Did the Obama administration have a grand strategy? If so, was it effective? Before Obama’s presidency even ended, these questions were unleashing fusillades of contradictory commentary. Sympathetic observers credited Obama with a wise, well-integrated grand strategy that enhanced American power for “the long-game.”¹ Detractors, by contrast, argued that Obama’s strategy of “overarching American retrenchment and accommodation” had been pernicious—even devastating—to national security.² Still other prominent observers rejected the very idea of an Obama grand strategy, charging that his policies lacked any coherent design.³ Finally, and further muddying the waters, Obama himself was sometimes dismissive of grand strategy, once remarking that “I don’t really even need George Kennan right now.”⁴ As the president’s tenure ends, it is useful to revisit these issues and come to grips with grand strategy under Obama.

In fact, the Obama administration did have a fairly clear and consistent grand strategy—if one defines grand strategy realistically, as a set of basic principles that guide policy. And that grand strategy reflected a mixture of continuity and change vis-a-vis the foreign policy tradition Obama inherited. In many ways, Obama’s grand strategy fit squarely within the broad contours of American statecraft during the post-war and post-Cold War eras, as its broadest objective was maintaining U.S. primacy and a liberal international order. Yet Obama simultaneously sought to define his grand strategy in opposition to the purported mistakes of George W. Bush, and therefore emphasized altering the more recent arc of U.S.

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policy. In particular, Obama stressed the need to inject greater restraint, economy, and precision into the use of U.S. military power; to double down on diplomatic engagement with friends and rivals alike; and to rebalance American policy geographically, in light of the emergence of the Asia–Pacific as the cockpit of 21st century geopolitics and geo-economics. To be sure, the degree of change in Obama’s grand strategy was sometimes less than advertised (or alleged), but across these three dimensions meaningful shifts did occur.

Obama’s grand strategy might thus be summarized—at least in the president’s own view—as preserving U.S. leadership of an eminently favorable international order, but doing so at reduced costs, via more supple and energetic diplomacy, and in ways that better reflected the shifting landscape of global power. These were the most consistent “big ideas” in Obama’s statecraft; they anchored key initiatives across issues and regions.5

The mere existence of a grand strategy does not ensure its success, however, and here the administration’s record has been more ambiguous than either defenders or detractors claimed. In some ways, Obama’s grand strategy was what the United States needed after the George W. Bush years. It promoted some necessary adjustment and recalibration of U.S. leadership; it better oriented America to address enormous long-term challenges such as the rise of China and global climate change; it provided the country with a strategic breather after a period of overexertion. Moreover, in a number of key areas—from diplomacy with Iran to U.S. posture in the Asia–Pacific—it drove policies that were broadly constructive in their effects.

In other ways, however, Obama’s grand strategy was more problematic. Its implementation entailed some notable and costly failures, particularly in the greater Middle East, and it exposed key tensions and limitations at the very core of his statecraft. Additionally, on issues from Iraq and Syria to the United States’ broader global posture, it periodically raised the question of whether Obama had overlearned from his predecessor’s mistakes—and thus committed the opposite errors himself. Finally, with the surprise election of Donald Trump as president in November 2016, there was significant uncertainty as to how much of Obama’s grand strategic legacy—and how much of American grand strategy more broadly—would ultimately endure. Grand strategy is never easy, of course, and not all the difficulties the administration encountered were entirely or even primarily of its own making. But these difficulties nonetheless revealed some fundamental dilemmas of U.S. grand strategy during the Obama years.

**Making Sense of Grand Strategy**

Grand strategy is frequently maligned by its detractors—in part because it is oversold by its advocates. Contrary to the common mystique, a grand strategy is neither
Grand strategy can never impart perfect vision and efficacy to statecraft.

a road map nor a cure-all for the complexity of global affairs. It is simply an integrated set of concepts that offers broad direction to statecraft. A grand strategy consists of considered assessments of the global environment, a country’s core interests and objectives, the most important threats and opportunities, and the ways finite resources can be deployed across key issues. These assessments constitute a conceptual framework that steers policy—the concrete initiatives through which states engage the world.

Grand strategy is therefore vital to effective statecraft. Yet doing grand strategy can be devilishly hard. It requires making sense of a messy world and reconciling competing priorities. It demands a strong overall sense of direction, as well as the flexibility to adapt as the unexpected intervenes. It requires synchronizing the sources of national power to achieve important ends, while also preserving that power so it endures. Throw in the perpetual vicissitudes of global and domestic politics, and it becomes clear how demanding the task can be. Grand strategy, then, is no panacea; it can never impart perfect vision and efficacy to statecraft. At best, it can impart a bare, essential minimum of those qualities to a country’s dealings with an unruly world.6

In terms of its content, U.S. grand strategy has featured strong elements of both continuity and change over time. The continuity reflects the fact that many drivers of the country’s statecraft—its geography, its liberal values, its power position within an interdependent global environment—change slowly, if at all. And so since World War II, that continuity has been manifested in an enduring, bipartisan commitment to shaping the global order through assertive economic, diplomatic, and military engagement. Yet the precise manner of that engagement has evolved from year to year, and administration to administration. Different leaders have made different choices about how assertively to press U.S. interests, what issues or regions to emphasize, and how best to employ the tools of American power to address given challenges. Likewise, changing circumstances at home and abroad have regularly compelled adjustments in American policy. Appreciating the interplay of continuity and change is thus crucial to understanding U.S. grand strategy historically, and to grasping grand strategy under Obama.

Continuity and Change in Obama’s Grand Strategy

Obama’s critics often have portrayed his policies as dramatic departures from the tried-and-true patterns of U.S. statecraft. In reality, there has been much continuity with the past. Since World War II, U.S. officials have consistently sought a
stable and prosperous international order, one that would be congenial to America’s liberal values, and one in which the United States and its allies would enjoy preponderant power. And after the Cold War, Washington essentially doubled down on this project in the highly favorable climate of unipolarity, which featured the United States as the sole superpower in the new global order.

Since 1989, every U.S. administration has aimed to maintain America’s remarkable post-Cold War primacy, to further spread liberal institutions overseas, and to contain or roll back the major threats to this advantageous environment. Every administration, moreover, has pursued these goals through policies deeply ingrained in U.S. strategic culture—promoting free trade and democracy; maintaining and expanding U.S. alliances overseas; preserving a globe-straddling military with unrivaled capabilities; and confronting “rogue states,” nuclear proliferation, terrorism, and other dangers. These initiatives reflect a longstanding, bipartisan commitment to sustaining U.S. leadership and primacy, and the liberal international order that American power underpins.7

They also constituted the first and broadest pillar of U.S. grand strategy under Obama. From 2009 onward, every major U.S. strategy document restated the goal of perpetuating U.S. primacy and shaping an international order that reflected American interests and values.8 And in practice, Obama undertook nearly all the same endeavors that have traditionally marked American globalism.

The administration affirmed that unrivaled military primacy represented the “backbone” of American leadership, and despite post-2010 budget cuts, the United States in 2015 still spent nearly three times as much on defense as any other country.9 Likewise, Obama maintained and even marginally expanded the vast system of U.S. alliances and security commitments; overseas force deployments remained robust, even as their regional distribution continued to shift. The administration also consistently opposed nuclear proliferation, terrorism, and other key threats. Not least, it used all aspects of national power to address the most significant dangers, as shown by its punishing counter-terrorism campaign against al-Qaeda and the counter-Islamic State campaign today.

The administration stayed within the historical mainstream in other ways, too. Obama promoted the United States’ longstanding globalization/free trade agenda, principally by pursuing international agreements—the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP)—meant to further liberalize and integrate the Asia-Pacific and North Atlantic economies. The president also selectively promoted human rights and democracy, even intervening militarily in Libya in 2011 to protect civilians and encourage the emergence of more pluralistic governance. One can dispute the efficacy of these various policies, but continuity with the broad contours of U.S. globalism clearly represented the foundation of Obama’s strategy.
That strategy also entailed real change, however, because Obama emphasized correcting the mistakes of more recent U.S. statecraft. Obama’s view, as he repeatedly argued in 2008 and after, was that he had inherited a mess. America was suffering from the punishing effects of the Great Recession and from military overstretch due to the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. It was confronting a shifting global power structure, in which key regional and global players were contending for greater influence, and in which U.S. supremacy—while still vast—was starting to slip from its post-Cold War peak. Finally, the country was facing the legacy of an administration that, from Obama’s perspective, had fundamentally mismanaged American power—by overinvesting in the Middle East at the expense of other priorities, by launching a costly war in Iraq that had empowered U.S. rivals and undercut the struggle against terrorism, and by employing a unilateralist ethos that had generated more resistance than cooperation.10

To be fair, this critique of Bush was somewhat overwrought, for it downplayed the progress Bush had made in areas such as U.S.–India and U.S.–China relations, as well as his second-term efforts to correct first-term errors such as alienating key allies and bungling the occupation of Iraq.11 But Obama’s team still believed—not without justification—that the overall pattern of Bush’s statecraft had been more damaging than constructive. The administration’s task, then, was to maintain U.S. leadership while adapting it in light of changing global circumstances and the painful lessons of the previous administration.

This imperative informed the second pillar of Obama’s grand strategy, which entailed taking a more restrained, economical, and precise approach to using U.S. military power. From 2009 onward, the administration stressed the need to begin winding down the manpower-intensive, open-ended stabilization operations that characterized the war on terror under Bush, and to take a “more targeted approach” that “dismantles terrorist networks without deploying large American armies.”12 It called for allies and local partners to bear greater responsibility when force was required. And of course, the administration repeatedly urged caution in contemplating any large-scale military operation, to minimize the risk of another draining misadventure. His guiding principle, Obama famously remarked, was “don’t do stupid shit.”13 Or, as the administration’s 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance made clear, a key aspect of preserving U.S. military dominance entailed husbanding that power to a greater degree.14

That document also noted another impetus to, and dimension of, military restraint under Obama—reduced defense spending. U.S. military spending
always contracts after major wars. Under Obama, the pressure was increased by the
president’s domestic policy priorities, the effects of the Great Recession, and the
legacy of Bush-era deficit spending. These factors, combined with partisan gridlock
that triggered the sequester mechanism created by the Budget Control Act of
2011, caused U.S. military spending to decline from $691 billion in FY2010 to
$580.3 billion in FY2016.15 These reductions compelled significant cuts in force
structure and a shift to a more modest defense strategy; they also accentuated
the need for cheaper, more discriminating approaches to the use of force.16

The policy implications of this approach would soon become apparent. The
Obama administration relied heavily on drones, Special Operations Forces
(SOF), and other “light-footprint” approaches as primary tools of counter-terrorism, even as
it aggressively targeted al-Qaeda.17 In Libya, it emphasized “leading from behind”—letting
U.S. allies and partners take greater initiative
—while keeping American boots largely off
the ground.18 In Iraq, the administration gradu-
ally wound down U.S. involvement between
2009 and 2011, and ultimately withdrew com-
pletely in December 2011. In Afghanistan, by
contrast, Obama actually escalated U.S. invol-
vement in 2009–2010 by deploying roughly
60,000 additional troops as part of an effort to win a “necessary war” against the
Taliban and al-Qaeda. Yet in line with his broader approach to military interven-
tion, he also hedged against an open-ended commitment by imposing a time-limit
on the surge of U.S. forces. “We have been at war now for eight years, at enormous
cost in lives and resources,” Obama said in December 2009; it was necessary to
begin bringing these conflicts to an end.19 And from 2011 to 2014, Obama
showed deep reluctance to be drawn into Syria’s civil war, even after the flagrant
transgression of his own “red line” on chemical weapons, for fear of another Middle
Eastern morass.20

Finally, this same approach guided the military campaign that increasingly
came to define Obama’s second term. Even after the Islamic State (IS) conquered
vast swaths of Iraq and Syria in 2013–14, thereby unleashing an avalanche of crit-
icism of Obama’s earlier restraint, the administration declined to “Americanize”
the conflict by sending any significant number of ground troops into combat.
Instead, it carefully circumscribed the American commitment, utilizing unique
U.S. enablers—SOF, airpower, logistics—to empower Iraqi and Syrian ground
forces to roll back IS.21 Across these initiatives, Obama sought to correct his pre-
decessor’s mistakes—and sustain American power—by establishing a more disci-
plined, limited-liability approach to military action.
The imperative of adapting U.S. leadership also informed the third pillar of Obama’s grand strategy, which involved *doubling down on diplomacy with friends and rivals alike.* Contrary to Obama’s critique, the Bush administration had never ignored diplomacy—it had scored a major diplomatic breakthrough with India, for instance, and launched new multilateral endeavors such as the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), which fostered international cooperation to counter the spread of weapons of mass destruction. Yet from Obama’s perspective, the combination of the Iraq war, the harsher aspects of the War on Terror, and the sometimes Manichean ethos of Bush’s post-9/11 statecraft had alienated too many international observers and foreclosed too many diplomatic opportunities. Redoubled, “comprehensive engagement” was therefore essential—essential to repairing America’s international reputation, to enabling greater multilateral cooperation on complex global issues, to improving relations with challengers as well as adversaries, and to regenerating U.S. leadership on a more consensual, lower-cost basis.

This approach motivated the series of immensely (critics would say naively) aspirational speeches Obama gave during 2009, on issues ranging from relations with the Islamic world to the need for eventual nuclear abolition. The specifics of each speech were important, but the broader grand strategic purpose was to begin rebuilding U.S. soft power by demonstrating that the country was ready to “turn the page” on the Bush years. Similarly, this approach motivated an array of diplomatic initiatives over the course of Obama’s presidency, from repeated (and repeatedly unsuccessful) efforts to broker Israeli–Palestinian peace, to recurring international and bilateral talks aimed at combating climate change.

Perhaps most importantly, the emphasis on intensified diplomacy undergirded Obama’s persistent willingness to engage adversaries and other problematic actors—and often, to take the first step in doing so. There were high-profile diplomatic openings to Myanmar in the first term and to Cuba in the second, which were geared toward ending outdated hostilities and using engagement rather than isolation to change an interlocutor’s behavior. There was also the much-touted “Russia reset.” That initiative was meant to foster greater cooperation on issues ranging from arms control and Afghanistan to Iran and North Korea, while also reinforcing positive political tendencies in Moscow during the presidency of Dmitri Medvedev (May 2008–May 2012); it entailed early U.S. concessions on issues such as revising plans for a ballistic missile defense system in Eastern Europe.

Most notably, there was American policy toward Iran. From 2009 onward, Obama averred that a nuclear Iran was unacceptable. Over time, and partially under pressure from Congress, he would employ powerful coercive levers—including economic sanctions and, reportedly, cyberattacks—to compel Tehran to halt
its nuclear program. Yet Obama also sought to engage Tehran diplomatically, first by offering to conduct direct and unconditional talks with the regime in 2009, and later by complementing increased pressure with persistent diplomatic outreach, both bilateral and multilateral. Tactically, Obama did so to enlist broader international support for economic sanctions and other pressures. More fundamentally, he did so to locate a peaceful, positive-sum solution to the nuclear issue, and to demonstrate that diplomacy could provide imperfect but acceptable ways of protecting U.S. interests at much lower cost than military force. “Part of our goal here has been to show that diplomacy can work,” Obama explained.25

The fourth and final pillar of Obama’s strategy also emphasized reorienting U.S. leadership, in this case to reflect the changing geography of international power. When Obama took office, it was becoming clear that the world’s center of economic and military gravity was shifting from West to East—that the Asia–Pacific was emerging as the future cockpit of global economic and military dynamism, and that the rise of China as a rival for regional, and perhaps eventually global, primacy presented arguably the greatest long-term challenge for U.S. statecraft. It was also clear that although the Bush administration’s immense military investment in the greater Middle East had not prevented it from undertaking a number of constructive initiatives in the Asia–Pacific, and making initial moves to bolster the U.S. strategic position there, it had nonetheless distorted the balance of resources and top-level attention between those two regions.26

The corresponding strategic imperative was to rebalance American engagement geographically. Washington must de-leverage its strategic investments in the Middle East, and simultaneously redouble its efforts to shape the future of a dynamic Asia–Pacific. Or as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton wrote in 2011, “We will need to accelerate efforts to pivot to new global realities.”27

In practice, this idea powerfully reinforced the inclination toward restraint, retrenchment, and light-footprint military strategies in the Middle East. More affirmatively, it was the logic behind the administration’s much-touted Asia pivot. The United States had never been absent from the Asia–Pacific, of course, and so the rhetoric surrounding the pivot was sometimes grander than the reality. Yet that initiative still featured myriad efforts to sustain the sine qua non of U.S. influence in the Asia–Pacific—U.S. regional military primacy—in the face of China’s rise, from the decision to eventually station 60 percent of U.S. naval and air assets in that region, to a “Third Offset Strategy” focused on developing advanced capabilities and concepts needed to preserve U.S.
conventional deterrence. The pivot also featured enhanced efforts to modernize America’s alliances, disperse and harden U.S. force posture, and build deeper defense relationships with non-allied countries from India to Indonesia.28

Importantly, the pivot included non-military components, which were meant to be just as prominent as the defense-related initiatives. There was intensified engagement to ensure a liberal, U.S.-facing regional economic order, mainly via negotiation of the TPP, which was finalized in late 2015. (As discussed subsequently, however, prospects for congressional approval of TPP seemed quite dire as of this writing.) On the diplomatic front, Washington worked to forge and strengthen relationships with key players across the Asia–Pacific, and to increasingly empower regional institutions such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or ASEAN. Finally, although all this activity was geared toward fortifying a favorable regional order against disruptions that a more bellicose China might cause, the administration also intensified engagement with Beijing —through creation of the U.S.–China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, attempts to negotiate a bilateral investment treaty, and other steps—as part of a continuing, multi-decade effort to bring China into that regional order as a constructive participant. “Most of the history of the 21st century is going to be written in the Asian–Pacific region,” Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell commented, and U.S. policy increasingly reflected that fact.29

The Obama administration did not lack a grand strategy, then, nor did it engage in a flight from American primacy. Rather, it pursued a multi-pronged grand strategy aimed at sustaining U.S. leadership by adjusting it to new challenges and realities. The key question thus becomes how effective that grand strategy really was. And here the answer is more ambiguous. Across several key issues, the record of Obama’s grand strategy consisted of a mixture of geopolitical insights and generally constructive policies, on one hand, with failures, limitations, and unresolved strategic dilemmas on the other.

Double-Edged Diplomacy

Consider one calling card of Obama’s strategy—his emphasis on intensifying U.S. diplomacy, particularly vis-à-vis adversaries and rivals. As noted, this approach was based on an overdone critique of Bush-era policies. Yet it was nonetheless true that a superpower whose energies had been taxed by Iraq as well as a punishing financial crisis, and whose soft power had been badly depleted, was going to have to rely more on diplomatic outreach to advance its interests. And so Obama’s diplomacy did yield some meaningful gains.

If nothing else, the opening to Cuba was an exercise in enlightened loss-cutting, for it distanced the United States from a policy that had long served to
isolate Washington as much as Havana. Likewise, climate-change diplomacy with China was arduous and often frustrating, but it ultimately produced a bilateral deal to begin limiting greenhouse gas emissions in 2014, which facilitated a broader international agreement in 2015. The near-term gains delivered by those accords were modest, but they did increasingly orient international diplomacy toward addressing an enormous long-term threat that, as Obama commented, “could define the contours of this century more dramatically than any other.”

For its part, the Russia reset hardly delivered warmer long-term relations with Moscow, but it did enable successful transactional diplomacy. Some of the dividends were the New Start Treaty of 2011 (which further reduced U.S. and Russian deployed nuclear weapons), enhanced cooperation on logistics for the U.S. mission in Afghanistan, Russian acquiescence to humanitarian intervention in Libya in 2011, and support for greater multilateral pressure on North Korea and Iran. Additionally, although the process was beyond ugly, coercive diplomacy—pursued in cooperation with Moscow—allowed Washington to partially disarm the Assad regime of chemical weapons following the “red line” saga in 2013.

Most notably, the administration’s blend of coercion, international coalition-building, and engagement did eventually deliver a nuclear deal with Iran in 2015. That deal was imperfect in many ways, and it left open the question of what would happen after its key provisions expired. But provided that Tehran adhered to the deal, it nonetheless froze and/or rolled back key aspects of Iran’s nuclear program for at least a decade—far longer than any military intervention might have accomplished, and at far less cost. In doing so, it averted, or at least significantly delayed, the twin nightmare scenarios U.S. planners had long feared: another major military conflict in the Middle East, or an Iran that was largely unconstrained in pursuit of the bomb. The nuclear deal thus illustrated that coercive diplomacy, when pursued with focus and persistence, could yield constructive results in the post-Iraq context.

Unfortunately, the Iran deal also illustrated prominent dangers that accompanied that endeavor. One critique of Obama’s diplomacy has been that the administration often became so invested in its search for agreement with adversaries that it lost leverage either in the negotiations themselves or in the broader bilateral relationship. It appears that Obama encountered this problem vis-à-vis Iran. During the negotiations, the administration retreated fairly significantly on important side issues such as limits on Iran’s ballistic missile program. Moreover, although Obama could be quite tough in applying nuclear-related pressures, based on published reports he seems not to have embedded those pressures within a broader program for pushing back against increasingly assertive Iranian behavior throughout the region, such as its growing influence with the sectarian, Shia-led government in Baghdad, its support for Houthi rebels in Yemen, and its intervention in Syria on behalf of Assad. The widespread perception
among U.S. partners, at least, was that the quest for a nuclear deal was helping Iran become ascendant in the Middle East, while the United States was retreating after Iraq.34

This perception related to a second problem, which was that the Iran negotiations caused significant fallout between Washington and its regional partners. An inherent dilemma of engaging enemies is that it can discomfit insecure friends. Although the administration sought to counter this dynamic via arms sales and other security assistance to Israel and key Gulf states, it was never particularly successful. In fact, Obama’s undisguised ambivalence toward partners like Saudi Arabia, as well as the perception of retrenchment fostered by U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and the failure to strike Syria after Assad’s chemical weapons attacks in 2013, made it even harder to reassure those partners that the nuclear deal did not presage a larger regional realignment that would empower Iran at their expense. That belief, in turn, apparently contributed to panicked behavior by an exposed Saudi Arabia, whose effort to push back unilaterally against Tehran in early 2015 led it into a war in Yemen that further destabilized the region.35

Engagement with Tehran thus provided an acceptable solution to the nuclear issue, but it complicated containment of Iran’s regional influence and tested America’s own regional relationships. Diplomacy with adversaries can be a double-edged sword; Obama’s strategy demonstrated the possibilities and perils of that endeavor.

Limitations of the Light Footprint

The same was true of Obama’s approach to using force, particularly his preference for light-footprint interventions. That preference reflected a sensible desire to set the War on Terror on a more sustainable footing, and to get away from manpower-intensive strategies that often inflamed local sensitivities and allowed enemies to bleed U.S. troops and the U.S. Treasury alike. In practice, this approach indeed enabled intervention at reduced risk of quagmire; in some cases, it delivered operational success.

A focused, light-footprint approach proved devastatingly effective against core al-Qaeda, for example. Obama’s first term saw an estimated 400 U.S. drone strikes, compared to roughly 50 during Bush’s entire presidency. Those strikes, along with SOF raids and other tools, killed dozens of al-Qaeda leaders and hundreds of mid-level operatives, and severely disrupted al-Qaeda’s operations. “Drones have
turned al-Qaeda’s command and training structures into a liability,” wrote terrorism and Middle East expert Daniel Byman, “forcing the group to choose between having no leaders and risking dead leaders.”

There were other successes, too. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) took a beating from drone strikes, assistance to local security forces, and other light-footprint methods prior to 2015. Similarly, and although the rise of IS was a tremendous setback for U.S. policy, a light-footprint strategy centered on airpower, SOF, and other enablers allowed Syrian and Iraqi partner-forces to roll back IS gains from 2014 onward. By late 2016, U.S. operations had helped those partners liberate key points from Manbij to Fallujah, while also killing perhaps 45,000 IS fighters, in exchange for a handful of American combat deaths. In these cases, Obama’s approach leveraged unique U.S. capabilities to wage a cost-effective War on Terror.

Yet the light footprint was no panacea. It disrupted extremist organizations, but did little to address the underlying failures of governance that allowed terrorist groups to thrive. In 2013–14, Obama was touting progress against AQAP as the very model of a newer, smarter counter-terrorism strategy. By early 2015, however, Yemen was disintegrating amid chaos so severe that the U.S. military mission had to withdraw from the country. As AQAP exploited this chaos to seize a greater territorial foothold, it seemed fair to ask whether the light-footprint had achieved anything more than simply “mowing the grass.”

The weaknesses of the light footprint were equally apparent in other contexts. The Libyan intervention was an early archetype of this approach, featuring an emphasis on allied contributions and a reliance on precision airpower and U.S. enablers. This campaign succeeded in halting Qaddafi’s onslaught and eventually pushing him from power. Yet even as American officials were hailing the war as “the right way to run an intervention,” the same light-footprint approach was depriving the United States and its coalition partners of the ability to influence events or provide security following Qaddafi’s demise. The strategic upshot of the intervention, then, was not the emergence of stable democracy, but a rapid erosion of internal order, the unleashing of instability that created a haven for extremists and spilled over into neighboring countries, and the need for two subsequent military interventions—one by France in Mali, one by the United States in Libya—to address the mess left by the original conflict. The light footprint may have limited the short-term military costs of intervention in Libya, but it contributed to the higher, longer-term geopolitical costs that conflict produced.

Obama’s presidency thus showed that the light footprint offered a way of utilizing U.S. military power while containing the country’s near-term exposure—no small benefit after Iraq. It also showed, however, that limited investments could produce limited—and sometimes strategically counterproductive—results.
Dilemmas of De-leveraging

The weaknesses of the light footprint highlighted another tension in Obama’s grand strategy, pertaining to the broader concept of de-leveraging U.S. investment in the greater Middle East. By virtually any measure, the Bush administration’s investments of time and resources in the region were out of proportion with the strategic gains achieved there. And so de-leveraging—lessening Washington’s strategic investment of resources to be more commensurate with American interests in the region—was indeed critical to restoring a healthier equilibrium in U.S. global engagement, and to positioning the country for success not just in Asia but globally.

The problem, however, is that the “how” of de-leveraging can be just as important as the “whether.” And so a key test for the Obama administration was whether it would adjust its regional posture in ways which allowed it to lock in existing gains, particularly in Iraq, and rebalance from a position of strength, or whether it would jeopardize existing gains and the prospects for long-term stability by de-leveraging too significantly or too hastily. This is a perpetual dilemma for great powers experiencing overstretch—how does one retrench without undercutting important interests? And it was here that Obama ran into trouble.

In Afghanistan, for instance, the need to de-leverage conflicted with Obama’s oft-stated belief that this “necessary war” had to be won, and with his post-election realization that winning would be a longer and costlier proposition than originally expected. Caught between competing imperatives, the administration split the difference. It significantly escalated U.S. involvement in hopes of reversing the downward trajectory of the war and enabling a later withdrawal on favorable terms, while also announcing that this surge would last only until mid-2011.41 From a de-leveraging perspective, that decision reflected an understandable desire to hedge against indefinite diversion of resources. Yet it also limited the military impact of the surge, reduced U.S. leverage in pushing for a potential negotiated settlement, and encouraged damaging hedging behavior by local partners in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In effect, the administration pursued a worst-of-both-worlds policy, one that incurred significant additional resource commitments, but simultaneously undercut the probability that these commitments would make it possible to de-leverage from a position of greater stability and success.

In fairness, Afghanistan was a hard enough problem that it may have been beyond Washington’s ability to solve at acceptable cost. In Iraq, however, where the trajectory of events was far more favorable when Obama took office,
the problem was that he was insufficiently attentive to the more manageable imperative of sustaining that trajectory. The administration did modify Obama’s campaign pledge to withdraw one brigade per month, in favor of a more gradual and realistic downslope. But particularly during the critical 2010–2011 period, the White House appears to have increasingly focused simply on winding down a conflict that Obama had long pledged to end, rather than on making the residual—and far from prohibitive—investments necessary to lock in U.S. influence and ensure some lasting stability following the Bush administration’s surge. This tendency, now well documented by administration insiders and independent observers alike, was evident in the decreasing personal attention that Obama paid to Iraq; it was equally evident in the White House’s diffident stance on potentially leaving behind a residual force after 2011.

Reasonable people can debate whether such a force, or other continuing investments, might have prevented the disastrous sequence that culminated in IS overrunning a third of the country. What is clear is that Obama’s approach helped deprive Washington of tools and presence it might have used to influence Iraq’s trajectory—to moderate Nouri al-Maliki’s sectarian governance, to mitigate the hollowing out of the Iraqi military, or simply to better understand the threat that IS posed to an increasingly fragile Iraqi state. By late 2014, then, whatever stability had existed in 2011 had unraveled completely, and an administration that had earlier boasted of ending the Iraq war had to start yet another intervention in that country, under far worse circumstances than when it had departed. That war, moreover, threatened to complicate the same longer-term global rebalancing that the U.S. drawdown had been meant to facilitate. Obama had been determined to learn from Bush’s mistake of getting into Iraq too carelessly; he ended up committing the opposite error of getting out too completely and precipitously.

De-leveraging can thus be a prudent strategic move for a country that is overinvested in a given area. But de-leveraging responsibly sometimes requires making, or sustaining, marginal investments to protect gains made along the way. Obama understood the first imperative; the second he learned the hard way.

NATO, Russia, and the Resource Balance

The challenges of Obama’s grand strategy were also evident with respect to NATO and Russia. Obama initially enhanced diplomatic engagement with Moscow, to elicit cooperation on key issues and perhaps mellow Russian policy over time. The reset was fairly effective on the first count; it manifestly failed on the second. Russia’s overall strategic behavior became more truculent with time (particularly after Vladimir Putin returned to the presidency in 2012), culminating in
the invasion and annexation of Crimea, destabilization of Ukraine, military intervention in Syria, and persistent efforts to undermine the European Union (EU) and NATO. In retrospect, the administration failed to recognize that a revisionist Russia was again emerging as a major threat, and its attachment to the reset—for all the transactional diplomacy it enabled—may have discouraged stronger steps to protect NATO’s exposed eastern flank, or otherwise address this challenge.43

To its credit, the administration steadied the ship thereafter, mounting a firm but measured response to Putin’s aggression in Ukraine. U.S. officials declined to risk a major confrontation over Ukraine itself, an area in which Moscow possessed escalation dominance and a profound asymmetry of motivation. But they did work to impose multilateral economic sanctions that—combined with falling oil prices—took a significant toll on Russia’s economy, while also beginning to prepare NATO to confront a renewed threat from the east. By late 2016, the long post-Cold War slide in European defense budgets had apparently bottomed out, the alliance was implementing a quasi-permanent troop presence in Eastern Europe, and Washington and its allies were working to improve interoperability, prepositioning, rapid-response, anti-access/area denial defeat, and other critical capabilities.44 In view of budgetary constraints and competing priorities on both sides of the Atlantic, these measures were probably close to what the traffic could bear.

As Obama’s presidency ended, however, there remained two strategic questions the administration had yet to answer. First, were the actions taken actually sufficient to deter an increasingly risk-acceptant Putin and mitigate NATO’s significant local inferiority in the east? As RAND Corporation analysts noted in 2016, NATO was still far from being able to mount a credible defense of the Baltic states, and its forces there would be quickly destroyed by a determined Russian assault.45 More broadly, Washington and NATO were only beginning to grapple with the more likely dangers posed by coercion short of war—the use of cyberattacks, paramilitary fighters, and other subversive tactics to undermine Russia’s neighbors without triggering a NATO military response.46 Obama had started late in addressing the Russian challenge; there remained much ground to cover as his administration wound down.

Second, and more broadly, how would the renewed Russian threat complicate the United States’ global defense calculus? From the start, a key premise of the Asia pivot—and of Obama’s overall defense strategy—was that Europe would remain quiescent, and that Washington could thus continue its post-Cold War drawdown on the continent.47 Yet with that premise now invalidated, it remained unclear how
Washington would reconcile the rising demands of European deterrence with the requirements of the Asia pivot and renewed military operations in the Middle East. The Obama administration had wagered that the demands on U.S. military power would become fewer in the post-Iraq context. With that gamble having failed, the country’s military posture was being stressed anew.

**Prospects and Problems of the Pivot**

The prospects of the pivot, then, would ineluctably be influenced by events and policies elsewhere. But what about Asia–Pacific strategy itself? Here, the administration deserves credit for re-weighting U.S. global engagement to reflect shifting long-term power dynamics, and for better positioning the country for what is likely to be the defining geopolitical rivalry of the 21st century—the struggle for regional and global influence between the United States and China.

The Pentagon, for instance, increasingly oriented itself for long-term competition in the region. It deployed more advanced capabilities, such as F-22 and F-35 fighters, to the Asia–Pacific; began investing in high-end future capabilities such as undersea drones and a new long-range bomber; and started developing advanced operational concepts relevant to regional contingencies. It also strengthened and diversified U.S. force posture by deploying additional assets to the Asia–Pacific and stationing them across a larger number of facilities. Alliance relationships across the region were strengthened or modernized; the U.S.–Philippines alliance was fundamentally revived via an agreement that gave U.S. forces access to Filipino bases for the first time in a quarter-century. (By late 2016, however, the election of Rodrigo Duterte as president of the Philippines had cast somewhat greater uncertainty over the future of the relationship.) Defense relationships with non-allied countries also improved, as demonstrated by normalization of U.S.–Vietnam defense relations and continued progress in U.S.–India relations. Finally, through its Maritime Security Initiative, Washington began linking friendly South China Sea littoral states into a more cohesive security network.48

The United States’ Pacific posture improved in other ways, too. Intensive diplomatic engagement enhanced U.S. involvement in ASEAN and the East Asia Summit, and opened or further developed important bilateral relationships with countries from Myanmar to Indonesia. Additionally, the signing of the TPP in 2015 demonstrated that there was strong regional demand for closer economic and strategic ties to Washington, and brought an agreement representing 40 percent of global GDP

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The pivot fortified America’s regional position, but it did not effectively address three factors.
tantalizingly—if, perhaps, frustratingly—close to fruition. In sum, the pivot was not just rhetoric. It fortified America’s regional position, and fostered a web of opportunities, relationships, and initiatives that Obama’s successors could exploit, if they chose to do so.

As Obama’s presidency wound down, however, there nonetheless remained great uncertainty—in Washington and the Asia–Pacific—as to the future of the region. That uncertainty, in turn, reflected three factors that U.S. policy had not effectively addressed.

First, there were growing questions as Obama’s presidency progressed as to whether the U.S. political system would in fact support the intensified Asia–Pacific engagement that the administration had pursued. In late 2013, for instance, a government shutdown caused by partisan gridlock forced Obama to cancel a trip to the region, raising doubts about U.S. steadiness and competence. Far more seriously still, amid growing domestic hostility to trade, the prospects for congressional approval of the TPP were problematic at best even before the 2016 presidential election—and they seemed downright dismal following Donald Trump’s victory. If that agreement collapsed, so would the economic pillar of the pivot—and with it a major component of Obama’s regional strategy.

Second, pivot notwithstanding, China’s behavior had become significantly more bellicose during the Obama years. From China’s assertion of expansive maritime claims, to its illegal land reclamation and militarization of disputed features in the South China Sea, to its increasing propensity to coerce and intimidate its neighbors, Beijing was testing the regional order more sharply than at any time since the Cold War. And for all the diplomatic and military fruits of the rebalance, the Obama administration had not been able to generate the leverage necessary to halt or significantly alter this conduct over any sustained period. In other words, U.S. policy might have given Washington an enhanced regional posture, but it did not dissuade China from seeking to improve its own position—often in aggressive and destabilizing ways.

Third, and as a result of these first two factors, there was increasing concern that the pivot might not suffice to preserve a favorable regional climate against this rising and increasingly disruptive China. Despite the Pentagon’s myriad Asia–Pacific initiatives, the regional military balance continued shifting adversely—in part because post-2010 defense cuts somewhat muted the military impact of the pivot, and more fundamentally because of a continued, decades-long Chinese modernization program. The United States would face a “progressively receding frontier” of its regional primacy, RAND Corporation analysts predicted, as Chinese modernization created intensifying challenges to U.S. power-projection capabilities and ability to uphold key security commitments. Meanwhile, China’s “gray-zone” coercive activities in the South China Sea and elsewhere were changing military and geopolitical facts on the ground, as its economic
diplomacy sought to exploit uncertainty regarding TPP and draw the region more tightly into Beijing’s economic orbit. As of late 2016, it was thus clear that the pivot had been necessary and generally positive. Whether it would ultimately be sustainable and successful remained far murkier.

The Overreach/Under-reach Dilemma

Many of these issues tied into a final matter, which might be termed the overreach/under-reach dilemma. Grand strategy requires calibrating the use of power—acting assertively enough to achieve important goals, but not so hyperactively as to risk blowback and exhaustion. From day one, the Obama administration chose to err—insofar as it had to err—on the side of under-reach. It argued that the greatest danger to American primacy and the liberal order was excessive activism rather than excessive restraint, and that, as the 2015 National Security Strategy put it, the United States must therefore exhibit great discretion and “strategic patience” in addressing a world full of complex and sometimes insoluble challenges.

This was probably a prudent judgment to make when Obama became president—a moment when even former Bush administration officials acknowledged that the country was “out of steam.” It protected against another enervating military misadventure; it gave the country a strategic breather after a period of intense and often disillusioning involvement abroad. Much as Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon recognized in the late 1960s that a degree of retrenchment was necessary to sustain U.S. globalism, Obama—with his assiduous avoidance of overreach—may eventually receive credit for a similar insight.

The trouble, however, is that under-reach can ultimately be quite dangerous as well. Excessive restraint can undermine an international system that has long rested on assertive U.S. leadership. The consequences of non-intervention can be just as messy and pernicious as the consequences of intervention. It is impossible to pinpoint where the critical crossover is—where the perils of under-reach surpass the perils of overreach. But this point does exist, and it was arguably closer on key issues than the administration acknowledged.

Consider Syria. Obama was certainly right to emphasize the myriad dangers of intervention, from the lack of attractive military options to the potentially high costs involved. Yet even so, many of the president’s advisers reportedly advocated more assertive steps in Syria between 2011 and 2013, in no small part because the costs of non-intervention could eventually exceed those of intervention. And
indeed, given the truly baleful consequences of letting that conflict rage—a humanitarian catastrophe rivaling Rwanda, the rise of IS and the destabilization of the Middle East, the return of Russian military intervention in that region, the decreased confidence of U.S. regional partners in Washington’s leadership, the unprecedented pressure on the European project, the insecurity and toxic spillover that contaminated that continent and points far beyond—it is hardly irresponsible hawkery to suggest that a more forceful approach, earlier in the conflict, may have been warranted.57

Or consider the state of the world as Obama’s presidency ended. Simply put, 2016 was not 2009 anymore—the global scene had become considerably more disordered since Obama arrived. The Middle East was in chaos; Europe and East Asia were experiencing growing geopolitical instability; great power competition was sharper than at any time since the Cold War. A perpetually provocative North Korea had reportedly attained a survivable nuclear arsenal and was reportedly building a nascent intercontinental strike capability; terrorist activity had reached an all-time high in 2015.58 The world was burning, it often seemed; the liberal order was under growing pressure.

To be clear, the United States was neither fully responsible for these problems, nor could it fully resolve them. But in these circumstances, and given how many countries around the world still looked to Washington for stability in periods of crisis, perhaps it was time for “strategic patience” to give way to strategic reassertion. Perhaps it was time to move beyond retrenchment, and to undertake the sort of renewed geopolitical offensive and military buildup that had allowed the United States to reassert itself after previous periods of respite. All told, Obama’s grand strategy certainly protected the United States from the dangers of overreach. Whether it protected the country from the perils of under-reach was far more debatable.

Mixed Legacy, Potent Dilemmas

No grand strategy is perfect, or even close to it. The world is too messy, the choices are too hard, the constraints are too real, the tradeoffs are too inescapable. All grand strategies have shortcomings; even the good ones leave problems in their wake.

This is worth remembering in evaluating Obama’s grand strategy. His administration sought to sustain U.S. leadership of a liberal international order, while also adapting that leadership in important ways. And in retrospect, there was real merit in that approach. Obama’s grand strategy showed recognition that greater discipline and restraint were probably needed after Iraq, and it was sensitive—in a way that the approach of Obama’s predecessor too frequently was not—to costs
and other constraints. It grasped the need to recalibrate the use of U.S. military power after two manpower-intensive interventions; it helped re-weight and re-focus American engagement following a period of overinvestment in the Middle East. It allowed Washington to reap some benefits of energetic diplomacy on issues from climate change to Iran, while also enhancing U.S. ability to compete in a dynamic Asia–Pacific. This was hardly a spectacular performance, but by comparative standards it wasn’t half bad. To paraphrase Robert Kaplan, prudence and restraint are rarely admired—until their absence reminds one that the alternatives can be far worse.59

Criticism is also warranted, however, for Obama’s grand strategic ledger had a debit side. There were some costly setbacks, most notably the failure to de-leverage in Iraq and the Middle East in a way that promoted stability rather than catastrophic instability. There were significant tensions and tradeoffs associated with all the core elements of Obama’s grand strategy, from the limitations of the light footprint to the dangers of diplomacy with Iran and Russia. There were areas—such as the Asia–Pacific, or Europe after 2014—in which U.S. policies were generally well-conceived and necessary, but there nonetheless remained great uncertainty about whether those policies would ultimately succeed. Finally, there was the question of whether Obama had perhaps overlearned the painful lessons of the Bush years—whether in averting the undeniable danger of overreach, had he exposed the country to the opposing danger of under-reach, just as the world was again demanding more, not less, of the United States’ stabilizing influence. Obama’s grand strategy had its virtues, then, but it entailed potent drawbacks and strategic dilemmas, as well. The overall result was an ambiguous record in steering the ship of state.

This was perhaps not surprising, given the inherent difficulty of grand strategy and the real challenges that Obama confronted. The tradeoffs associated with a light-footprint approach to military intervention; the rewards and risks of engagement with adversaries; the difficulties associated with right-sizing U.S. involvement in the Middle East; the challenge of balancing commitments across regions; the question of how to preserve a favorable climate in the Asia–Pacific in the face of China’s rapid rise; and the balancing act required to avoid the twin perils of overreach and under-reach: these dilemmas probably would have tested the abilities of any president. The fact that they tested Obama thus spoke to the constraints and tradeoffs imposed by geopolitical circumstances, as well as to the limitations and ambiguities of his own statecraft.

It is perhaps fitting, then, that the election of Donald Trump to the presidency in late 2016 brought both the limitations and the value of Obama’s strategy into sharper relief. The immediate effect was to make the president’s grand strategic legacy seem increasingly precarious, for the nation had now elected a president who had pledged to roll back Obama-era policies such as the Iran deal, climate-
change diplomacy, and the TPP, and who promised—rhetorically, at least—an unprecedented presidential departure from the broader post-war patterns of American globalism. How Trump would actually govern once in office remained unclear, of course. If he followed through on his campaign rhetoric, he might erase a significant part of Obama’s grand strategic record, and fundamentally upend U.S. foreign relations in the process. But in doing so, he might also pay the Obama administration an unintended and sadly ironic compliment. For he might underscore that although future presidents could do better than Obama in addressing the challenges and dilemmas of American grand strategy in the early 21st century, they could also do far, far worse.

Notes


13. “Politico Playbook, June 1, 2014,” _Politico_ daily briefing newsletter, from June 1, 2014; also Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine.”


24. Hillary Clinton, _Hard Choices_ (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 201-210; Arthur Rachwald, “A ‘Reset’ of NATO-Russia Relations: Real or Imaginary?” _European Security_ 20, no. 1 (April 2011), 117-126. Although Obama cancelled the particular missile defense system that was planned to be deployed in 2009, the administration soon announced plans to replace that system with another, scaled-down variant.


39. Daalder and Stavridis, “NATO’s Victory in Libya.”


46. On these activities, see Alexander Lanoszka, “Russian Hybrid Warfare and Extended Deterrence in Eastern Europe,” International Affairs 92, no. 1 (January 2016), 175-195; also Hal Brands, “Paradoxes of the Gray Zone,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, February 2016.
47. Department of Defense, Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership, esp. 3.


51. U.S. diplomatic missteps may have contributed to this problem. In 2009, the Obama administration pledged to respect China’s “core interests,” and in 2013 it broadly affirmed Beijing’s concept of a “new model of great power relations.” These innocuous-sounding phrases were often used by Chinese officials to connote a situation in which Washington would be more deferential to Chinese prerogatives, and so it is possible that their endorsement was interpreted as giving Beijing greater license to push those prerogatives more assertively.


59. Robert Kaplan, The Revenge of Geography (New York: Random House, 2012), 20. As Kaplan writes, “Realism is not exciting. It is respected only after the seeming lack of it has made a situation demonstrably worse.”