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**Does Obama Have a Grand Strategy?**

Why We Need Doctrines in Uncertain Times

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As the U.S. military intervenes in Libya, a fierce debate has erupted over the possible existence of an Obama doctrine, with a chorus of foreign policy observers bemoaning the United States' supposed strategic incompetence. Last fall, the columnist Jackson Diehl wrote in *The Washington Post*, "This administration is notable for its lack of grand strategy -- or strategists." In *The National Interest* this January, the political scientist John Mearsheimer concluded, "The root cause of America's troubles is that it adopted a flawed grand strategy after the Cold War." The economic historian Niall Ferguson took to *Newsweek* to argue that alleged U.S. setbacks in the Middle East were "the predictable consequence of the Obama administration's lack of any kind of a coherent grand strategy, a deficit about which more than a few veterans of U.S. foreign policymaking have long worried." Even the administration's defenders have damned it with faint praise. *The National Journal*'s Michael Hirsh argued that "the real Obama doctrine is to have no doctrine at all. And that's the way it's likely to remain." Hirsh, at least, meant it as a compliment.

But is it true that President Barack Obama has no grand strategy? And even if it were, would that be such a disaster? The George W. Bush administration, after all, developed a clear, coherent, and well-defined grand strategy after 9/11. But those attributes did not make it a good one, and its implementation led to more harm than benefit.

Grand strategies are not nearly as important as grand strategists like to think, because countries tend to be judged by their actions, not their words. What really matters for great powers is power -- national economic and military strength -- and that speaks loudly and clearly by itself. Still, in times of deep uncertainty, a strategy can be important as a signaling device. In these moments, such as the present, a clearly articulated strategy matched by consistent actions is useful because it can drive home messages about a country's intentions to domestic and foreign audiences.

Despite what its critics say, the Obama administration has actually had not just one grand strategy so far but two. The first strategy, multilateral retrenchment, was designed to curtail the United States' overseas commitments, restore its standing in the world, and shift burdens onto global partners. This strategy was clearly articulated, but it delivered underwhelming policy results.

The second, emergent grand strategy is focused on counterpunching. More recently, the Obama administration has been willing to assert its influence and ideals across the globe when challenged by other countries, reassuring allies and signaling resolve to rivals. This strategy has performed better but has been poorly articulated. It is this vacuum of interpretation that the administration's critics have rushed to fill. Unless and until the president and his advisers define explicitly the strategy that has been implicit for the past year, the president's foreign policy critics will be eager to define it -- badly -- for him.

SOUND AND VISION

A grand strategy consists of a clear articulation of national interests married to a set of operational plans for advancing them. Sometimes, such strategies are set out in advance, with actions following in sequence. Other times, strategic narratives are offered as coherent explanations connecting past policies with future ones. Either way, a well-articulated grand strategy can offer an interpretative framework that tells everybody, including foreign policy officials themselves, how to understand the administration's behavior.

All this sounds terrifically important, but most of the time it is not. For grand strategies to matter, they have to indicate a change in policy. And trying to alter a state's foreign policy trajectory is like trying to make an aircraft carrier do a U-turn: it happens slowly at best. The tyranny of the status quo often renders grand strategy a constant rather than a variable, despite each administration's determined efforts at intellectual differentiation and rebranding.

Power is the true reserve currency in international affairs, and most countries simply lack the power to make others care about their intentions. The rest of the world is not waiting up nights to learn about Belgium's grand strategy (although a government would be nice). The same applies to nonstate actors. After 9/11, a cottage industry of analysts emerged to deconstruct every statement issued by al Qaeda's leadership. As the group's operational tempo, capabilities, and ideological appeal eroded, however, its statements garnered less and less interest. Unless Osama bin Laden's successors demonstrate their continued ability to wreak havoc, only a narrow slice of specialists will care about their ideology or strategy. This is why the debate over U.S. grand strategy is less important than the debate over how to rejuvenate the U.S. economy.

Even for powerful actors, moreover, actions speak louder than words. George Kennan may have articulated the doctrine of containment, but in his formulation, the strategy did not require protecting South Korea. "Containment" gained the meaning it did because a series of presidents fleshed out Kennan's concept in their own distinct ways. As the historian Melvyn Leffler has documented, the core elements of George W. Bush's National Security Strategy -- preventive war and democracy promotion -- were not new, having appeared in the official discourse of prior administrations. What was different about Bush was that unlike his predecessors, who treated the concepts as boilerplate rhetoric, he acted.

Critics and analysts stress the importance of choosing the right grand strategy and the catastrophic implications of selecting the wrong one. History suggests, however, that grand strategies do not alter the trajectory of great-power politics all that much. Consider the United States. Even radically imperfect strategies have not fundamentally affected its rise and fall. The United States should have taken a more active role in world affairs after World War I but instead retreated into isolationism. Successive presidents bought into the domino theory of communism and expanded U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War beyond what any other strategic logic would have dictated. The Bush administration launched a war of choice against Iraq that was designed to inject a stable democracy into the region while bolstering nuclear nonproliferation. The actual result was a $1 trillion-plus diversionary war and a global wave of anti-Americanism.

All three of these strategic mistakes were rooted in coherent strategic narratives popular with both policymakers and the public. What is striking, however, is that none of these missteps altered the trajectory of U.S. power. The United States eventually assumed the responsibilities of primacy after World War II. The country's overstretch in Vietnam did not change the outcome of the Cold War. Operation Iraqi Freedom was costly, but public opinion data demonstrate that the harm done to the United States' standing quickly faded. In all three cases, the institutional strengths of the United States forced appropriate corrections to the grand strategy. New leaders in the White House, Congress, and the Pentagon made the country adopt a leadership role in the postwar era, refrain from post-Vietnam interventions, and reform its counterinsurgency doctrine in the face of setbacks in Iraq. These course corrections prevented strategic miscues from becoming permanent reversals.

WHEN IDEAS MATTER

If grand strategies are so overrated, why the furious debate? For two reasons, one petty and one substantive. The petty reason is that everyone in the U.S. foreign policy community secretly hopes to be the next Kennan. When a commentator bewails the failings of the United States' grand strategy, it is usually because he has scribbled down his own set of musings on the topic. Indeed, complaints about grand strategy have plagued every U.S. administration since the end of World War II for precisely this reason. Grand strategies are easy to devise -- they are forward-looking, operate in generalities, and make for great book tours. Whenever a foreign policy commentator articulates a new grand strategy, an angel gets its wings.

The more substantive reason is that there are moments when grand strategies really do count: during times of radical uncertainty in international affairs. Ideas matter most when actors are operating in uncharted waters. They can function as cognitive beacons, guiding countries to safety. During normal times, decision-makers will extrapolate from current capabilities or past actions to predict the behavior of others. In novel times, however, grand strategies can signal to outsiders the future intentions of a country's policymakers, reassuring or repulsing important audiences.

Two kinds of events can trigger the kind of radical uncertainty necessary for a grand strategy to matter. One is a massive global disruption -- a war, a revolution, or a depression -- that rejiggers countries' interests across the globe. In this situation, when everybody is unsure about what comes next, grand strategies can provide a functioning road map for how to interpret current events and the appropriate policy responses. The other is a power transition, which can also lead to profound uncertainty. When a fading hegemonic power is confronted by a rising challenger, countries want to know how each of the two governments views its role in the world. States in relative decline can respond in a myriad of ways, from graceful retrenchment to preemptive conflict. Rising powers, for their part, can be revisionist states, like Germany in the 1930s, or status quo powers, like Japan in the 1980s. Other actors will assess the statements and actions of rising powers carefully to parse out their intentions.

The current era, interestingly, is marked by both sets of uncertainties. The Great Recession has rocked the global economy, and commodity prices have gyrated wildly. The international system has had to cope with a welter of natural disasters, technological changes, and incidents of diplomatic turmoil. Revolution has spread across the Middle East with dizzying speed and with an uncertain effect on the global system.

At the same time, China's relative power has increased and the United States' has shrunk. The International Monetary Fund currently estimates that, based on purchasing power parity, China's economy will surpass the United States' in five years. This shift has led to genuine confusion as to the relative power of both countries right now. In April 2010, a Pew Global Attitudes survey asked global respondents to name "the world's leading economic power." In many developing countries, including Brazil and India, majorities picked the United States. The results looked dramatically different in the developed world. In five of the original G-7 countries, including Germany, Japan, and the United States, strong pluralities named China as the world's leading economic power. In other words, the developing world still largely believes that the United States has retained its hegemony, whereas the developed world thinks that primacy has shifted to China. Something is clearly going on, but people disagree about what it is. It is precisely in such a world of radical uncertainty that intentions matter, and this is where grand strategy comes in.

When operating in unfamiliar terrain, officials in charge of making and executing national policy can infer what to do from their government's strategy documents. Actors abroad can also develop expectations about the future from them. In these circumstances, foreign governments will care about how much a country's proposed response to uncertainty seeks to revise or reinforce the status quo. Countries prefer the devils they know. Even during uncertain times, grand strategies that advocate wholesale revisions of the international order will make other countries nervous. The Bush doctrine of preemptive intervention had this effect, as did China's more recent statement that the South China Sea represents a "core national interest."

One other aspect of grand strategy will pique everyone's interest: whether a country's strategic vision appears to promote public or private goods. All great powers have their own ideas about how to buttress a stable world order: strict recognition of Westphalian sovereignty, nuclear nonproliferation, counterterrorism, more multilateralism, greater global development, democracy promotion, and so forth. Some of these ideas advance goods that clearly benefit the rest of the world as well as the great power itself; in other cases, the benefits to others seem less clear. When a great power puts forward a grand strategy that appears to focus on its own interests, it will trigger a backlash from other countries. For example, the Bush administration believed that democracy promotion was in the greater good, but other countries viewed that goal in combination with preemptive intervention as a license for the United States to bypass multilateral institutions. Not surprisingly, this grand strategy resulted in significant short-term costs for the United States.

Much of the handwringing about U.S. grand strategy has been overblown -- but the Obama administration has inherited a world of great uncertainty. Does it have a grand strategy to respond? Actually, it has had two.

STRATEGY SWITCH

Obama came into office with three firm strategic convictions. First, domestic rejuvenation was crucial for any long-term grand strategy, a point he has stressed in all his foreign policy speeches. "[We have] failed to appreciate the connection between our national security and our economy," Obama said in his December 2009 address on Afghanistan. "Our prosperity provides a foundation for our power. It pays for our military. It underwrites our diplomacy." Second, the United States was overextended in all the wrong places, fighting two counterinsurgencies and a war on terrorism in the Middle East while neglecting other parts of the globe. Third, the Bush administration's mistakes had pushed the United States' standing in the world to an all-time low. Ben Rhodes, Obama's deputy national security adviser for strategic communications, recently explained the administration's strategic vision to *The New Yorker*: "If you were to boil it all down to a bumper sticker, it's 'Wind down these two wars, reëstablish American standing and leadership in the world, and focus on a broader set of priorities, from Asia and the global economy to a nuclear-nonproliferation regime.'"

Obama's first grand strategy, as explained in various speeches and administration initiatives in his first year, was to make lemons out of lemonade. As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton put it, a multipolar world was actually a "multipartner" world, in which the United States would call on other countries -- rivals as well as allies -- to assist it in preserving global order. The Obama administration attempted to "reset" relations with Russia. With China, there was talk of the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue becoming a "G-2" that would echo the summitry of the Cold War. The administration embraced the G-20 to supplant the G-8 as the premier international economic forum, in the belief that more partners would mean more effective partnerships. Rather than aggressively push for democracy, a more reserved United States would lead by example.

This mixture of words and actions represented a clear strategic concept, but the results fell short of the administration's expectations. China reacted to Obama's outstretched hand with bellicose rhetoric and grander regional aspirations. Russia continued to be truculent in its dealings with the United States. Traditional allies resisted making greater contributions in Afghanistan and elsewhere. The G-20's achievements have not matched its aspirations. Meanwhile, isolationist sentiment inside the United States reached a 40-year high.

What went wrong? The administration, and many others, erred in believing that improved standing would give the United States greater policy leverage. The United States' standing among foreign publics and elites did rebound. But this shift did not translate into an appreciable increase in the United States' soft power. Bargaining in the G-20 and the UN Security Council did not get any easier. Soft power, it turns out, cannot accomplish much in the absence of a willingness to use hard power.

The other problem was that China, Russia, and other aspiring great powers did not view themselves as partners of the United States. Even allies saw the Obama administration's supposed modesty as a cover for shifting the burden of providing global public goods from the United States to the rest of the world. The administration's grand strategy was therefore perceived as promoting narrow U.S. interests rather than global public goods.

In response, the administration reset its policies after its first 18 months in office, pivoting toward a second, more assertive grand strategy. One remaining constant is that the administration is still focused on restoring American strength at home, but it has been increasingly comfortable using the specter of rising foreign powers as a motivational tool. This is why Obama called for a "Sputnik moment" in this year's State of the Union speech and why he has tried to boost public investment in education, science, and clean energy.

At the same time, the administration switched from a strategy of retrenchment to one of counterpunching. In response to international provocations, the United States has signaled that it can still rally allies and counter rising threats. For example, the United States tightened its economic and security relationships with most of China's neighbors in the Asia-Pacific region, forcing Beijing to rethink its strategy. In demonstrating a willingness to balance against rising threats, the United States has reassured its allies that it will not be retreating into isolationism anytime soon. Similarly, reacting to the unrest in the Middle East, the United States used its leverage over the Egyptian military to assist in bringing about a mostly peaceful regime change in Egypt.

Finally, and contrary to the claims of many Republican operatives, Obama linked U.S. foreign policy to American exceptionalism. Clinton has become much more vocal in criticizing China's human rights abuses, and in responding to the revolutions in the Arab world, Obama has evinced an appreciation for promoting U.S. values as well as U.S. interests. When explaining his decision to intervene in Libya, he said, "To brush aside America's responsibility as a leader and -- more profoundly -- our responsibilities to our fellow human beings under such circumstances would have been a betrayal of who we are. . . . Born, as we are, out of a revolution by those who longed to be free, we welcome the fact that history is on the move in the Middle East and North Africa, and that young people are leading the way. Because wherever people long to be free, they will find a friend in the United States." These are not the words of a man who believes only in realpolitik.

TROUBLE AT HOME

As a set of ideas, Obama's new grand strategy holds together in most parts of the globe. The United States' key allies in Europe and the Pacific Rim appear to have been reassured. Its rivals now understand that the administration cannot be pushed around. But the administration's embrace of democratic ideals has not gone down as well in Saudi Arabia or Israel; those countries prefer the devils they know, and the United States again seems like a revisionist power in the region. The administration's reticence to intervene in Bahrain or Syria should ameliorate their concerns.

But whereas the new counterpunching doctrine is sustainable internationally, the same is not true on the domestic front. The most significant challenge to Obama's grand strategy is likely to emerge at home rather than abroad. Viable grand strategies need to rest on a wellspring of domestic support. The biggest problem with Obama's new grand strategy is its troublesome domestic politics.

One issue is the mismatch between the complexity of the global system and the simplicity of U.S. foreign policy rhetoric. Politicians do a fine job talking about "friends" and "enemies," but have great difficulty discussing "rivals," a more nuanced category. It is difficult for the administration to use rising powers as a threat to goad the United States into further action without it leading to excessive demagoguery about China. Official rhetoric is at least partly to blame for inflated public fears about Chinese power.

A more serious problem is that by focusing on renewing the United States' domestic strength, the Obama administration has introduced more partisan politics into the equation. There is still some truth to the aphorism that politics stops at the water's edge. But if the administration argues that the key to U.S. foreign policy is the domestic economy, then it increases the likelihood of domestic discord. Based on the tenor of the debates about the rising levels of U.S. debt, the possibility that the president can hammer out a grand bargain over fiscal and tax policies is looking increasingly remote. These difficulties reinforce the argument, made by the political scientists Charles Kupchan and Peter Trubowitz, that demographic and political shifts within the United States (including the right's rejection of multilateralism and the left's rejection of power projection) are making it harder and harder to build support for a grand strategy based on liberal internationalist principles.

But none of this explains why Obama has done such a bad job explaining his grand strategy to the American people. To be fair, the long economic downturn has soured Americans on engaging with the rest of the world, making any activist foreign policy a tough sell. That said, the administration has done itself few favors in this area. Indeed, the most well-known phrase that articulates current U.S. grand strategy is "leading from behind," which is a politically disastrous wording.

Why has the Obama administration not been more up-front about its grand strategic redesign? First, changing course implies an admission that the previous course was incorrect, and no administration likes to do that. Second, the administration takes pride in its foreign policy pragmatism, but that makes it difficult to promote a new grand strategic vision. Finally, military actions tend to crowd out attention to other dimensions of a foreign policy. And although the Libyan intervention might be justified on its own terms, it does not fit perfectly with Obama's new grand strategy. Libya, by the administration's own admission, is not a core national interest. This has left Obama in the awkward position of trying to explain his foreign policy while de-emphasizing the use of blood and treasure to prosecute the first war he started. Simply labeling it a "kinetic military action" has not helped.

All this is a problem because politics abhors a rhetorical vacuum. If the president is not clear about his grand strategy, foreign policy critics and political opponents will be happy to define it for him, using less than flattering language. Until the Obama administration does a better job of explaining its grand strategy to the American people, it will encounter significant domestic resistance to its policies.

After some initial wrong turns, the Obama administration seems to have found a useful strategic map, but it still needs to persuade the other passengers in the car. Clear communication is rarely a cure-all. In the wake of bin Laden's death, however, the administration has a golden opportunity to explain its revised grand strategy. In taking the risk of sending U.S. Special Forces into Pakistan to eliminate bin Laden, Obama earned a significant bump in public support for his foreign policy. If he articulates his counterpunching strategy soon, he will be doing it from a position of domestic strength rather than weakness. By better explaining his grand strategy to Americans, Obama can show them -- and the rest of the world -- that he knows where to go and how to get there.