U.S. GRAND STRATEGY AFTER WAR

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American Grand Strategy after Iraq

by Sarah Kreps

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Abstract: To the extent that a grand strategy can be discerned in the first year of the Obama Administration, its defining features are not a break from the past but continuity. As the President himself has analogized since taking office, crafting grand strategy is like parallel parking. He has only been able to make changes to grand strategy around the margins since a number of existing commitments limit his freedom of action. This article first identifies the structural determinants of grand strategy, pointing to the international distribution of power, American bureaucracy, and public as the key sources of strategic constraint and opportunity. It then shows how shifts in these factors—comparatively less U.S. power, an overstretched military organized around counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and an American public weary from an aggressive grand strategy—produced a shift in grand strategy that predated the 2008 election and that remains consistent with the current strategic setting. It is for these reasons that the 2008 “change” election has produced considerable continuity in American grand strategy.

The most striking feature of the 2008 “change” election was its emphasis on continuity. Despite being their parties’ “insurgent” candidates and vowing to be anything but President Bush, neither Senator John McCain nor Senator Barack Obama called for the wholesale reappraisal of U.S. defense and security policy, nor did either endorse a set of policies that collectively constituted a marked retrenchment from those of George W. Bush. Notwithstanding continued reliance on the rhetoric of change, as president, Obama has tacked closely with policies that Bush had endorsed or already enacted: a measured, extended withdrawal from Iraq, willingness to undertake unilateral airstrikes against al Qaeda in Pakistan, troop reinforcements in Afghanistan, and an assertive approach to suspected terrorists, including the use of renditions and indefinite detentions. These shifts, particularly the last, have begun to chagrin his change constituency, leading one early supporter to remark that “no matter how hard President Obama tries to turn the page on the previous administration, he can’t.”


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The Obama administration’s signs of continuity are puzzling not just because of the campaign rhetoric to the contrary, but because the major foreign policy initiative of the previous eight years—the Iraq War—was so roundly criticized that any connection to the past could presumably risk political suicide. Former Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott captured the prevailing view of the Iraq War in 2007 when he wrote that “Precisely because Iraq is a policy disaster, one consequence may well be a national abandonment of the attitudes that brought it about.”\(^2\) Historian Andrew Bacevich echoed that view forcefully, referring to Iraq as the “Iraq Syndrome”—drawing an obvious parallel with the Vietnam war—and suggesting that its cure “begin with this dictum: never again. This time we need to mean it.”\(^3\)

The main reason there is no observable evidence of a national abandonment of the past is that President Obama does not have a free hand in crafting new strategies. He did not enter office with a clean slate, but rather against the backdrop of a number of strategic commitments that bound his set of choices. That strategic setting constitutes a \textit{de facto} grand strategy and is the subject of this article. Although the range of limitations is far more extensive, for analytical parsimony they are organized under three main headings: the international distribution of power, the bureaucracy, and public opinion. These factors form a set of opportunities and constraints that largely define the strategic latitude of the incoming president. This article evaluates each in turn, specifically focusing on whether or how they have changed since the start of the Iraq War and whether there are residual, unresolved imbalances that could affect their capacity to support a lasting grand strategy. With these structural factors in mind, it becomes less surprising that President Obama cannot actually ‘press the reset button’ on strategy but rather is forced to act within the boundaries established during the second term of the Bush Administration.

\textbf{Continuity or Change?}

The conventional view of the Obama administration—hailing from both the Right and the Left—is that its grand strategy marks a sharp break from his predecessor. The \textit{New York Post}’s Ralph Peters chided President Obama’s willingness to negotiate with adversaries and admit America’s historical errors as acts of “terrifying . . . naivété.”\(^4\) The \textit{Washington Post}’s E.J. Dionne applauded Obama’s understanding that “the United States can’t achieve great objectives on its own,” a departure from the Bush administration’s willingness

to pursue its major international goals unilaterally.\(^5\) To the extent that an Obama Doctrine or grand strategy can be discerned this early on, it appears to diverge sharply from the Bush administration. In particular, its emphasis on multilateralism and diplomacy, and reluctance to use military force—unilaterally or otherwise—seem to be a far cry from the aggressive, unilateral and military-first model of the Bush administration.\(^6\)

Upon closer inspection, however, many of the differences look more cosmetic than real, more of a shift in tone than of substance. In one of the first signals of his intended shift, Obama entered office and immediately signed an Executive Order to close Guantanamo Bay and vowed to end the process of military tribunals for trying detainees within days of occupying the Oval Office. In the subsequent months, however, the Obama administration acknowledged that about 100 detainees were too dangerous to be either released or tried; it has revisited the idea of using the much-criticized military tribunals and preventive detentions; and Congress has denied requests for Guantanamo closure funds, citing the absence of an executive plan for handling the prisoners.\(^7\) President Obama’s plan for dealing with captured, suspected terrorists now looks uncannily like his predecessor’s, prompting editorials both in Europe and the United States to agree that it will “likely disappoint all those who expected him to embark on a radical change of course.”\(^8\) One writer went so far as to suggest that having implemented such similar approaches as his predecessor, Obama “owes George W. Bush an apology for saying that the last administration’s thinking was an affront to U.S. values . . . and owes his supporters an apology for misleading them.”\(^9\)

The treatment of suspected terrorists may seem like an esoteric legal matter, but it speaks to broader issues of strategy. It indicates how Obama sees the terrorist threat, and the means he is willing to use to confront it. Moreover, taken together with numerous other examples of continuity, a pattern starts to emerge. From continuing authorizations for covert action in Pakistan, to adopting the Bush strategy of withdrawal from Iraq, to more troops for Afghanistan, President Obama is pursuing a similar constellation of plans that his predecessor set in motion, even if the rhetoric is more accommodating.\(^10\) If a grand strategy can be


said to have emerged during the second term of the Bush administration, then Obama is largely pursuing its key elements, even as he rejects the rhetoric.

To be sure, rhetoric is consequential in international politics, and the Bush administration had a knack for needling even friendly states—former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s New versus Old Europe distinction comes to mind—to the point of alienation. By contrast, Obama’s Big Tent, diplomacy-first approach to international politics reassures states that if military force is employed, it is as a last resort. Yet even this emphasis on cooperative rhetoric and multilateral diplomacy represents continuity with the latter half of the Bush administration. In its dealings on North Korea, Iran, Darfur, and Myanmar, the Bush administration was “multilateral to a fault” in its second term. 11 Reputations die hard though, and the Bush administration developed its in the first term, when it brashly walked away from the Kyoto Treaty, International Criminal Court, and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. It is this reputation that the Obama administration and conventional wisdom have implicitly invoked when citing the disjunctures with its predecessor. The more apt comparison, however, is with Bush’s second term, and here there is little light between the more restrained, multilateral Bush administration and what has emerged so far in the Obama administration.

The President as Parallel Parker-in-Chief

That there is more continuity than change in American grand strategy is consistent with the structural impediments that stand in the way of change. As President Obama himself has acknowledged, the act of presidential decision-making is much like parallel parking. His job is to “carefully find his spot between existing commitments.” 12 If the street were open and the United States had no existing commitments, he could park anywhere. He could enter office and craft an entirely new grand strategy. Instead, however, he entered office trying to park between two wars, an economic recession, and a number of domestic “cars” that were already on the street. The ironic result, as Jack Goldsmith observed, is that “some of the Obama agreement with Bush policies reflects the fact that Obama inherited challenges that were created by decisions with which he would not have agreed.” 13

The new president used a parking analogy, but a card game is equally apt. A president does not come into office and deal himself a new hand. He begins with the grand strategy hand that his predecessor bequeathed him. The

11 Author’s exchange with former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Thomas Christensen, April 25, 2009.
12 John Dickerson, “In a Tight Spot: For Obama, Being President is like Parallel Parking,” Slate, May 14, 2009.
question is, what cards matter for the game of grand strategy? The answer warrants a brief discussion about the meaning and sources of grand strategy.

The standard definition of grand strategy involves matching national interests (ends) with the resources or power necessary to achieve those goals (means). It is about articulating the country’s national interests and priorities and formulating a strategy that furthers and protects those interests, all within the constraints of American power, usually military power. Grand strategy should not be mistaken with military strategy; it is not about fighting a particular battle or campaign, and is therefore broader than simply winning on the battlefield. Likewise, it should not be mistaken with foreign policy; it is not solely concerned with the relationships between states. These distinctions should not imply, however, that grand strategy does not reflect military and diplomatic realities. Insofar as wars and diplomacy affect resource distribution or availability—the means available to a state—events such as conquest or defeat can presumably lead to a shift in grand strategy.

Against this brief conceptual backdrop, it begins to make sense why one individual, even the single most powerful, may be unequipped to change a country’s grand strategy. American interests, threats, and capabilities do not change on Inauguration Day. Grand strategies are characterized by their longevity, often spanning many years, with little more than minor tweaks around the margins. For example, Charles Kupchan and Peter Trubowitz make the case that liberal internationalism—which they define as “power plus international cooperation”—endured throughout the Cold War. Despite spanning decades and presidents of both parties, the strategy had staying power because the distribution of power (bipolarity) changed little during this time. It endured because of a willingness to maintain large defense budgets and engage in proxy fights in far-flung places, while appreciating that U.S. power would be short-lived if it did not contain communism by cooperating with allies. Lastly, because communism appeared to be an existential threat, and containing it alone was costly, a forward-leaning yet cooperative grand strategy such as liberal internationalism elicited bipartisan public support in spite of raucous partisan differences on domestic policy.

This brief discussion of grand strategy, and the case of liberal internationalism, points to three levels that act as the source of opportunity

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and constraint for grand strategy: international, bureaucratic, and the public. The international distribution of power determines whether a state can pursue an expansive or restrained grand strategy. The organization of the bureaucracies that carry out grand strategy, particularly defense, determines how well they are equipped to pursue the state’s interests. The public represents a mobilization hurdle, since an enduring grand strategy is unsustainable without the public’s support. It is therefore around these three levels—international distribution of power, the American bureaucracy, and the American public—that this analysis is focused. Together they constitute the principal source of constraints limiting the ability of the Obama administration to turn the page on the Bush administration’s grand strategy.

**Strategy and the International Distribution of Power**

As political scientist Barry Posen recently reminded us, “Any grand strategy must address the global distribution of military power.” Whether a state can pursue a strategy of primacy, whether it should pursue a strategy of selective engagement, collective security, or neo-isolationism hinges in part on the power at its disposal. A strategy of primacy, for example, requires preponderant power; liberal internationalism and selective engagement are power-conserving strategies that may be better suited to a state whose power is on the wane; and collective security, which relies on international organizations for the provision of security, or neo-isolationism may be best for less powerful states that cannot independently balance power or threats or for a state whose domestic audience eschews international engagement.

In real terms, the Iraq War did little to change the international distribution of power. Military spending remains unrivaled. In 2006, U.S. defense spending ($531 billion) eclipsed the next country—the UK—by a factor of almost 10 ($59.7 billion). Measured in purchasing power parity (PPP) dollar terms, China’s expenditures reached $115 billion in 2006, but the gap is still enormous and has only grown as a result of spending on the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

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19 These figures are based on data from the World Bank’s World Development Indicators; they are calculated based on GDP (PPP) and military spending as a percentage of GDP. They are similar to data in the *SIPRI Yearbook 2008, Armaments, Disarmaments, and International Security* (Stockholm, Sweden: SIPRI, 2008), which quotes spending at $528.7 billion and $59.2 billion respectively.
If the measure is economic, the story is more mixed. The years of the Iraq War have coincided with galloping economic growth in China. By 2007, China’s economy was still just half the size of the U.S. economy, and its per capita income about one-tenth of the United States’, but its growth of 8–10 percent has far exceeded the U.S. rate of growth.\(^{20}\) As a result, the U.S. share of the world economy dropped from 23 percent of the world total in 2002 to 21.9 percent in 2006, and 20.8 percent in 2008. In contrast, China’s share of the world economy went from 8.1 percent to 10.2 percent and has almost doubled in the last decade (Table 1).\(^{21}\)

Based on these standard measures of power—military and economic—the United States remains dominant relative to its putative rival, China. Technical characterizations of power continue to suggest that the United States is the unipolar power, possessing overwhelmingly more power along every dimension than its nearest competitor.\(^{22}\) Despite the relative continuity in distribution of power, the perceptions of U.S. power appear to have changed notably. At the outset of the Iraq War, the overwhelming consensus among the commentariat was that the United States had a secure position atop the international hierarchy. “Power is America . . . there’s never been a superpower like it,” economist Niall Ferguson asserted in response to a Tolstoy question, “what is power?”\(^{23}\) Writing after the early success of the Iraq war and before the insurgency and civil war, Joseph Nye wrote that “if anyone

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\(^{20}\) Purchasing power parity data is preferable to nominal GDP because it incorporates cross-national variation in currency strength and the price of goods. The World Bank revised China’s GDP (PPP) when new data suggested that Chinese prices were about 42% of US levels rather than 26% under the previous calculations. Wayne M. Morrison and Michael F. Martin, “How Large is China’s Economy? Does it Matter?” CRS Report, February 13, 2008; World Bank, World Development Indicators 1992-2006.

\(^{21}\) From the International Monetary Fund World Economic Outlook Database, October 2008.


\(^{23}\) Niall Ferguson, “What is Power?” Hoover Digest, No. 2 (2003); a similar argument has been made by Parag Khanna, who argues that American dominance has been replaced by that of actors in Europe and Asia who more decisively impact outcomes in the international system. The Second World: How Emerging Powers are Redefining Global Competition in the Twenty-First Century (New York, NY: Random House, 2008).
doubted the overwhelming nature of U.S. military power, Iraq settled the issue.”

A distinctly declinist wave of assertions followed in Iraq’s wake. Fareed Zakaria suggested that a “post-America world” has emerged because of the “rise of the rest,” by which he especially meant China (and to a lesser degree India). Such declinism might seem puzzling given the relative stability of America’s place in the world, but a couple of factors—both real and perceived—have provided fodder for the declinist camp.

First, U.S. struggles in Iraq humbled Americans’ perceptions of their country’s power. The prevailing view going into Iraq was that the projection of American power could be a force for good. As upheaval rather than democracy took root in the Middle East following the U.S. invasion, it became clear that decisionmakers had “overestimated the capacity of the United States to determine the course of events overseas or the behavior of other states . . . [and] the extent to which events on the ground can be shaped by power exercised from outside.” The United States had an abundance of material power and advanced technology, neither of which offered much political or military utility against the asymmetric tactics employed by the Iraqi insurgency.

A second, related factor is that much of the U.S. comparative strength—its advanced military—has been tied up in Iraq and Afghanistan. In principle, the Army’s goal is to have a rotation ratio of 2.0, which means that combat brigades have two years at home for every year deployed. That ratio reached a low of less than 0.75 in 2004 when every active duty Army unit had deployed to Iraq or replaced a unit that had deployed. The ratio recovered to about 1.5 in 2005 and then declined again during the 2007 and 2008 surge. In his confirmation hearings for Chairman of the Joint Chiefs in the summer of 2007, Admiral Mike Mullen predicted that it would take three to four years before the military could reach that ratio and one to two years even for a 1:1 ratio of 15 months at home and 15 months in theater. The practical implication of those ratios is that Army readiness is considerably lower as a result of activities in Iraq and Afghanistan, with only about five brigades able to respond to other contingencies compared to about 25 if forces were withdrawn from Iraq.

A third factor that has contributed to the perception of waning American power was the growing sense of “overstretch.” Paul Kennedy famously cautioned that a state spending more than 10 percent of GDP on

defense is vulnerable to such overstretch.\textsuperscript{29} According to this measure, U.S. spending is still modest; at 4 percent of GDP, the United States now spends less as a fraction of its overall economy than at any time during the Cold War, when U.S. spending ranged from about 5 percent to 11.7 percent.\textsuperscript{30} The newest incarnation of the overstretch argument was a modification on the original theme: rather than military profligacy affecting economic security, the new concern was that domestic economic profligacy would hinder military security.

Niall Ferguson summarizes his version of the argument as follows: “the decline and fall of America’s undeclared empire will be due not to terrorists at our gates . . . but to a fiscal crisis of the welfare state.”\textsuperscript{31} Andrew Bacevich includes the burden of ongoing wars with domestic fiscal recklessness but draws a similar conclusion about debt and dependency as a source of American vulnerability.\textsuperscript{32} Both observations predated the Wall Street meltdown, but lacked broader resonance until the 2008 fiscal crisis made manifest the grave consequences of a “financial structure so fragile, so overextended, so opaque.”\textsuperscript{33} That sense of gloom surrounding the crisis was accompanied by a fresh wave of declinist commentary—some coming from elated U.S. foes in the Middle East\textsuperscript{34}—and some sense that perhaps the international balance of power had shifted.\textsuperscript{35}

Although the economic outlook is still murky, such schadenfreude may be premature. Many of the economic troubles certainly had their origins in the United States, but quickly produced a number of knock-on effects with potentially destabilizing consequences for other actors: plunging oil prices, which had a devastating impact on oil-reliant economies such as Russia, Iran, and Venezuela; and plummeting consumer demand, which is damaging to export-reliant economies such as China and trade partners in Europe. China’s year-on-year exports dropped 22.6 percent in April 2009, causing some economists to wonder if the official targets of 8 percent—still a decline from double-digit growth—are themselves overstated.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{29} Paul Kennedy, \textit{Rise and Fall of Great Powers} (Vintage Books, 1989).
Compared to close allies, the relative economic picture looks even more favorable—or at least less unfavorable—for the United States. Whereas the United States quickly used its economic levers to stimulate the economy and fix the banking system, countries in Europe, for example, have been more reticent to enact large fiscal stimulus packages. One reason is the European Union’s concern with public debt, another is that robust unemployment benefits reduce the adverse effects of unemployment and makes stimulus program less urgent. Thus, in terms of relative economic decline, the United States has fared less poorly than other states. While it has experienced an annualized loss of 6.1 percent, Germany’s first quarter (2009) economic decline reached an annualized 14.4 percent, Japan sank 15.2 percent, and Mexico 21.5 percent. The extended outlook, according to the International Monetary Fund, is that the United States would stabilize by 2010 while other states such as the euro-zone economies would continue to shrink.

Strategy and the Bureaucracy

Beyond the strategic limitations imposed by the international distribution of power lie the bureaucratic constraints. Bureaucracies are the structures that actually implement grand strategy, so the solvency and tensions within these bureaucracies helps constrain the nature of goals that are attainable. States can have a preponderance of resources, but the balance of resources, leadership structures, and organizational cultures within its bureaucracies can hinder the implementation of even a modest set of goals.

The foundations of the most prominent debate related to grand strategy—how the military should be organized and around what priorities—actually predated the Iraq War. Secretary Rumsfeld took the helm with an eye toward “transformation.” The German blitzkrieg served as his historical analogy for how the American military should be capable of operating, and what he saw as the lumbering American army was his foil. Whereas the military of the Cold War was rightly structured along the Fulda Gap scenario, with purported rapidly reinforceable military formations in place to counter a possible assault by Warsaw Pact forces, the modern military needed to be quick and agile—hence the blitzkrieg analogy—and adaptive, prepared to respond to new, previously unanticipated threats: the “known unknowns”

and the “unknown unknowns” in Rumsfeldian language. Implicit in this transformation message was that the Army, as structured in 2001, was an anachronism and needed to change.

Rumsfeld drew the battle lines early through his support for some programs and the elimination of others. Army programs such as the Crusader, a mobile artillery system, and the Comanche helicopter were relegated to the dustbin while stealth, unmanned aircraft, and precision munitions were rewarded. His approach to war—preferring what eventually came to be called the “Afghan Model” of small numbers of light, agile forces using twenty-first century technology over large numbers of heavy, armored ground forces—also seemed to signal that the Army was ill-suited to contemporary security environment. The implicit criticism was not lost on the Army, and chafed its leadership.

What started as a civil-military debate over transformation mutated into a universal debate over the course of the Iraq war. Should the military be organized to fight counterinsurgencies, a principle around which it has been reorganizing over the last several years, or around large-scale conventional war, which is the principle around which it has been organized since the Vietnam War? Unlike the aftermath of Vietnam, in which the military intentionally discarded the counterinsurgency principles in a fit of “willful amnesia,” the post-Iraq military debate seems poised to make what may be the opposite mistake: preparing to fight the last counterinsurgency (COIN) when the next war may be a conventional conflict for which the re-oriented military may find itself unprepared to fight.

Debates about the likely nature of future wars divide into three main camps, informed in part by their views of why fortunes in Iraq changed around 2007. At this point in the Iraq and Afghan wars, the military continues to hold this philosophical debate about the source of outcomes in the last war and the likely nature of war in the future. For those who believe that a shift to counterinsurgency operations in Iraq was the source of decreased violence and that the source of future threats is political unrest within a country, then continuing to organize around counterinsurgency is the wise strategy. The

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40 Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Feb. 12, 2002 Department of Defense news briefing.
43 For a representative Army response to transformation, see LtCol HR McMaster’s Crack in the Foundation: Defense Transformation and the Underlying Assumption of Dominant Knowledge in Future War (Carlisle, PA: Army War College’s Center for Strategic Leadership), November 2003. In terms of how this debate played out in the approach to Iraq, see James Fallows, Blind into Baghdad: America’s War in Iraq (Vintage Books, 2006), p. 75.
observable implication is a military that views the use of deadly forces only part of a soldier’s duties, competing for training time and priority with providing essential civilian services and promoting political and economic development in a foreign state.45

For those who believe other factors contributed to lower violence (e.g., the Sunni Awakening) and that past wars (Iraq) are not necessarily prologue, then the current orientation around counterinsurgency is actually counterproductive, as it has eroded the core capabilities of fighting a large-scale land battle. The prescriptions flowing from this argument are not that the military purge the word “counterinsurgency” from its lexicon and training, but to re-balance the military towards prioritizing conventional warfare requirements.46

There is yet a third camp that sympathizes with the COIN community but is less sanguine about whether the military is equipped to win Afghanistan or Iraq-like wars.47 On the contrary, this camp points to those experiences as evidence that economic and social development is more likely to prevail in these settings than military power. The prescriptions that follow reach out to the traditionalist camp. Since U.S. military power is unlikely to be effective in a COIN setting, the United States should instead invest in conventional warfare.48

The appropriate strategy—continued focus on counterinsurgency or re-balancing towards conventional warfare—continues to be debated within the military and indeed among the members on Capitol Hill who fund the military. An outcome that is less palatable in a constrained budget environment is one that entertains the idea of investing in both the counterinsurgency mission of today and advanced technology systems that might be used in future conventional conflicts.49 In that case, the likely outcome is institutional inertia, favoring the current orientation around counterinsurgency until the emergence of a new threat adjudicates whether that was the appropriate strategy or whether instead the military improperly learned the lessons from Iraq.

Defense budgets for 2010, however, hint at a continuation of the status quo, both in terms of nature and magnitude of defense spending. Where initial reports suggested cuts, the reality shows that the $534 billion defense budget is a 4 percent increase over President Bush’s 2009 budget. What differs

somewhat is the emphasis away from conventional capabilities such as the F-22 that might be useful for future conflicts and towards unmanned aerial vehicles and other programs that proved to be useful in today’s conflicts.\footnote{Robert M. Gates, “A Balanced Strategy: Reprogramming the Pentagon for a New Age,” \textit{Foreign Affairs}, January/February 2009. Though he calls it a “balanced strategy,” this article presages the shift in budget priorities away from tomorrow’s conventional conflicts and towards today’s insurgency battles.} As Secretary Gates summarized the pattern, programs that “do not adequately reflect the lessons of counterinsurgency and close quarters combat in Iraq and Afghanistan,” were penalized in the budget and in his vision for the future.\footnote{August Cold and Yochi J. Dreazen, “Pentagon Pushes Weapon Cuts,” \textit{Wall Street Journal}, April 7, 2009; Thom Shanker, “Gates’s Plan to Shift Military Spending Faces Skepticism,” \textit{New York Times}, May 10, 2009.} The verdict sides with the COIN community and largely sidesteps cautionary notes about the risks of investing too heavily in the current war, what critics refer to as “this-war-itis.”\footnote{Horowitz and Shalmon, “The Future of War,” p. 301.}

In short, while there are ongoing debates about how to allocate defense resources in the pursuit of national interests, the conclusion—backed by a costly signal of defense budgets—supports the status quo. Neither overly expansive, nor an act of retrenchment, the immediate future looks more to draw on the past rather than break with it. To the extent that analysis of grand strategy benefits from a “follow the money” approach, it would seem that the Obama administration’s Defense Department is going to largely retain the vision of the departing Bush administration, helped in part by Obama’s decision to retain Secretary Gates as the head of the Defense bureaucracy.

**Grand Strategy and the American Public**

The third pillar of the strategic setting is the public itself, since the sustainability of strategy is contingent on whether elites have—or can mobilize and sustain—domestic support. Polls that query the public’s view towards specific attitudes related to the Iraq War are suggestive of a more cautious public than the one that initially supported the war. In particular, the public became increasingly dissatisfied with several attributes of the ambitious grand strategy that has come to be associated with the invasion of Iraq: dominant overseas military presence as the primary vehicle for security, a willingness to use military power in preventive wars, a reluctance to rely on allies and international institutions, and an indifference to America’s image abroad. Before-and-after polls give a sense of how the Iraq experience shifted public views on questions of grand strategy.

In general terms, the U.S. public clearly became dissatisfied with the status quo after events soured in Iraq. In November 2002, only 26 percent of
Americans thought the government was mismanaging U.S. foreign policy; in that same month, only 25 percent disagreed with the management of terrorism-related issues. Just four years later, dissatisfaction with Bush’s handling of the Iraq War reversed that result. Only 26 percent supported the current approach to the way current leaders were handling American interests abroad and 71 percent were seeking leaders who would pursue a new strategy.  

Just as stark as the shifts toward dissatisfaction were the sources of that shift. American support for multilateralism, high in 2003, increased after the Iraq War. In 2003, 78 percent of Americans indicated their preference for working with allies and international organizations rather than using force alone. In an April 2007 survey, 84 percent of Americans said it was important to initiate force only with the support of allies.  

Most Americans also became wary of the costs and consequences of a dominant military presence overseas. Whereas in 2002, 49 percent of Americans believed that increased military presence was desirable as a way to increase security, compared to 29 percent who thought less presence was better, by 2006 those numbers had virtually inverted. Forty-five percent of Americans indicated that decreasing overseas military presence would make them safer compared to 26 percent who argued the opposite. In 2002, 62 percent of respondents agreed that the best way to ensure peace was through military strength, but by 2007, just 49 percent agreed with that statement, the lowest value since Pew Research Center collected that data.  

Adding further support to the observation that the public had come to see an overcommitted military as a drag on America’s power and standing, 65 percent of Americans said that the Bush administration was “too quick to get military forces involved” overseas and 67 percent indicated that the United States should “put more emphasis on diplomatic and economic” tools. Sixty-eight percent of the American public was concerned with the U.S. position in the world. Seventy-eight percent believed that American behavior had decreased international goodwill; the consequence, according to 60 percent of Americans, was an increased likelihood of a terrorist attack.  

Security improvements in Iraq have done little to revive Americans’ enthusiasm for taking bold, unilateral action on security issues abroad, but have simply made the issue of Iraq less salient. Instead, the economic uncertainty in the United States has elevated domestic issues to the top

57 “Seven in Ten Americans Favor Congressional Candidates Who Will Pursue a Major Change in Foreign Policy,” World Public Opinion, 19 October 2006.
priorities. In November 2007, Americans cited the war in Iraq as the top priority for candidates in the 2008 presidential election. A year later, Iraq ranked third after the nation’s economy and health care. By February 2009, Iraq ranked as the seventh most important issue to Americans in poll, behind the economy, terrorism, education, health care, social security, and taxes.58

These opinions add up to a public dissatisfied with the Bush Doctrine, a “species of primacy”59 that viewed the best defense as a good offense, and allies as helpful but not necessary. Americans now look askance at military force as the primary means by which its government provides security; they are concerned with the blowback and costs that come with acting alone; they are more inward-looking, wanting to solve problems at home rather than expending resources abroad. The composite picture of public support looks far more like selective engagement than primacy: it reflects a more restrictive view of U.S. interests, support for a more discriminate use of force, and recognition that scarce resources make multilateralism more attractive. It was this shift in public opinion, and the hard facts underneath that shift, that forced a change in Bush’s grand strategy. Other than espousing rhetorical agreement with these new public attitudes, the Obama administration has done no more than the second term of the Bush administration to change U.S. grand strategy to reflect the new reality.

Grand Strategy after Iraq

Discussing grand strategy during an *ongoing* war is almost a fool’s errand. Iraq has always been a moving target, with 2006 producing “never again” mantras and the relative security of early 2009 relegating Iraq to a lower priority interest. Iraq could again slip into civil war and reignite debates about how to pursue U.S. interests. Recognizing these analytical limitations, this article has focused less on specific events in Iraq but more generally at how the Iraq experience changed or coincided with shifts in American power, its bureaucratic instruments, and its public attitudes. Taken together, these levels constitute the “means” available for the pursuit of a state’s interest (its “ends”) and shape the menu of grand strategic options available to a state.

An analysis along these levels goes some way to explaining why the “change election” has ushered in more of the same. That the Iraq War challenged the well-equipped American military suggested that the U.S. comparative advantage in military spending might not be all that helpful in achieving American interests. The concomitant “rise of the rest,” specifically

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58 For polls on problems and priorities, see the Polling Report, at http://www.pollingreport.com/prioriti2.htm.
China, showed that the United States might soon have peer competitors. Economic uncertainty provided yet an additional reminder of American vulnerability and the increasing scarcity of resources.

Meanwhile, the part of the American bureaucracy most explicitly oriented towards grand strategy, the military, has been mired in debates about light versus heavy and conventional versus COIN. Arguments based on the current needs in Iraq and Afghanistan seem temporarily to have won the day, which has also made any sharp turns in U.S. military posture abroad less tenable. For its part, the experiences in Iraq combined with events at home have made the American public less zealous about an assertive grand strategy. It is collectively wary of an assertive international presence and weary of the cost of policing the international system alone.

Because of the timing and severity of these developments, it is not surprising that the course correction to U.S. grand strategy predated the 2008 election. The strategy that took the United States into Iraq was one of primacy, in which “only the preponderance of U.S. power ensures peace” and international institutions alone were insufficient in advancing U.S. interests. But as the Iraq experience showed, preventive war is costly and working outside multilateral institutions too inefficient. Out of necessity rather than ideology, then, the United States changed course during the Bush administration’s second term. It reached out to allies and relied on diplomacy in trying to resolve the Iran nuclear issue, engaged in multilateral talks with North Korea, established a more cooperative rapport with China, relaxed its antithetical position to the International Criminal Court, dropped any talk about offensive use of force, and shifted its emphasis in the prosecution of the war on terror, including changing its treatment of detainees and announcing its intent to close the facility at Guantanamo.

As a codification of that shift, the 2006 National Security Strategy, revised from the far more grandiose 2002 NSS, more clearly emphasized friends and allies, elevated diplomacy, backed away from the need for “unparalleled military strength,” and downplayed preventive or preemptive force. With these shifts, the new strategy, according to one observer, was a proclamation that “the Bush Revolution is officially over. We’re seeing a return to a foreign policy that is much more akin to the foreign policies pursued by the administration’s predecessors than by this administration in its first term . . . In some notable ways, the new strategy document represents a return to the

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foreign policy of Bill Clinton.” This strategy combined an appreciation for balance of power realism and discriminate intervention with the focus on multilateral institutions of liberal internationalism. That shift not only brought the Bush Administration grand strategy more in line with that of his predecessor, but also more in line with the underlying and more enduring principles reflected in American power, the bureaucracy, and public attitudes.

That strategy is consistent with the current setting for several reasons. First, its emphasis on multilateral institutions offers a way to share the burden of international commitments and addresses real and perceived declines in U.S. power. Second, it does not seek to challenge rising peer state competitors, which would require conventional rather than the counterinsurgency capabilities that the military has honed in recent years. Third, it calls for a less assertive international presence, implicitly attends to concerns about the U.S. image abroad, and privileges diplomacy over force without withdrawing international military presence altogether.

As this analysis shows, it would be neither desirable nor necessarily possible for the Obama administration to start anew on American grand strategy. Course corrections were already made to accommodate a less favorable distribution of power, a strained military geared towards counterinsurgency, and a public disapproving of an ambitious grand strategy. Several years later, having implemented a more sustainable grand strategy, there is little strategic impetus for change. There is no need to reach for the reset button on American grand strategy.

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