An Obama Grand Strategy? What Does It Mean for U.S.-China Relations?

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As the tectonics of the international order shift at a pace as fast, or faster, than the polar ice is melting, there has been a reinvigorated call in American policy circles for a new American grand strategy — a new strategic road map to guide the United States as it pursues its interests in a world in transition. While these calls are catalyzed importantly by immediate changes in U.S. engagement in the Middle East and Afghanistan, they also respond to the recalibration of the world's economic and military balance toward Asia with a rising China at its core. There have been high expectations that during his presidency President Obama will be the source of a new grand strategic vision to marshal American influence and capabilities in shaping the direction and outcome of the international changes underway, including the rise of new power centers. This essay addresses the question of whether such grand strategic vision has emerged or is emerging and what shape it is taking; how the U.S. Administration's "pivot to Asia" relates to it; and what it means for U.S. policy toward China and the U.S.-China relationship in this context.

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The Search for an Obama Doctrine

The search for an "Obama grand strategy" began almost as soon as the dynamic young Democratic contender for president arrived on the 2008 campaign stage. Then, a war-weary electorate appeared receptive to a foreign policy vision by a new national leader that would move the country from the Bush presidency's "imperial America" of exuberant external interference, to recall George Liska's reflections on America during an earlier era,[1] toward more restrained engagement with the outside world.

In this context, the issue of America's international role — linked during the presidential campaign principally to the issue of United States' commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan — had emerged as a key campaign issue, not only between the Democratic and Republican sides, but among candidates for the Democratic nomination. Candidate Obama's essay "Renewing American Leadership," published in the July/August edition of *Foreign Affairs* was widely perceived as an early articulation of a possible "Obama Doctrine" that could be expected to shape his presidency's approach to world affairs. In the essay, Obama condemned the Bush Administration's decision to wage war in Iraq as the outcome of a "tragically misguided" view of international affairs. He argued instead for an alternative vision for American policy whereby the U.S. would provide "global leadership grounded in the understanding that the world shares a common security and a common humanity."[2]

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Opinion on what the candidate's essay suggested about the prospective president's vision for the United States' international role varied widely. Some commentators declared it clear evidence that an Obama-led America would be a country less assertive of its global leadership. However, others interpreted it differently as a declaration of foreign policy activism consistent with Obama's public positions on other foreign policy issues. Many recalled that

in speaking out in opposition to the Iraq War in the Senate, Obama had done so using language that was far from anti-interventionist. Rather, the candidate had explained his position as being "opposed to [...] A dumb war. A rash war. A war based not on reason but on passion, not on principle but on politics."[3] An "Obama Doctrine," Obama's champions declared, would move the U.S. from unilateralism and the raw pursuit of primacy toward an approach to advancing American interests through "enlightened global leadership" in the best tradition of liberal internationalism.[4] The President's decision to rescue Captain Richard Phillips from Somali pirates soon after taking office in the spring of 2009 inspired further declarations that an Obama Doctrine had been born. Writing in *The Washington Post*, columnist E.J. Dionne labeled it "a form of realism," one "unafraid to deploy American power but mindful that its use must be tempered by practical limits and a dose of self-awareness."[5]

Even before the first year of the Obama Administration had come to a close, however, observers were asking questions about whether the "Obama Doctrine" that was emerging was less a grand vision than a narrow set of precepts on the use of force to guide the prosecution of the wars and anti-terror policies that the President had inherited. In accepting the Nobel Prize for peace, Obama had laid out precepts on the use of force, including that force can be used in self-defense; against an aggressor; on humanitarian grounds; and it must be conducted according to certain rules of conduct.[6] His "National Security Strategy," issued in May 2010, appeared to explicitly challenge the Bush Doctrine of preemption, stating that "While the use of force is sometimes necessary, we will exhaust other options before war whenever we can...When force is necessary, we will ... [use it]... in a way that reflects our values and strengthens our legitimacy, and we will seek broad international support...." However, the document also stated that while the United States would "seek to adhere to standards that govern the use of force," it would "reserve the right to act unilaterally if necessary to defend our nation and our interests...."[7] This was doctrine but, as one frequent critic later observed, it was doctrine without the strategic vision and policy content necessary for grand strategy.[8]

As China's economy continued to boom while the U.S. reeled under the effects of the global financial crisis, there was rising pressure on the U.S. Administration to articulate a vision addressing the U.S. role in a world experiencing an accelerating power shift, one driven by a rising China. As a candidate, Obama had identified China as a "competitor" — "neither enemy nor friend." Members of Obama's first-term Asia policy team, including national security adviser, Jeffrey Bader, sought to begin the Obama presidency with an approach to the U.S.-China relationship that stressed cooperation over rivalry. The Administration appeared intent on emphasizing areas of mutual concern and interest between the two countries, while also seeking to encourage China to channel its growing international influence in directions supportive of international norms.[9] In a speech on U.S.-China relations opening the 2009 Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED) between the two countries, for example, the President moved far from the labels he'd applied to China as a candidate, choosing to describe the U.S.-China relationship as a "partnership" between the two countries that together would "shape the 21st century," adding that "[c]ommon sense calls upon us to act in concert."[10] This framed the U.S.-China relationship in a way consistent with the emphasis that the President had placed as a candidate on promoting "common security" and "common prosperity" as guiding principles not only for international stability but for American interests.[11] Many of the President's loudest critics linked this cooperative approach to China to disappointing outcomes such as the Copenhagen Summit on climate change, suggesting that Beijing was reading the Administration's effort at cooperation as weakness.[12]

"The Pivot:" Grand Strategy or Political Strategy?

As the presidential race got underway half way through Obama's first term, the Administration fielded a set of foreign policies that directly addressed these criticisms and challenged the narrative of the U.S. as a country in decline against a rising China. Gauged against John Gaddis' definition of grand strategy as an approach to world affairs expressing a "calculated relationship of means to large

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ends," the set of policies known initially as the "pivot toward Asia" — subsequently and unsuccessfully rebranded as "the rebalance" — certainly had elements of an emerging grand strategy. The pivot included a geostrategic dimension: that of giving renewed and systematic focus to the Asia Pacific, the world's most economically dynamic and heavily militarized region. Its goal of preserving American primacy in the region through the reinforcement and expansion of both economic interconnections and diplomatic and security ties also appeared to link ends to means. This included a promise by the President to defend U.S. defense commitments in the region from cuts in military spending, and an agreement to rotate marines through Darwin for the first time, as well as participation by high-level U.S. representatives in the gamut of regional fora, including new membership in the East Asia Summit. Also among the initiatives associated with the pivot was the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a broad regional free trade agreement.

What became less clear as the Administration linked these initiatives toward the region to "the pivot" was the extent to which it reflected a *calculated* approach to large ends. Some of what was rolled out as strategy could be traced to policy statements and actions taken ahead of the pivot's rollout by then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in her November 2011 article in *Foreign Policy*. These included the decision to reverse the Bush policy of decreasing American troops in South Korea, naval cooperation with Vietnam and Cambodia, or Secretary Clinton's declaration on territorial disputes in the South China Sea in July 2010. This opened the pivot to criticism that it was foremost an *ex post facto* effort at manufacturing coherence out of what was principally a set of American reactions to developments and initiatives within and by the region itself.

Other concerns raised by observers included the extent to which American capabilities could match the commitments it implied, or even, some asked, if these commitments were necessary.[13] A

commentary in *Forbes* reflected that, for example, "the policy of 'reassuring' our allies forces the United States to carry a disproportionate share of the growing burden of containing China…. Although … no one has specified how precisely even a very militarily powerful China would directly threaten U.S. national security."[14] Heritage Foundation experts labeled the pivot a "strategy of hope" in the face of plans to reduce military spending: "It is unrealistic to think that the United States can sustain a half a trillion dollar cut in defense spending, let alone the trillion dollar cut currently pending congressional action, and still maintain its current level of commitment, much less augment it…."[15] A Congressional Research Service report also pointed to the issue of credibility as an important area of concern, observing that the Administration's budget request for the 2013 fiscal year included a recommendation of a five-percent reduction for bilateral assistance programs for East Asia and Pacific — a more modest decrease than cuts to other regions, but nonetheless an "ambiguous [signal]" to partners in the region.[16]

The pivot's neat domestic political logic ahead of the presidential election also prompted speculation that it had been embraced principally for its domestic political advantages rather than because it served international strategic aims. It offered a new focus for defense outlays, mitigating the potential impact of reductions in defense spending amid the anticipated wind-down of American wars of the previous decade and the budgetary constraints associated with sequestration. This, as the president for national security at the Aerospace Industries Association (AIA), a trade association representing the nation's major aerospace and defense manufacturers, commented, offers "growing opportunities for our industry to help equip our friends."[17] In addition, as Kenneth Lieberthal observed, the refocus toward Asia also enabled the President to give greater attention to a democracy and human rights agenda in his foreign policy in the wake of the Arab Spring,[18] such as pursuing closer ties to India and normalizing relations with Myanmar to support the liberalizing political changes underway there. As the U.S. economy continued to struggle toward recovery it was also an opportunity to focus the public's attention on the more positive economic story of opportunities for

Americans to trade and invest in a part of the world where the best global economic news was being made. At a time when negative campaign rhetoric on trade and investment with China was heating up, the pivot's push for the TPP offered an opportunity for the Administration to showcase its initiatives, and successes — among them, the new FTA with South Korea (once opposed by Obama), toward diversifying economic ties across the economically dynamic region beyond the China market.

However, how the U.S.-China relationship fit into the pivot underlay much of the debate over its significance as a possible centerpiece of an emerging American grand strategy. While the Administration officials sought to reassure Chinese officials that the pivot was not aimed at China, it proved difficult to change perceptions that it marked anything other than a (re) assessment by the U.S. of the impact of China's growing power as fundamentally antagonistic to American interests and a shift from cooperation to competition or rivalry. Reinforcing the view that the Administration was intent on adopting a harder line toward Beijing — a view widely held by observers of the bilateral relationship in China — was the clear shift in tone on China by the President and senior officials beginning in 2010. Secretary Clinton's statement in July 2010 at the ASEAN Regional Forum in Hanoi on territorial disputes in the South China Sea referred to above was a notable example,[19] as were President Obama's comments on North Korea and American security in his talks with President Hu Jintao in Seoul later that year.[20] Promises of sustained and strengthened defense cooperation not only with longtime allies but with new partners in the region, including some sharing both long borders and histories of tension with China, coupled with what Secretary Clinton had described as "forward deployed diplomacy"[21] toward many of China's neighbors, only reinforced concerns in Beijing that Washington sought not only to balance but to check, or even to deliberately damage, China's rising influence.

For some American observers who viewed the pivot in grand strategic context, this suggested a grand philosophical reset by the President, perhaps consistent with a foreign policy over which Secretary Clinton exerted greater leadership. A doctrine defined

by a view in which collaborative engagement was both a strategic approach as well as a goal appeared to have pivoted toward the proposition that states work toward common goals in response to a perception of shared threats; mutual challenges and opportunities alone are rarely sufficient incentives for cooperation. Applied to Iran, where Obama's early offer to "extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist[,]" failed for various reasons to open the door to improved bilateral ties, the shift away from efforts at diplomacy toward coercion was enabled by the estrangement of the two countries and the relatively low economic costs (to the United States) of hard line tactics.

In contrast, however, costs — immediate costs as well as opportunity costs — for the U.S. and its allies associated with any type of coercive action toward China would be high. Given the degree of economic interdependence between the U.S. and China, American economic well-being depends heavily on China's sustained economic success, even as China also benefits from its economic ties to the U.S. In addition, nearly all Asian economies are also closely linked in various ways to China. Furthermore, no matter how frustrated the United States may be with the current pace at which China is willing to commit to cooperating on some of the United States' priorities, particularly those that fall into the global commons area, from climate change to maritime security to space as well as other areas, such as "global zero" and cybersecurity, China's importance in these areas is such that the U.S. cannot achieve its objectives without significant cooperation from China. However, policy that seeks simultaneously to develop partnerships with China to serve mutual interests, such as protecting global public goods, while also trying to enhance the relative capacity of the U.S. to thwart a potential military challenge from China is tremendously challenging, with goals for cooperation under these circumstances only very hard won. It is not surprising, for example, that China has reacted with suspicion to U.S. efforts to find ways to engage China in securing the global maritime commons,[22] with some Chinese academic analyses assessing such overtures as no more than a U.S. ploy to secure American hegemony.[23]

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Questions about how his Administration might manage the challenges and contradictions inherent in the pivot have pervaded the President's second term. The impact of the pivot on U.S.-China strategic trust and its effects on strategic competition between the two sides have been among the questions on the table as America's national security elite has debated America's global leadership role. This debate has been taking place against a backdrop of continuing economic and budgetary limitations for Washington and acute domestic partisanship — a backdrop which has made the U.S. ability to sustain its global leadership appear vulnerable as never before.

Stephen Walt has characterized the debate as principally a disagreement between those who argue for "deep engagement," such as John Ikenberry, and those who advocate selective American engagement, as does Walt himself, as the best way to secure American interests.[24] In an essay explaining why the U.S. can and should pursue (sustain) a grand strategy of "deep engagement," Ikenberry, with Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, identify three main benefits to the United States in doing so. First, they argue that American security commitments both "act as a check against potential rivals" and also help to lower competition within important regions of the world. Secondly, they argue, it enables the U.S. to "maintain an open world economy" and, citing the U.S. free trade agreement with South Korea and anticipating Japanese buy-in in the TPP, they contend that it contributes significantly to U.S. leverage in economic negotiations. Thirdly, and finally, they assert that deep engagement makes it easier for the United States to get cooperation from other countries for combating many global threats, and shape this cooperation in ways that disproportionately serve American interests.[25]

This latter point takes particular aim at the arguments of advocates, like Walt and Barry Posen, of a less forward strategy — what

Ikenberry et al. eschew as "retrenchment" but, as noted, what Walt and others describe as "engagement" or a "restrained grand strategy" — a more limited form of international engagement than "deep engagement." In declaiming against the perpetuation of a "hegemonic quest" by the U.S., Posen, for example, argues for a "calculated and discriminating" approach to addressing key challenges. This includes distributing the burden for security provision more widely among allies and partners, cooperating to assure regional access in crises, but making it clear to American partners that they should "fortify their own militaries and develop the political and diplomatic machinery to look after their own affairs." Posen contends that what the U.S. currently has are "friends without benefits" — partners that free ride on American largesse, with the U.S. underwriting "welfare for the rich" in the security arena.[26]

The pivot has drawn a lot of attention from those leading this debate. On the "restrained grand strategy" side, many of the alliances and associated bases that Posen criticizes as too costly for the U.S. are in the region. At the same time, prominent among Posen's strategic priorities for the U.S. is the goal of "preventing a powerful rival from upending the global balance of power," a goal that — in the absence of another candidate — appears to refer to China. Advocates of the "deep engagement" side of the debate argue for a strengthened security commitment to Asia, arguing that any perceived retrenchment by the U.S. offers an opening for a "destabilizing reaction from China." They argue that deep engagement is necessary to mitigate increases in military budgets in the region, including by China; anything less adds up to a narrowing of the U.S. lead in military capabilities.[27] For Posen, American interests are better served by reducing Chinese perceptions of a U.S. threat; cooperation with China around issues that are immediate threats to U.S. interests should be the priority in U.S. policy. Posen argues that current U.S. behavior, which he characterizes as reflecting a "profound sense of insecurity," only engenders insecurity on the part of China and the region; the U.S. should adopt a forward strategy selectively only in the face of a credible threat.[28] Against this, his detractors assert that "deep engagement" offers a vital hedge against emerging hegemons,

a status for which, they contend, China is "already a potential contender." Proponents of "deep engagement" go on to argue, therefore, that the "implication is that the United States should get out of Afghanistan and Iraq, reduce its military presence in Europe, and pivot to Asia… exactly what the Obama administration is doing."[29]

Obama, "Restrained Grand Strategy," and China

Is the pivot a "deep engagement" approach and is it being sustained in the second Obama Administration? There has been a significant change in foreign and security policy leadership — has this brought with it a change in strategic direction?

The Obama Administration's new foreign policy team appears biased toward a "restrained grand strategy," rather than toward "deep engagement."

Although the Obama Administration has promised a commitment to the pivot policy, its new foreign policy team appears biased toward a "restrained grand strategy," rather than toward "deep engagement." One commentator has described the new team as a "team of mentors."[30] In addition to Vice President Biden, who has enthusiastically assumed a substantial share of the Administration's foreign policy portfolio, it includes a new Secretary of State with experience as Chairman of the Senate's Committee on Foreign Relations, John Kerry, and a Secretary of Defense in Chuck Hagel, also a former U.S. senator, with experience serving on both the Committee on Foreign Relations and Select Committee on Intelligence. (In Susan Rice, who, several months into the second term, replaced Tom Donilon as National Security Adviser, President Obama has a counselor whose profound personal loyalty has been tested and affirmed, with some experts seeing her role in the Administration as less a formulator of policy than an "honest broker" of policy advice.[31])

Kerry, and Hagel, like Biden, are nearly a generation older than the President; they share records that largely indicate a commitment

to restraint in the use of force, a position that, in the cases of Kerry and Hagel may be attributed to the personal experience fighting in the Vietnam War. Kerry and Hagel have assumed responsibilities in a time of budgetary austerity; while both have defended the proposed budgets of their respective agencies, they have also appeared comfortable linking their strategic priorities to resource capacity.[32] Kerry, for example, described the budget proposal for the State Department for FY2014 as organized on the principle of "mak[ing] the world safer" through "high-impact, low-cost work…."[33] The "strategic choices and management review" ordered by Secretary Hagel is one source of analysis for review of military priorities that Hagel has repeatedly conceded "includes balancing the competing demands of capacity and capability…."[34]

Even this seasoned foreign policy team faces many obstacles to pursuing a strategy of international restraint. Whatever the fiscal realities, a perception that the U.S. is pursuing retrenchment in its role in world affairs — and thus risks appearing weak and in decline — is a tough sell. It is not a vision that plays well even among the architects of the sequester on Capitol Hill, the American public, nor the many interests that have grown alongside America's activist foreign policy — not to mention American allies and partners. At the same time, events have also worked against efforts by the Administration to approach foreign and security policy with the "calculation and discernment" of strategic restraint. On the diplomatic front, the "Snowden affair" intruded on the State Department's efforts from the Middle East peace process to forays to Latin America and Africa to improve America's international image and enhance its prestige. On the security front, efforts to focus defense strategy on "21st century realities" and to align strategy and budgeting have been challenged by pressure to make heavy-handed cuts to the defense budget (while preserving politically popular programs) in a climate in which military threats and their sources are increasingly diffuse and unpredictable.

So, where is the pivot to Asia in this mix? Is it being retained as a sphere of "deep engagement" while "restrained grand strategy" is applied to American policy toward the rest of the world? In fact, as the second Obama Administration got underway, a number

of statements and activities by the new foreign policy leadership appeared deliberately designed to give the Administration the flexibility to reset and move away from the "deep engagement" approach that the pivot had implied. During his confirmation hearing for Secretary of State, for example, Kerry addressed the pivot head on, stating "I think we have to be thoughtful about... how we go forward." He acknowledged that for China the pivot was alarming, prompting it to ask itself "What's the United States doing? They trying to circle(*sic*) us? What's going on?" He continued, "And... you know, every action has its reaction..., it's not just a law of physics. It's a law of politics — and diplomacy.... Whatever we do… in the Far East... should not come... at the expense of relationships... elsewhere... we need to think thoughtfully about not creating a threat where there isn't one, and understanding... where we can find the basis of better cooperation."[35] Later, during his first visit overseas, which was notably to Europe and not Asia, in responding to a question from the press about the pivot, Secretary Kerry's response sounded quite indifferent to the idea: "It used to, you know — people called it the pivot, right?"[36] Speaking at the Munich Security Conference in February, Vice President Biden went so far as to describe Europe as "the cornerstone of [American] engagement with the rest of the world and... the catalyst for global cooperation."[37] Later, in commenting on the pivot, Biden focused almost entirely on its economic dimensions.[38] Similarly, Hagel began his tenure as Secretary of Defense with the launch of a strategic review to be completed by May 31, 2013, a review which included an assessment of the rebalance to Asia. In remarks at the Shangri-La Dialogue, Hagel downplayed the defense side of the pivot, characterizing it as "primarily a diplomatic, economic and cultural strategy."[39]

Thus, while the Administration has repeatedly asserted it remains committed to its rebalance strategy, the pivot of 2013 is not the same animal it once was; today's pivot hearkens to the vision of "common security" candidate Obama laid out in 2007. Rather than emphasizing the military-security side of the U.S. role in Asia, this version of enhanced U.S. strategic attention to Asia gives greater

weight to the economic and diplomatic elements of the strategic package. At the same time, the U.S. appears to be approaching the region with a greater understanding that its policy choices vis à vis the region cannot be compartmentalized from its relationship with China. It has seized opportunities to engage in frequent dialogue with China, taking care to articulate a vision of China as a partner and constructive force in the region. In remarks at Shangri-la, for example, Secretary Hagel highlighted the importance of U.S.-China cooperation in addressing regional challenges and argued that the bilateral relationship was vital to developing a "future security order" capable of "achieving real, tangible solutions to shared problems, and [offer] a common framework for resolving differences."[40] Until such rhetoric is translated into concrete action, of course, it does little to bridge the trust deficit that has only grown in recent years between the two sides. It does suggest that Beijing should not reject the notion that the U.S. is trying to pursue a policy that seeks to transcend zero-sum thinking about national power and influence in its approach to Asia.

It remains unclear if it will be possible for this Administration to pursue a "restrained grand strategy" without incurring the costs of destabilization its critics warn about so compellingly. At the same time, setting goals that reflect resource limitations has never been an American forte historically, nor is it, again, a concept that finds political support in many influential quarters. Amid the myriad, diverse challenges to national interests that confront the U.S., moreover, harmonizing policy responses within a single grand vision may itself prove beyond its capabilities.[41]

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