Grand Strategy Constraints and Feedback during the GW Bush and Obama Administrations

Jacob Shively
University of West Florida
jshively@uwf.edu

Introduction

This paper evaluates the Obama administration’s grand strategy and its implementation with a specific comparison to the George W. Bush administration. Both conventional wisdom and scholarly research suggest that despite efforts to distance itself from its predecessor, the Obama team has carried forward a number of substantive foreign policies and security strategies. Is this in fact true? Accounts of a possible Obama Doctrine and other efforts to characterize the administration’s grand strategy lack a consistent framework to compare it with previous presidential terms. More generally, whether and how frequently grand strategies change remains an oft-debated but underdeveloped research agenda. To meet this gap and answer the question at hand, the following study outlines a generalizable framework describing when observers should expect fundamental grand strategy changes. It finds that the Obama administration’s efforts at grand strategy change remained constrained, and it argues that while many Bush policies carried over into Obama’s first term, their fundamental similarities fun far deeper.

The following sections first review ongoing debates about the Obama administration’s grand strategy and then present a two-tiered framework, as well as a set of distinguishing characteristics, to analyze that grand strategy. The paper’s subsequent section presents a general overview of the administration’s early grand strategy, while the largest section then traces how the administration implemented this grand strategy through 2009. At the end, the paper’s findings characterize the Obama grand strategy along three dimensions, and then the paper compares that outcome to previous findings for the Bush administration.

Debating Obama’s Foreign Policy

Both conventional wisdom and scholarly research converge on the essentials of Obama’s grand strategy; however, whether and how this strategy might represent a fundamental break
with Bush or with America’s larger strategic trajectory—in other words, how to categorize Obama’s grand strategy—remains debated. Journalist accounts broadly agree that, after filtering his rhetoric, Obama’s early foreign policy was pragmatic. Klaidman (2012, 15), for example, argues that “Obama was a foreign policy realist by the time he ran for president,” and that while a left-of-center politician, “he was skeptical of rigid ideology and pat solutions to complicated problems.” Obama and his closest advisers developed this foreign policy approach as an anti-George W. Bush movement, which for them meant preserving US leadership through diplomacy, limited resource commitments and precisely-targeted violence.\textsuperscript{1} Sanger (2012, xiv) even proposes an Obama doctrine as a “redefinition of the circumstances under which the United States will use diplomacy, coercion, and force to shape the world around it.” With direct threats, Obama and his team remained ready to apply limited, unilateral force, but on larger threats, ranging from economic stability to nuclear proliferation, they sought to outsource responsibility to international partners with as much or more at stake.

Scholars, however, offer more pointed disagreements about how to precisely define the administration’s grand strategy, which carries important implications regarding how observers evaluate Obama’s strategic efficacy as well as whether and how he may have redirected US foreign policy for future administrations. A persistent critique holds that the Obama administration failed to even adopt or implement a grand strategy, but most researchers in the field—whatever their other differences—hold that an identifiable Obama grand strategy exists.\textsuperscript{2} Dueck (2011, 14), for instance, argues that Obama adopted an accommodationist grand strategy in which, strapped by domestic challenges, the president pursued his internationalist vision by

\textsuperscript{1} Mann (2012, xviii–xix and 22–45) suggests that Obama and his advisors, as Democrats, portrayed themselves as a new generation, free from the baggage of Vietnam and focused on working in a world defined by constrained resources after Bush’s adventures and the 2008 financial crisis. See also Johnson and Mason (2009).

\textsuperscript{2} For an argument against any coherent Obama grand strategy, see Ferguson (2011).
appealing to mutual self-interest, promulgating from his bully pulpit and collegially reaching out to even hostile regimes. Unfortunately, says Dueck, writing in 2011, this approach failed.

Drezner (2011) makes a similar case but offers a different conclusion. He suggests that Obama’s 2009 grand strategy was “multilateral retrenchment,” which was supposed to help the United States reduces its commitments and push allies to shoulder more of the international leadership burden. This “delivered underwhelming policy results” but was replaced with another strategy, “counterpunching.” Parmar (2009) argues that, in fact, Obama’s grand strategy effectively extended the aggressive liberal internationalism (or even neoconservatism) of the previous decade, while Walt (2011) makes the realist case that, indeed, the United States even under Obama was trapped in a ponderous effort to dominate global politics.

The Framework

Two-Level Approach: Dominant and Tactical Level Grand Strategy

This paper argues that grand strategy is best understood as a two-level phenomenon. This allows researchers to more precisely understand how grand strategies can experience both regular adjustment and long-term stability. Specifically, in the cases here, I maintain that US policymakers in the Obama administration sought to change grand strategy tactics without fundamentally questioning the dominant “internationalist” grand strategy. In turn, though major

---

3 On retrenchment, Kaufman (2011) agrees that the Obama administration entertained retrenchment but had yet to seriously engage it. Lieber (2011), by contrast, argues that US decline, with its resulting need for retrenchment, is an illusion tied to “elite and societal beliefs” more than America’s actual relative standing.

4 Though outside this study’s immediate scope, counterpunching, says Drezner, involves pushing back in kind when a regime fails to engage the administration’s good faith outreach.

5 Walt’s recommended alternative for the future is offshore balancing.

6 This notion is based upon a hierarchy developed by Deibel (2007, 9-21). The least expansive strategies, says Deibel, are (1) tactical military strategies, while higher levels of strategizing include (2) waging war with all the tools available to the state, (3) developing a “national security strategy” that focuses on security but extends beyond war, (4) a “foreign affairs strategy” that unites all ambitions related to foreign policy and, finally, (5) “national strategy,” which unites domestic and foreign ambitions. See also Biddle 2007, 461-463 for an alternative hierarchy; Dueck (2006, 12) for an account of first- and second-order change.
periods of change may appear to represent grand strategy revolutions or type changes from one grand strategy to a fundamentally new one, they in fact reflect lower or tactical-level dynamics. Stated differently, most grand strategy changes, whether long-lived or abortive, occur at the tactical level.

According to this bifurcated distinction, grand strategy’s dominant parameters are the higher order elements of grand strategy: they are a stable set of guiding principles that prescribe 1) the nature of state interests (and threats to those interests), 2) the type of international system or world order as well as the menu of acceptable methods to best secure those interests. These are the ends of grand strategy. The dominant level, then, defines both the grand strategy’s ends as well as the parameters within which the grand strategy shall be contained, but the particular policies, behaviors and institutions policy makers pursue from year to year and from one administration to the next are worked out at the second level—or tactical level—of grand strategy. In other words, tactical level grand strategy involves active plans to secure state interests. These are the means of grand strategy.

Implied in this two-level distinction is a testable framework about the frequency and parameters of grand strategy change. Specifically, it predicts that dominant-level transformations from one grand strategy type to another will be rare, whereas tactical adjustments within a dominant grand strategy are likely to prove much more common. Stated differently, tactical grand strategic adjustments are more likely than fundamental grand strategy transformations. That stability depends on one variable: perceived relative geopolitical change. If a state’s geopolitical situation (especially relative power) remains relatively stable, overall inertia will prevail even as the state responds to ongoing foreign policy and geostrategic fluctuations. If that same state’s geopolitical situation is changing, a shock can initiate
fundamental change. In other words, dominant grand strategy transformation remains unlikely unless a shock is combined with policy makers perceiving an underlying geopolitical shift.

Tactical level changes will be constrained and are more likely to occur in the presence of relative geopolitical stability: they will not exceed the parameters set at the dominant level. Confronted with a gap between existing strategy and new realities, policymakers move to adjust grand strategy after unexpected domestic or exogenous events, such as economic downturns, strategic surprises and—especially when ruling coalitions change—domestic elections. Whereas dominant-level change requires redefining the fundamental framework of state goals, tactical level change involves the (relatively) simpler task of seeking out new or adjusted means to pursue those goals. Faced with a gap between existing strategy and new realities, policymakers move to change grand strategy, but they are constrained by parameters set at the dominant level. Whereas dominant level change requires redefining the fundamental framework of state goals, changing grand strategy tactics involves the (relatively) simpler task of seeking out new or adjusted means to pursue those goals.7

For the Obama administration, this framework predicts that, despite ambitious rhetoric and some policy initiatives, dominant grand strategy is unlikely to have changed from the Bush administration. As shown below, evidence strongly suggests that the Obama team believed that foreign policy needed to be realigned with the United States’ relative geopolitical standing; however, officials focused on moving toward a less ambitious or expensive leadership role. They did not believe that a “near peer” such as China was about to eclipse US power; rather, they insisted that US leadership would, and perhaps must, persist into the medium or long-term

7 Notably, some accepted strategies and approaches may persist for decades even as they waver in and out of favor or are periodically updated to address new conditions. Cullather’s research on modernization theory in US foreign policy, for instance, demonstrates how mid-twentieth century intelligence (2006, 143-144) and development (2002, 513-515) policies have experienced new life since the end of the Cold War.
future. At the tactical level, then, Obama officials acted to change or adjust grand strategy; however, those efforts remained fixed within a preexisting, dominant grand strategy because they lacked the political and strategic justification to initiate or complete fundamental change.

Operationalizing Grand Strategy

To evaluate such claims, this paper assess policy makers’ decisions, initiatives and statements in order to operationalize grand strategy along three dimensions: scope, substance and orientation.8 Scope involves the geopolitical extent of a state’s grand strategy and can range from local to inter-regional to global. Scope also includes both the allies and adversaries with or against whom grand strategy is implemented. Substance, meanwhile, includes a state’s perceived core interests as well as in what ways—often through ideologies—policy makers broadly understand the nature of the international system as well as their own state’s role in that system. Orientation, finally, refers to a grand strategy’s posture toward other actors. Characteristics here are the level of physical force and diplomatic assertiveness prescribed to pursue the grand strategy. Orientation also includes security plans, such as America’s regular “National Security Strategy” papers.

If values on these three dimensions remain relatively stable in comparison to the baseline and each other, then the assumption of dominant level stability is more likely to be correct. However, the case should also show movement within those dimensions as policy makers attempted to adjust to new conditions and implement a new, lower-order strategy. Alternatively, the more one or all of scope, substance and orientation diverge from the 1940s baseline, the more

---

8 Unfortunately, no scholarly consensus exists regarding which characteristics constitute grand strategy type. Competing examples include Art (2003, 2-7), Christensen (1996, 13), Deibel (2007, 13), Dueck (2006, 12), Layne (2006, 6 and 13), Posen and Ross (1996-7, 7-9), Trubowitz (2011, 10-15) and Walt (1987, 17-25). The dimensions introduced in this paper represent the author’s best assessment of the most expansive but still discrete characteristics commonly used throughout the relevant literature.
likely it is that grand strategy has undergone a dominant level change between those two cases. Such findings would undermine the claim that American grand strategy has remained basically stable.

**Table 1**: Operationalizing grand strategy for comparison: dimensions and their constituent characteristics. When comparing either multiple grand strategies or grand strategy at multiple points in time, the more given characteristics diverge from those of a baseline case, the more likely the overall dimensions are fundamentally different. Greater divergence between dimensions indicates that the grand strategies being compared may be fundamentally different types.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SCOPE</td>
<td>Geographic Extent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Allies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adversaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUBSTANCE</td>
<td>Core Interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nature of System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ORIENTATION</td>
<td>Force Level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Security Strategies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Obama’s Grand Strategy**

This paper is seeking to evaluate whether and how Obama’s grand strategy may have remained fundamentally similar to Bush’s grand strategy. To do that, the following section overviews Obama’s grand strategy as it was formulated and articulated in 2009. Any new administration enters office with a clear vision of how it differs from its predecessor, so this focus creates a “tough case” for the author’s proposed framework, which holds that fundamental change between Bush and Obama is unlikely. Specifically, if the dominant/tactical framework is correct, *scope, substance* and *orientation* in Obama’s administration will not fundamentally diverge from those measures as observed during the height of the Bush Doctrine. If, however, the Obama administration did succeed in fundamentally breaking with Bush, one of these dimensions will prove qualitatively different than its Bush counterpart.
After Obama’s famously high but vague campaign rhetoric about his ability to change the tenor and direction of international politics, the administration’s first year revealed an underlying pragmatism. The president-elect appointed a series of Washington insiders for his top foreign policy posts, and while he remained skeptical of certain Bush-era legal positions on counterterror, no fundamental overhaul of the programs occurred. With the financial crisis dominating 2009’s early months, administration officials attempted to stake out their grand strategic vision with a series of speeches and initiatives. These included nuclear talks with Russia, assertively engaging the Iran nuclear program, articulating a renewed focus on US-Muslim relations, and laying the groundwork for what became called a “pivot” to Asia, and particularly China. In December, two events capped the administration’s grand strategy as it had settled into place that year. Obama waded into the UN climate talks at Copenhagen, focused on China and a couple other key players—at the expense of the activists and small states who expected revolutionary change from the new president—and worked out a relatively conservative, low-commitment joint statement. He also accepted a Nobel Peace Prize, and he used the opportunity to explicate his view of America’s role in the world, a role that rested on both cooperation and force.

Grand Strategy Overview, 2009

Not unlike Jimmy Carter, Obama entered office on a set of commitments to “renew America’s security and standing in the world through a new era of American leadership.” (White House, 2009) This was an “activist vision” to “bend history’s arc in the direction of justice, and a more peaceful, stable global order.”9 This meant rebuilding against anti-American perceptions abroad; drawing down and ending the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; attempting to “reset”

---

9 As paraphrased by Indyk et al. (2012, 2).
relations with Russia and Iran; seeking Israeli-Palestinian peace; and establishing a renewed rapport with China. In other words, recalibrating US foreign policy and restoring a tarnished reputation after the Bush administration’s perceived bungling.\textsuperscript{10} Mann (2012, xv-xvi) argues that Obama “turned out to be far less wedded than his predecessors to the idea of an enduring American primacy or hegemony in the world,” but that he was also “the peace candidate who wasn’t.” For the new administration, this middle path was both a campaign tactic and a substantive trajectory.

Grand strategy in this new term emanated largely from Obama himself and, secondarily, his cadre of close advisors. For his most senior positions, the new president appointed a so-called “team of rivals,” including former campaign adversary Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State; the standing Secretary of Defense, a Republican, Robert Gates; outspoken Democratic foreign policy expert and Clinton-era appointee, Susan Rice, as UN Ambassador; and a retired general that Obama did not know personally, Jim Jones, as National Security Advisor. Along with vice president Joe Biden, a former Senator with foreign policy experience, these players enjoyed relative latitude to express their views. This arrangement nullified possible political challengers and lent the administration a sense of gravitas when Obama himself remained relatively inexperienced. However, it also concentrated strategic thinking in the Oval Office. “By virtually all accounts,” says Mann (2012, xviii), Obama “was the main strategist,” while in his absence, advisors like Mark Lippert, Denis McDonough, Ben Rhodes, and (later) Samantha Power effectively spoke for the president.\textsuperscript{11}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{10} Interestingly, as a prominent and respected holdover from the Bush administration, Gates (2014, 322) considered the new administration’s “everything was awful” evaluations to be out of touch with reality. European, African, and Chinese relations “were in pretty good shape,” and poor Russian relations had more to do with Moscow’s recent behavior. Admittedly, he reflected, Asian leaders expressed a sense of neglect and the Middle East “still had big problems.”}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{11} Woodward (2010, 144) observers that “tribes” populated the administration, with the “Hillary” and “Chicago” tribes giving way to the “campaign tribe” at the National Security Council.}
Finally faced with actually governing, Obama slowly began to articulate his strategic vision. On the campaign trail, Obama had invoked “the kind of foreign policy” reflected in Truman’s administration with Marshall, Acheson and Kennan as well as as well as the first president Bush’s team, with Scowcroft, Powell and Baker. He also suggested that his personal background deepened his ability to connect with international publics and fundamentally informed his understanding of international affairs. While Obama’s inaugural speech offered little substance on foreign affairs, his personnel decisions and early initiatives on war and counterterrorism, as well as insider testimonies, reveal a deliberative style and a genuine interest in aligning ideals with material interests. When asked about international interventions, for example, Obama insisted that “we should always strive to create genuine coalitions -- not coalitions that are based on us twisting arms, withholding goodies, ignoring legitimate concerns of other countries, but coalitions that are based on a set of mutual self-interests.” (Zakaria 2008)

Top officials outside Obama’s inner circle, charged with guiding bureaucracies and communicating the administration’s views, this vision’s grand strategic parameters. In her confirmation testimony, for instance, Clinton (2009E) affirmed a revealingly traditional list of grand strategic priorities: physical security at home and for allies; pursuing economic growth; and “strengthen[ing]” US global leadership; however, on a series of major issues, ranging from Russia and China to security and aid efforts in Africa, she consistently returned to establishing mutual interests and recognizing the constraints of two-way collaborations as well as working through, rather than recreating or circumventing, established institutions and regimes.13

---

12 Zakaria’s interview (2008) with the president-elect offers a good overview of Obama’s initial foreign policy positions.
13 In another Senate testimony, Clinton (2009C) summarized US priorities in a similar way: “We are deploying the tools of diplomacy and development along with military power. We are securing historic alliances, working with emerging regional powers, and seeking new avenues of engagement. We’re addressing the existing and emerging challenges that will define our century: climate change, weak states, rogue regimes, criminal cartels, nuclear
Similarly, Gates (2009B), told Pacific Rim leaders that the United States was moving from a hub-and-spoke model to reliance on multilateral institutions and arrangements. Clinton also regularly invoked “smart power” to explain the administration’s self-conscious effort to mix principles and pragmatism on initiatives like institution-building through NATO and with allies and East Asia as well as engaging as partners the so-called BRICS. Nonproliferation, for instance, hinged on innovative diplomacy undergirded by hard power. Faced with serious, persistent budget challenges, Gates (2009A, 28) asserted that the Pentagon’s overarching strategy rested upon a balance between military capacity and pragmatic constraints. Perceived failure in Iraq or Afghanistan “would be a disastrous blow to U.S. credibility,” and the United States faced open-ended demands for its unique military prowess; nevertheless, Gates insisted that the military must remain one of several foreign policy tools.

Throughout 2009, Obama himself used a series of foreign policy speeches as tools to set out the administration’s agenda, but they also embodied a conviction that communication and engagement themselves might work real international change. In his first presidential trip to Europe, for example, Obama (2009D) announced a plan to advance a nuclear weapon-free world. Notably, though, this agenda largely operated within existing institutional and strategic frameworks, whereas, Obama’s Cairo speech (2009A) attempted to shift the tenor of world politics through cultural or moral suasion. Rather than offering specific policies, the speech

---

14 Clinton reviewed her vision of “smart power,” a notion developed by scholar Joseph Nye, in a 15 July 2009 address to the Council on Foreign Relations. BRICS referred the growing economic powers of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

15 See, for example, Gates (2009C) and Clinton (Clinton 2009D) as the administration’s rhetoric about Iran’s nuclear program explicitly warned about the need for coercion if engagement failed.

16 In a speech on defense budgeting later that year, Gates (2009D) argued that “the security challenges we now face, and will in the future, have changed, and our thinking must likewise change. The old paradigm of looking at potential conflict as either regular or irregular war, conventional or unconventional, high end or low – is no longer relevant.”
sought “new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world” by highlighting a series of thorny issues, ranging from Iraq and Afghanistan to religious freedom, and explicating each side’s motivations and shared interests. Later in the year, after an extensive review process, Obama (2009D) announced a new strategy for Afghanistan in which he systematically presented the history, the decision (a compromise between immediate withdrawal and ever-expanding commitment), and the reasoning. By now a familiar formula, the approach melded internationalist tools, such as coalition-building, with pragmatic political constraints and shared self-interest. By the end of the year, though, doubts persisted regarding this approach’s efficacy. (Wilson 2009)

**Implementing Grand Strategy**

To evaluate implementation of this grand strategic approach, the following analysis focuses particularly on the period beginning in spring 2009, as the administration moved from responding to a series of minor crises to promoting a proactive, actionable foreign policy agenda. Between April and December, Obama delivered a series of speeches aimed at defining and directing US foreign policy. The administration also faced important decision points when North Korea tested a nuclear weapon and when Iranian street demonstrations seemed poised to spark a revolution. How to approach the Afghanistan war, though, became the administration’s single biggest internal debate and was not resolved until late November, when Obama decided on a mixed strategy drawn from two competing approaches.

Despite that later momentum, Obama’s first months were dominated by the financial crisis, a nearly catastrophic market failure beginning fall 2008. (Indyk et al., 2012, 7) On 17

---

17 As described below, the strategy itself involved an immediate surge followed by a specific withdrawal timetable. The in-country strategy itself would involve “a military effort to create the conditions for a transition; a civilian surge that reinforces positive action; and an effective partnership with Pakistan.”
February, for example, the President signed an unprecedented 2.5 trillion dollar stimulus package. Consequently, rather than immediately push a coherent, ambitious foreign policy agenda, administration officials initially dealt with crises as they arose.\(^{18}\) While Obama did take immediate action to assess options for an Iraq drawdown and empty the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, within four weeks of his inauguration, he was faced with a Pentagon request for up to 17,000 more troops in Afghanistan as well as a threatened closure of the logistically crucial Manas, Kyrgyzstan air force base. Added to these were an IAEA report showing that Tehran had seriously understated its uranium enrichment and a first-ever Iranian satellite launch. On the economic front, China aired several public concerns about US financial stability while governments of the newly-formed G20 evaluated options for a coordinated response to the crisis. Inside the administration, meanwhile, the first months saw a permanent divide grow between the president’s favored advisers and senior administration officials.

**Nuclear Options**

Outside the economic crisis and Iraq, the administration’s first ambitious precedent involved nuclear weapons. Dmitry Medvedev had reached out to Obama as a fellow “young, new president,” and at a Munich security conference on 7 February, Biden famously announced that the US administration wanted to “press the reset button” with Russian relations. Simultaneously, Obama’s team was seeking to bypass Putin, an “old school believer in zero-sum games,” and treat Medvedev as an independent political force and a pragmatic realist who shared national interests with the United States.\(^{19}\) That month, US officials agreed with their Russian

\(^{18}\) Then Secretary of Defense Robert Gates (2014, 323), a Republican who had worked for several administrations, observes that few presidents entered office with “more challenges of historic magnitude than Obama.”

\(^{19}\) In one visible case, Obama personally appealed to Medvedev to keep open the US air base in Manas, Kyrgyzstan when the Kyrgyz announced that it would close immediately after a meeting with the Russians. Obama reasoned that a successful war in Afghanistan was also in Russia’s interest, and Medvedev—after receiving an oil contract from the United States military—agreed. (Mann 2012, 187)
counters on a series of steps, such as building a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), supporting Russian entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO), and drawing down the Polish/Czech Antibalistic Missile (ABM) system in exchange for greater support with addressing Iran’s nuclear program. Debates at home, from both opposition voices and inside the White House, countered that this pragmatism rewarded Russian misbehavior in Georgia, trampled agreements with East European allies, and elided Moscow’s abuse of domestic dissenters. In a press conference, Obama responded that European missile defense remained a fixed priority. More generally, inside accounts suggest that the president “refused to acknowledge the choices or trade-offs,” and instead, he “did just enough to convince both sides of the internal debate to believe that he was really on their side.”

At the height of his rhetorical ambitions, though, Obama’s balancing began to totter. With an early April speech delivered in Prague, Obama (2009D) announced his dramatic goal of “a world without nuclear weapons.” Along with the renewed START, practical steps included US ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and agreements to end production of weapons-grade fissile materials. Revealingly, though, the speech also framed this vision as part of, or at least congruent with, deepening and reinforcing NATO relationships as well as preventing nuclear terrorism. Within weeks, Russia itself raised NATO concerns when it conducted aggressive military exercises near the Georgian border. By mid-summer, Obama advisors began to interpret Medvedev as a “good cop” to Putin’s “bad cop,” and even as Obama

---

20 As Mann (2012, 188 and 209) elaborates, Obama “wanted to do business with Russia, on the basis of national interests, and also to promote democratic change on occasion, when he could.” Further, nuclear nonproliferation represented the largest challenges of Obama’s vision for world order and shared enforcement. As one of Obama’s informal advisors observed, “This is a test not just of the Obama administration but of the whole approach, whether you can use the international community to solve problems like this.”
signed a preliminary START agreement, high-level officials in Eastern Europe articulated concern that their interests would be lost in the “reset.” (Carter and Scott 2014, 202)

Meanwhile, North Korea launched a missile over the Pacific within days of Obama’s nuclear disarmament speech and, the following month, conducted an underground nuclear test. The administration had previously aimed to build on the October 2007 six-party agreement with North Korea (though without proffering generous inducements); however, officials considered these tests an “inflection point” with North Korea and sought Japanese and South Korean cooperation to pass and implement UN sanctions.21 China received special treatment. The administration’s regional specialists traveled to Beijing and presented the specter, if North Korea’s confrontational behavior persisted, of growing armament among regional powers allied with the United States. Obama characterized this approach as “not a threat. It’s simply reality.” (Bader 2012, 38)

Grappling with the Middle East

With his nonproliferation agenda rolling, Obama next focused on relations with the Middle East and the Muslim world. Already, with Clinton’s urging, the president had appointed George Mitchell, a former Senator and key negotiator for Northern Ireland’s Good Friday Accords, as the administration’s Middle East envoy. Mitchell reported that on the Palestine issue, Arabs uniformly decried Israeli settlements. In turn, Obama demanded a settlement freeze and even called existing settlements “illegitimate,” which shifted US policy by implying dismantlement of even established settlements. As Clinton (2014, 315) later admitted, this “early hard line ... didn’t work.” Many Israelis and their supporters in the United States complained that Obama was sacrificing an established alliance for Arab approval, and both Obama and

---

21 As Indyk et al. (2012, 36) explain, Obama officials did not want to reward bad behavior. See also Bader 2012, 30-33 and 37-39.
Netanyahu, Israel’s tough-talking prime minister, had staked out public, incompatible stances.\textsuperscript{22} The effort was pushed back to early 2010 as Mitchell attempted, quietly, to negotiate an agreement; however, Obama had by then suffered a highly visible setback.

As Obama insisted, though, his larger goal with reaching out to the Muslim world was to decrease tensions for both the United States and Israel. (Indyk 2012, 118) To that end, White House officials developed a June tour of the Middle East with a speech in Cairo as its centerpiece. This was to be a seminal statement, and Obama’s foreign policy speech writer, Ben Rhodes, developed it over four months. Obama wanted to send “a clear, new message” that he represented a genuine, humble effort to transform US relations with the Muslim world. (Gerges 2013, 303) In the speech itself, Obama (2009A) reviewed his own religious and cultural background, explicates American motivations on fraught foreign policies, reviews his positions on Israel-Palestine, nuclear proliferation, democracy, religious freedom, women’s rights, and development. Democracy promotion, notably, was downplayed largely because Obama and his advisers agreed that it exemplified Bush’s overreach in the region. (Mann 2012, 144) Observers at home and abroad largely welcomed the rhetoric, but praise remained muted: regional elites noted the new president’s record of status quo policy positions; conservatives worried about projecting a weak image; and liberals registered continued disappointment that Bush’s Guantanamo, Iraq and Afghanistan commitments remained intact. (Gerges 2013, 304) Not surprisingly, on his next Middle East stop, Obama was “reportedly stunned” and faced a “rude awakening” to find that Saudi king Abdullah had little interest in accepting some prisoners from

\textsuperscript{22} See, for example, Indyk et al. 2012, 119-120. In addition, Obama and Netanyahu personally clashed and never developed a warm relationship. This did not condemn US-Israeli relations, though, in part because Robert Gates (2014, 388) and others were able to maintain open, lower-level channels with their counterparts.
Shively, 18

Guantanamo and, more damningly, would do nothing to help the Israeli-Palestinian peace process without a fully-formed deal. (Indyk et al. 2012, 122)

The Saudi rebuff also frustrated White House officials because they were transitioning away from a tentative conciliation with Iran. That March, ostensibly seeking at least a cultural détente, Obama had publicly announced an “open hand” to the Iranian people and sent a private letter to Ayatollah Khameini. US officials generally believed that this effort would fail, but the effort was also aimed at establishing the administration’s good-faith and credibility before the international community.23 As if on cue, Khameini responded to the reconciliation effort with boilerplate opposition, and US regional allies, ranging from the Israelis to the Saudis and Jordanians, were “completely unnerved” and warned that Iran remained a menace. The Israelis offered a particular concern because they threatened to bomb Iranian nuclear facilities before the program could generate actual weapons. To forestall this and buy time for US negotiators, earlier in 2009, Obama had agreed to speed up “Olympic Games,” a classified, rolling series of cyber attacks on Iran’s nuclear facilities.24

Paralleling his approach to Russia, Obama attempted to simultaneously push engagement and confrontation; however, when thousands of Iranians began protesting an apparently rigged presidential election, Obama took no actions and delivered cautious statements. White House insiders insisted that Obama still hoped that engagement would still work and that, anyway, protest leaders did not want their movement to be seen as coopted or supported by the United States. Not insignificantly, US officials also did not trust the opposition candidate, Mir-Hossein

23 Both Clinton (2014, 421) and Gates (2014, 327) agree that, as the latter describes it, “we would be in a much better stronger position to get approval of significantly stricter economic sanctions on Iran at the UN Security Council.” Thus, in March, when a Treasury official (Charles Glaser) met European counterparts, he told them that “Engagement alone is not likely to succeed.” (Mann 2012, 196)

24 When the worm leaked onto the internet and infected computers worldwide, observers dubbed the program by its now more widely-known name: Stuxnet. (Sanger 2012, 159)
Moussavi and suspected that real political change remained unlikely. (Sanger 2012, 163-165)

The protests soon withered under harassment from the regime’s internal security forces, and Obama again suffered a round of criticism from both conservatives and liberals. Administration insiders almost universally agreed, particularly in light of the later Arab uprisings in 2011, that they should have done, or at least said, more. As one senior presidential aide reflected, “it turned out that what we intended as caution, the Iranians saw as weakness.” (Sanger 2012, 164)

After this crisis, though, administration officials began floating the idea—and secretly installing the weapons for—a defense system over the Gulf as well as mulling harsher sanctions. In September, as the UN reconvened, Obama secretly revealed to the Chinese that Iran had been hiding the Qom nuclear facility and began lobbying for coordinated sanctions. When a proposal to enrich uranium outside Iran was rejected by Khameini over the objections of even the hardline president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Obama “reached the end of the road for his engagement strategy.”

Waging War

Throughout 2009, despite their peril, nuclear issues paled relative to the time and energy Obama officials invested in deliberating war strategies. Of these, the Iraq war topped Obama’s order of business. Candidate Obama staked his foreign policy argument on responsibly but inexorably withdrawing from Iraq and fixing Afghanistan. Within days of his inauguration, the new president initiated an Iraq review, and later decided, based upon recommendations from Generals Odierno and Petraeus, to draw US troops down to 50,000 in “advise and assist

---

25 See, for example, Clinton 2014, 423; Gates 2014, 328.
26 Clinton floated the notion of a Middle East “defense umbrella” in July. (Sanger 2012, 177) See also Sanger (2009) and “U.S. Urges Arab States” (2009).
27 As Sanger (2012, 150 and 184-185) details, for administration insiders, this was a “telling episode” in which the regime in Tehran revealed total disinterest in negotiations that preserved the nuclear program but ended its weapons capability. Unfortunately for the administration, though, “Iran may be the most challenging test of the emerging tenet of the Obama Doctrine that asserts adversaries can be effectively confronted through indirect methods”
brigades” by the end of 19 months. Both conservatives and liberals criticized the policy because it represented a compromise position: less than what Obama intimated he might do but still a fixed withdrawal timeline. Obama then tasked Biden to quietly manage the final transition. As one observer concluded, Obama chose the “prudent and pragmatic” rather than “historic or transformative.”

Another major security decision facing the new administration centered on counterinsurgency (COIN) and counterterrorism. Initially uncomfortable with the legal and humanitarian dangers of “signature strikes”—or bombing a group that matches the profile of an insurgent gathering—Obama leaned on and even expanded the tactic for months. Rahm Emanuel, the president’s chief of staff, consistently maintained that this type of “kinetic power” was what Americans wanted; however, Obama pushed for increasingly precise attacks and frequently vetoed proposed strikes that might envelop noncombatants or other peripheral players. (Klaidman 2012, 43-53) A pernicious question, however, remained whether to capture high-ranking militants when possible. Negotiations in early 2009 revealed that persuading other governments to accept even benign Guantanamo prisoners would prove monumentally difficult. During a pivotal deliberation in September 2009, with both options viable, Obama opted to kill rather than capture a Somali militant. Though careful to not articulate a formal position, administration officials appear to have settled upon a policy of “surgical” killings even in locations far from an active theater of battle.

---

28 Admittedly, Indyk et al. (2012, 77-78) may have been angling for positions in Obama’s second term, but in this case, their findings fit the evidence.
29 Klaidman (2012, 126) notes that the military’s top lawyer, Jeh Johnson even conducted an investigation to determine whether evidence existed that officials, worried about political and legal complications, indeed implemented a policy of killing rather than capture.
The administration’s largest strategic and political debate centered on Afghanistan. From the earliest national security meetings in January 2009, a contingent of military officials like Petraeus and Mike Mullen, the Joint Chiefs chairman, made the case for more troops to conduct a broad counterinsurgency campaign. Political operators like Biden and Emanuel, though, remained skeptical and demanded more time to review the situation; however, faced with an immediate demand and still establishing his national security *bona fides*, Obama in February did approve a 17,000 troop increase. In March, the president received an interagency review calling for, and he himself announced, a broader COIN approach, building Afghan civilian and military capabilities and treating the Afghan/Pakistan border region (a.k.a “AfPak”) as a single theater. (Obama 2009B)

In the following months, a major interpersonal fault line opened: Biden and Obama’s closest advisers pushed a counterterror approach with a limited US footprint while the newly appointed ISAF commander, General Stanley McChrystal, with apparent support from Mullen and Petraeus, pushed for thousands more troops and a full counterinsurgency campaign. By September, when McChrystal requested 40,000 more troops, Obama suspected that the military was “jamming” him by constantly presenting two exaggerated options and one more reasonable one between them. Despite his frustration, Obama then initiated “nine formal war meetings and three months of intense debate” in order to evaluate his final decision. After Clinton and Gates leaned toward a moderated McChrystal approach, the president decided upon and announced in late November a troop surge with a hard cap of 30,000 and a target to withdraw

---

30 Gates (2014, 362-364) attempted to play a mediating role here, though he tended to defer to military personnel with experience and command responsibilities. See also Baker (2009A).
31 See, for example, Burns (2009), Gates (2014, 369), Mann (2012, 135) and Schmitt and Shanker (2009).
32 For overviews, see Gagnon and Hendrickson (2014, 29); Woodward (2010, 153-313).
from combat in 18 months. In other words, Obama navigated between the military’s preference and his perceived political constraints. On McChrystal’s preferred plan, Obama had complained that it lacked awareness of international political realities and, anyway, “This is not what I’m looking for. I’m not doing 10 years. I’m not doing a long-term nation-building effort. I’m not spending a trillion dollars.” Notably, though, while senior House and Senate members immediately launched hearings on the new strategy, the debate revealed that those players “had little control over Obama’s decision beyond approving the money to pay for it.” (Gagnon and Hendrickson, 2014, 30)

Moving Toward an Asian Pivot

With the Afghanistan process winding down, Obama set out on his first presidential visit to China. Earlier in the administration, Obama’s close foreign policy advisors like Tom Donilon and Denis McDonough emphasized that the United States needed to rebuild its standing with neglected regions, so Clinton used for first official trip to tour East Asia. Later, Obama himself asserted that America’s economic future more than ever lay in Asia. In particular, administration officials, aware of Bill Clinton’s early missteps, were anxious to build a smooth working relationship with the Chinese, and they were willing to remain mute on human rights issues to do it. Unfortunately for the Obama administration, the Chinese were far more powerful than they had been in the early 1990s and were faring far better than the Americans in

---

33 By this point, Clinton was seen as one of the Cabinet’s more hawkish and influential members. (Solomon 2009)
34 As quoted in Woodward (2010, 251 and 253). In a similar vein, when presented the option of framing the war in terms of human rights, such as protecting women, Obama declined because this would entail an open-ended commitment. (Mann 2012, 137)
35 At the time, Donilon was Deputy National Security Adviser and McDonough was the National Security Council’s chief of staff. See Bader (2012, 9-10) for more details on this effort to compensate for the Bush years.
36 See, for example, Kurniblot and Harden (2009).
37 Bill Clinton had threatened sanctions against China early in his first term but had been forced to retract his position. (Mann 2012, 177) Bader (2012, 15-16) describes how both he and Hillary Clinton in early 2009 reassured Chinese officials that they would not be discomfited by sharp questions on delicate subjects.
the financial and economic crisis. Indeed, in the first months of 2009, Chinese officials publicly floated proposals for an alternative global reserve currency to the dollar and directly questioned US economic stability.\textsuperscript{38}

The “optics” of Sino-US relations did not improve. When the Dalai Lama sought a White House visit for October (just before Obama’s Asia trip), Chinese as well as State Department and National Security Council officials warned that this would damage the administration’s relationship with Beijing, and the meeting was pushed back to January. In November, after arriving in China, local officials carefully restricted Obama’s access to dissidents and lawyers, and the diplomatic teams generated a joint statement that offered little new substance. Though Obama’s team was able to stage a town-hall style event to showcase American-style politics, the overall trip was broadly portrayed as a US president arriving as an economic “supplicant” and bowing to Chinese prerogatives on most issues.\textsuperscript{39} The trip carried few ambitions, but Obama still left “frustrated” by the domestic backlash.\textsuperscript{40} (Bader 2012, 60)

Overall, Obama’s first year, and particularly the middle months, saw the administration attempt to push, but falter with, a more proactive agenda.\textsuperscript{41} On nuclear proliferation, officials encountered resistance from Iran and North Korea; however, this largely confirmed a more confrontational approach that was pursued by quietly building coalitions and, in the case of Iran, even waging a type of cyberwar on the regime’s nuclear infrastructure. Similarly, Obama settled on a covert, hard power policy for dealing with counterterrorism when capturing targets with less kinetic methods proved too politically and legally complicated. While Europe, consumed also

\textsuperscript{38} That summer, during a regularly-scheduled “Strategic and Economic Dialogue,” Chinese delegates “wanted to know, in painstaking detail, how the health-care plan would affect the deficit.” (Sanger 2012, 388)
\textsuperscript{39} See, for example, Bader (2012, 59); Mann (2012, 182); Sanger (2012, 390).
\textsuperscript{40} See Bader (2012, 60). Despite his frustration and the Asia trip’s overall lack of clear substance, experts did praise the President for clearly shifting attention toward East Asia. (“Foreign Policy Experts” 2009)
\textsuperscript{41} By September, a number of key initiatives, particularly in the Middle East, had apparently demanded course corrections. (Landler 2009)
by economic crisis, remained a secondary concern, the administration’s efforts to revitalize relations with Russia and China generated mixed results. Medvedev’s early openness soured in the eyes of administration officials as they concluded that, outside the START treaty, Moscow was making little effort to seriously address US concerns. Faced with a China flush with confidence after weathering the financial crisis, Obama appeared to observers to be a supplicant rather than a partner, to say nothing of the dominant world power.

**Findings: Dimensions of Obama’s Grand Strategy**

In a June 2009 speech, Secretary of State Clinton (2009B) argued that “our new diplomacy, our outreach, our policy of engagement and partnership” stood in clear contrast to the Bush administration, which Obama’s team had consistently characterized as unilateral and relying too heavily upon military power. And indeed, the Obama administration’s first year represents the strongest case for a fundamental break with the Bush administration. To evaluate whether that claim is true, therefore, this paper analyzes Obama’s grand strategy along the three dimensions described above and, at the end, compares these with findings from an earlier study of the Bush grand strategy.

**Scope: Global**

Not surprisingly, the administration maintained a steadfastly global purview: no major region and few international issues were considered outside the US national interests. While the financial crisis consumed significant attention during 2009’s early months, from the transition onward, administration officials carried forward a genuinely global set of policies. However, the administration did attempt to expand the tent of “partners” with whom they might conduct business on even the most intractable conflicts. Along with an effort to connect with traditional allies, particularly in Asia, fresh starts were extended to major players such as Russia,
intransigent interlocutors such as Iran, and old foes such as Cuba. Notably, though, despite critics’ fears and supporters’ hopes, Obama and his team remained fundamentally defensive with these regimes and shifted toward confrontation when engagement failed.

**Substance: Hope, Change and Realism**

No consensus title for Obama’s approach to foreign policy yet exists, though “Niebuhrian” may be the most academically accurate. At a theoretical level, Obama explicitly attempted to unite traditional liberal internationalist goals and his own optimism for progress with a realist’s view that human politics are inevitably conflict-prone. Regarding specific US interests, though, the administration attempted emphasize reducing America’s official footprint around the world even as it prosecuted two wars, expanded certain types of security operations and, in key regions, initiated complex multilateral projects. Indeed, Obama officials continued to portray the United States as the world’s essential lead state, even if that state would like its allies to pick up more of the leadership tab. They portrayed the nature of the international system as receptive to change, particularly through the power of persuasion on the grounds of mutual self-interest. Change, however, was a bounded concept: Obama officials consistently left themselves political and strategic escape routes should an optimistic effort fail (and many of them did).

**Orientation: Moderate Assertiveness**

In the face of rhetoric about realizing the aspirations of humans everywhere and opening mutually beneficial dialogues, the Obama administration ultimately reserved the right to exert coercion and force where it deemed that to be necessary. Iraq and Afghanistan notwithstanding, Obama did attempt to proactively address nuclear proliferation through institutions and treaties; however, even on that banner issue, the president secretly authorized what was in effect a

---

42 As Holder and Josephson (2012, 2-5) point out, Reinhold Niebuhr’s thought pervades Obama’s political thinking.
cyberwar on Iran’s nuclear facilities and quickly resolved to aggressively isolate North Korea after its missile and weapons tests. Similarly, as led by Gates, the Pentagon sought to reduce spending through smarter budgeting and careful long-term planning even as it also worked to preserve its global, cutting-edge capabilities. Though the administration had yet to release an official security strategy, Obama’s expansion of deadly drone attacks, for example, indicated a resolve to apply violence where legal, diplomatic and other avenues failed.

**Grand Strategy Type**

In another summer speech, Hillary Clinton (2009A) articulated a guiding question for grand strategy during the Obama administration: “not whether our nation can or should lead, but how it will lead in the 21st century.” The answer involved characterizing the Bush administration’s grand strategy as overly expensive, ambitious and unilateral and then, in turn, attempting to build collaborative relationships with even intransigent regimes, applying limited but deadly force against specific threats and, overall, building pragmatic constraints into new initiatives that protected the administration’s domestic politics. In some ways, this approach represented a new tone more than an effort to build a new strategy. A deliberative but energetic political actor, Obama sought to project his own persona as integral to this new foreign policy agenda.\(^{43}\) As Obama’s words and actions in December 2009 reveal, his grand strategy aimed at idealist ends, such as ending nuclear proliferation or staucing climate change, but he would not overcommit US resources and reserved the right to wield specifically-targeted coercion and violence to protect US interests. Dueck’s “accommodation” and Drezner’s “multilateral retrenchment” probably overstate, in different ways, the Obama administration’s withdrawal from international leadership. Nevertheless, they do capture the essential point: Obama officials

---

\(^{43}\) See Wilson (2009) for a good, contemporary overview.
did not seek to fundamentally change US grand strategy. Rather, they sought to make it more efficient and less confrontational. Notably—and perhaps ironically—this approach bears some similarity to Nau’s “conservative internationalism,” though Obama underplayed one key element of that approach: credible military threats during negotiations.44

Two events in December 2009 reflected the administration’s yearlong drive toward a distinctive and workable grand strategy. On 10 December, Obama (2009D) accepted the Nobel Prize for peace, but his acceptance set out an unexpected notion of international politics and, within that, the United States’ role. In an appeal to classic liberal international thought, Obama argued that for decades, motivated by “enlightened self-interest,” US power has underwritten international stability and driven effective international institutions and rule of law. However, the President also asserted that “evil does exist in the world” and that he reserved the right and obligation to wield force to protect his state’s interest as well as, secondarily, humanitarian interventions. A “just and lasting peace” is possible, but it must be grounded in enforcement of international norms and regimes as well as human rights, and it must encompass global economic security. Later that month, along with a number of other heads of government, Obama attended the UN climate change conference. After a day of diplomatic wrangling, Obama interrupted and redirected private negotiations between China’s Wen Jiabao and other BRICS leaders to hammer out a broadly-acceptable but toothless agreement.45 Highly anticipated, in no small measure due to rhetoric during the presidential campaign and the subsequent administration, the summit left activists and many world leaders frustrated—even outraged—but

44 In this tradition, Nau (2013, 2) argues, presidents have sought to spread freedom but within a limited sphere; a careful application of force during negotiations; and a “decentralized world of democratic civil societies or ‘sister republics.’”
45 For inside, if somewhat generous, overviews of the negotiations, see Bader (2012, 61-68) and Clinton (2014, 491-500).
underscored the administration’s basic political pragmatism as it attempted to thread between US leadership obligations, domestic political constraints and its own ambitions.

**Findings: A Comparison with George W. Bush**

The author (Shively 2014) has argued that the G.W. Bush administration’s grand strategy, even during its most extensive, confident phase in early 2005, fits within a dominant grand strategy framework established in the mid-1940s. Though still a loose formulation, this approach prescribed, in effect, a version of liberal internationalism. During World War II, policy elites groped for a new model to simultaneously prevent another catastrophic war and promote American material interests, and consensus settled on an admixture of institutional cooperation and US power. In terms of scope, though planners discussed regional arrangements and sharing “responsibility” with other great powers, there remained no region considered irrelevant or peripheral to possible US intervention. Officials also thought of the world in terms of cooperative states versus aggressors with a preference for democracies, which they presumed would be more peaceful and willing to work with the United States. In turn, the substance of this “American internationalism” centered on free markets and binding institutions but with the United States, able to wield leading military and economic power, setting itself as the central veto player of the new world order. In terms of orientation, finally, this grand strategy remained assertive but not aggressive. It involved retaining access to key geostrategic assets around the world and attempting to preserve, particularly through nuclear weapons, a leading military capability in order to actively prevent the kind of instability that plagued the interwar period.

---

46 Somewhat more narrowly but revealingly, Rosenberg (1982, 229-234) argues that postwar internationalism represents a triumph of the “promotional state,” a broad agreement between private business and the government about how to promote an expansive idea of the national interest.
The Bush Doctrine, meanwhile, invoked muscular, sometimes unilateral and even preemptive, means to achieve specific ends: a world order based upon liberal democracies and free trade that is protected by global, assertive American military power. Bush’s administration demonstrated a controversial willingness to “go it alone” and faced charges that it fundamentally broke with traditional US foreign policy. On all three dimensions of grand strategy, though,

**Table 2: Comparison of three grand strategies.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>FDR-Truman “American Internationalism”</th>
<th>Bush Doctrine</th>
<th>Obama Grand Strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SCOPE</td>
<td>GLOBAL</td>
<td>GLOBAL</td>
<td>GLOBAL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All regions relevant to US security and economic interests. Allies and adversaries determined by willingness to cooperate in new US-led order.</td>
<td>All regions and states where terrorist organizations supported. Allies and adversaries defined by regime type (i.e., whether democratic or not) and willingness to cooperate with US-led security policies.</td>
<td>Officials pushed partners to assume some costs of leadership, but no region or population was outside US purview. Despite some outreach to the latter, allies and adversaries centered on willingness to work with the administration and within US-specified global norms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUBSTANCE</td>
<td>PRAGMATIC LIBERALISM</td>
<td>“FREEDOM AGENDA”</td>
<td>Hope, Change and Realism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Combine US power, economic integration and political institutions to prevent war and expand wealth at home and abroad.</td>
<td>Leverage US power to foster democratic and economic development around the world, particularly in the Middle East. Ongoing trade and political relations with great powers and established allies.</td>
<td>Traditional US interests such as security and economic integration coupled with “smart power,” or institutions and dialogue along with traditional power. US should lead in a system that can change toward greater cooperation based upon shared interests.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ORIENTATION</td>
<td>MODERATE ASSERTIVENESS</td>
<td>MODERATE – HIGH ASSERTIVENESS</td>
<td>MODERATE ASSERTIVENESS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overwhelming military power in conflict, deterrent military power in peace. Moderate – High willingness to apply force as policy instrument.</td>
<td>Active application or threat of conventional military power against peripheral states and official adoption of preemption. However, complex relations with nondemocratic great powers like China.</td>
<td>Targeted violence and coercion where other efforts fail. Preserve dominant military capabilities but reduce spending. Wind down wars but remain aggressive but precise with global counterterrorism.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Bush’s attempt to revise US grand strategy remained fundamentally similar to the 1940s baseline. Regarding **scope**, officials did begin to reposition military and other assets around the world, and they redefined American adversaries as terrorist networks as well as states who sponsor them. Nevertheless, these moves fit within the long-standing perception that no region lies outside American security interests. Likewise, the attempts to redefine adversaries and allies sparked consternation and criticism at home and abroad, but the basic principle of engaging democratic and cooperative non-democratic governments remained unchanged. Regarding **substance**, Bush proved more willing to “go it alone” than policy makers of the 1940s, but the underlying drive to position the United States at the center of a liberal international order remained fundamentally similar. With **orientation**, the administration did attempt to completely revise the country’s strategic approach toward peripheral states, like Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as toward terrorist networks and their supporters. The United States proactively targeted these types of actors and even introduced “preemption” as an explicit and justifiable means to protect the United States and its allies. However, the 2003 Iraq invasion was the only time this approach was fully applied. By contrast, toward major powers in Europe and Asia, Bush’s grand strategy largely followed the internationalist model by emphasizing, if not always fostering, cooperation and collective security. Even toward “rogue states” like Iran and North Korea, the administration followed precedents and pursued multiparty negotiations rather than rely on military coercion.

From this broad perspective, Obama’s grand strategy appears to be genuinely different from Bush’s, but only at the tactical level. Certainly **scope** is global in all three periods, and while geographic emphases differ to some extent, Bush and Obama in particular remain concerned with similar regions just as they work with essentially identical adversaries and allies.
Substance offers more opportunity for divergence, but a fundamental difference does not appear. America’s role in the world, for example, centered on a kind of subsidiarity in which US officials pushed regional leaders to lead on challenges, such as China, that affected them more directly than the United States. But in the final analysis, Obama officials still assumed that they represented the most important and powerful—even indispensable—global actor. To take another example, Obama’s team deliberately moved away from talk about democratization in order to distance itself from Bush, but in no way was the value or ultimate goal of democracy ever jettisoned. Revealingly, like Obama’s approach, the 1940s “American internationalism” also minimized democracy promotion and elevated institutional building, human rights and other aspects of the liberal agenda. Orientation offers perhaps the greatest potential for a fundamental break between Bush and Obama. Again, the latter explicitly attempted to draw down US commitments around the world and lean on diplomatic and other non-coercive tools to pursue national interests, including security. However, this was ultimately a shift in degree rather than kind: the Obama administration continued to use, and even expanded, certain targeted killing tactics, protected America’s leading military capacity, and, particularly toward “rogue states,” reserved the option of coercive power.

Conclusions

Coming out of a presidential campaign and setting out early precedents, when it explicitly sought to diverge from its predecessor, Obama’s grand strategy did not in fact fundamentally differ from Bush’s. To reach this conclusion, this paper has reviewed the Obama administration’s grand strategy through much of 2009, and it has applied a generalizable rubric (scope, substance, orientation) to assess and compare the two administrations as well as a more distant grand strategy: the one that US policy makers developed in the 1940s. Indeed, grand
strategy at all three points, under this rubric, appears fundamentally similar. This finding supports the dominant/tactical framework advanced above. In other words, observers should not be surprised that Obama and Bush, despite their political, rhetorical, personnel and other differences, advanced different versions of the same grand strategy. Many, expressing either chagrin or satisfaction, have argued that in fact Obama did carry over many policies from the Bush administration. These include, most dramatically, the Guantanamo detainees and the drone program. However, few argue that Obama’s grand strategic approach itself is fundamentally similar, but these findings point to that conclusion.

Thus, Obama’s grand strategy itself represents an extension of a long-standing “American internationalism.” Arguably, the Obama administration necessarily or inevitably landed on this approach because, in the push to distinguish itself from its understanding of Bush’s grand strategy, officials appealed to earlier precedents from “pragmatic” foreign policy presidents such as George H.W. Bush, Eisenhower and Truman. Structurally, though, this outcome was also likely because Obama and his team perceived relative geopolitical stability in the international system. Yes, they reasoned, the United States needed to draw down its expansive foreign policy commitments, but they did not believe that the world’s basic power arrangements were changing or that the dominant American internationalism had failed. Rather, they argued that Bush’s iteration of US grand strategy proved to be a failure and that a return to established principles was prudent. For Obama, this meant emphasizing multilateralism or accommodation, even with established adversaries and recasting US leadership as a keystone

---

47 As Mann (2012, 115) observed, “Virtually everyone in the Obama administration interviewed for this book acknowledged that, in many policy areas, there had been considerable change from Bush’s first term in office to his second, and that in fact the changes from the late Bush years to Obama’s tenure were not so dramatic.” Similarly, the first round of media assessments largely concluded that Obama was continuing most Bush policies. See, for example, Barone (2009) and Baker (2009B).
rather than the entire bridge—others should bear the weight of responsibility, as well. However, while this meant winding down the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, it also meant reserving the prerogative to maintain unmatched military power and apply that power in targeted ways to kill or coerce. To reiterate, though, none of this broke with Bush’s grand strategy. Rather, it simply shifted priorities.

This paper is part of a larger project, so future research will focus on later periods in Obama’s first term, such as the Arab Spring. The dominant/tactical framework as well as the scope-substance-orientation rubric offer promising applications outside the United States, so extensions to this work might include developing a more systematic literature on comparative grand strategies. At any given moment, or between any two national leaders, grand strategies may appear to be contested or changing, but in fact, stability remains most likely outcome.
Works Cited


Clinton, Hillary. “Interview with Greta Van Susteren of Fox News (As Aired).” Interview, Cairo, Egypt. 4 June 2009B.


Gates, Robert M. “Address to the International Institute for Strategic Studies.” Speech, Singapore. 30 May 2009B.


Obama, Barack. “A New Beginning.” Speech, Cairo, Egypt. 4 Jun 2009A.


Obama, Barack. “Remarks by President Obama.” Speech, Prague, Czech Republic, 5 Apr. 2009D.

Obama, Barack. “Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan.” Speech, West Point, NY. 1 Dec 2009D.

Obama, Barack. “Remarks by the President on a New Beginning.” Speech, Cairo, Egypt, 4 Jun. 2009E.


Solomon, Jay. ““Clinton Reasserts Her Role in Foreign Policy --- Her Profile Rises as ‘Engagement’ Tactic Comes Under Pressure.” *The Wall Street Journal*. 2 Nov 2009.


