to grow.

To be clear, the United States will not soon find itself in the position of having the second-strongest military in the world; but it could discover that it has jeopardized the margin of dominance that makes American grand strategy viable. Reconciling means and ends is always a central dilemma of grand strategy, and it is one that is particularly pronounced today.

Europe and the Pivot

The ends-means gap relates to a third dilemma, which has to do with the question of how a less-tranquil European security environment may complicate the Asia pivot in the years ahead. A central premise of the pivot—if an often-unstated one—was that Europe was a basically stable and peaceful region, and that it could therefore be treated as a relative economy of force by American planners. That premise, in turn, was based on the notion that relations between the United States and Russia would remain fairly calm and productive.

Needless to say, both of these judgments are becoming hard to sustain. [It is impossible to predict how events in Kiev and Moscow will unfold in the coming months and years](#), but there is already an increased sense of insecurity hanging over Eastern Europe, and

U.S.-Russian relations have become more explicitly competitive than at any time since the Cold War. This does not mean that the United States will be going back to Cold War-levels of military commitment to Europe, but it is already forcing American officials to reconsider what level and form of commitment will be necessary to maintain the climate of reassurance and stability that Washington has grown accustomed to having on that continent.

To the extent that more resources and attention are needed—and they very well may be—it will only become more difficult to square the imperatives of the Asia pivot with the requirements of security and stability in other key regions. Grand strategy invariably entails difficult tradeoffs across geographic priorities; in the current environment, those tradeoffs may be getting even harder for American strategists to make.

Pivoting from Strength or Weakness?

The fourth key dilemma—and one that pertains chiefly to the Middle East—is that it matters how the United States pivots from one theater to another. There is little question that U.S. involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan has been less productive than many Americans hoped, or that reducing that involvement was and remains essential to refocusing on the Asia-Pacific over the long term.

It is also true, however, that a pivot that consolidates existing gains is stronger than one that undermines them by refocusing too quickly. And so one of the trickiest aspects of the Obama grand strategy has been—and continues to be—balancing the need to reduce military exposure in the Middle East with the need to do so in ways that do not convey weakness or undercut progress made to date.

This was never going to be an easy balance to strike, but in implementing its grand strategy, this administration has not struck it nearly as well as it might have. Looking back at the Iraq drawdown ([and the more recent unraveling of that country](#)), or looking at the Afghanistan drawdown today, it is hard to argue that this administration has made—or even tried hard enough to make—those incremental investments that might protect the stability that was gained along the way. And that is a real source of tension within the Obama grand strategy, because if the United States exits the Middle East and Southwest Asia in ways that encourage instability rather than stability, it will only

undermine its own ability to be effective in other regions. Thriving in one theater means getting out of another in relatively good order, which is a fourth dilemma of current American strategy.

Overreach and Underreach

All of these issues tie into a fifth and final dilemma, which is that “underreach” can ultimately be as dangerous as overreach. Grand strategy is about calibrating the use of power—using it energetically enough to be effective, but not so hyperactively as to be draining or self-defeating. The Obama administration is certainly attuned to the second half of this challenge, for it clearly recognizes the value of strategic prudence, and it understands that a period of erring on the side of discretion was probably warranted after the experiences of the past decade.

What remains to be seen is whether it also recognizes that there is a danger in pulling back too far. There is the danger of liquidating existing commitments too quickly, or of becoming so hesitant to use force that allies and adversaries perceive weakness rather than prudence. [There is the danger that the consequences of nonintervention or insufficient intervention in a place like Syria might eventually become worse than the consequences of a more assertive policy.](#) Above all, there is the broader danger that too much retrenchment or caution could undermine the stability of the post–Cold War system in which the United States has thrived and prospered.

There is, of course, no way of knowing in advance precisely where the crossover point is—where the dangers of underreach exceed the dangers of overreach. But such a point certainly does exist, and those charged with devising and implementing American grand strategy would do well to keep this in mind.

Conclusion

No grand strategy is perfect, and the very undertaking of grand strategy involves wrestling with the problems, challenges and tensions inherent to foreign policy. To its credit, the Obama administration has crafted a set of grand-strategic principles that give guidance to American policy, and that seem fairly reasonably, given Washington’s international position and the particular challenges of the current situation.

That grand strategy, however, is also rife with potent dilemmas, ranging from the political to the geopolitical. Considered individually, each of these dilemmas has the potential to be rather problematic; taken collectively, they raise real questions about how well a grand strategy that seems plausible enough in theory will ultimately fare in practice. How effective U.S. policy makers—in this administration and the next—will be in managing these issues and answering that question remains to be seen. What is certain is that the ongoing debate on American grand strategy will benefit from recognizing both the nature and the merits of the Obama grand strategy—as well as the challenges and dilemmas therein.

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