The Future U.S. Foreign Policy: No Revolutions

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This article analyzes the possible course of the U.S. foreign and security policy (USFP) under the next presidency. In a nutshell, I argue that whichever of the two major candidates were to be elected, there would be no substantial revision of the current U.S. grand strategy. The argument is structured as follows: First, grand strategy as an organizing concept for the following inquiries is introduced. Second, competing visions of Barack Obama and Mitt Romney are presented. Third, the analysis of these visions against the background of the key current global and domestic drivers is put forward. Finally, in the conclusion, implications for Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) are suggested.¹

Grand strategy as a tool for analysis

Grand strategy is a familiar, yet indeterminate concept. The causes of its indeterminacy are found in its history and in the understanding of the concept by grand strategy writers and their normative agendas. The history is one of displacement of the concept from the military realm into the broader field of international affairs – from a means of contextualization of military planning during wartime to a distinct field of knowledge with ever-expanding boundaries.² The understanding is one that relates grand strategy to the ideal of prudence: it is to be a practiced art in the Clausewitzian sense, eschewing systematic rationalization of principles in favor of a development of particular way of thinking (cf. Clausewitz, 1984: 141) rather than

¹ For a more detailed elaboration of some of the arguments made in this chapter, see Ditrych (2012a, 2012b).
² Roots of this development are most likely found in Liddell Hart’s influential conception of strategy as encompassing not only fighting power, but also diplomatic, financial, commercial and ethical pressure, all combined with a view of future peace, security and prosperity (Liddel Hart, 1929: 151). Contemporary prominent 'grand strategists' define their subject matter as e.g. including means and ends to preservation and enhancement of the nation’s long-term interests in war and peace (Kennedy, 1991); or as ‘the calculated relationship of means to large ends’ (Gaddis, 2009). For an overview of the concept’s use see e.g. Howard (2001).
science. The most important source of ‘truth claims’ for grand strategists, therefore, is history. History, however, tends to be instrumentalized in the field and it ultimately produces de-historicized knowledge of universally valid ‘lessons’ and ‘principles’ in processes that differ less from mainstream political science which subjects history to coding and counting than grand strategists would be willing to admit. The main driver of this instrumentalization seems to be the prescriptive agenda of the strategists, found outside the government, who use the derived principles and lessons to support their own grand strategies ready to be employed by administrations which themselves seem to universally lack in satisfactory strategic thinking and are in need of advice by a contemporary Machiavelli.

In contrast to the grand strategy mainstream, in this chapter the concept is used not in the normative, but rather in an analytical, descriptive way. Grand strategy can be thus defined as a set of theoretical, political and organizing ideas. The theoretical ideas are assumptions about the nature of the global politics, one’s own position in the world, and the means to influence one’s environment. The political ideas define the national interest. The organizing ideas relate to the deployment of means to manage this environment in order to realize it.

This definition relies on several premises. First, political actors with authority to articulate a grand strategy are rational, and hence they strategize in terms of linking means and ends based on their conceptions of the international world. Therefore, as long as there is any outside and hence foreign policy (isolationism not excluded), there is also a grand strategy. This is not to say, however, that grand strategies may be internally incoherent or deeply flawed. Second, in terms of substance, a grand strategy needs not be codified to be practiced: it is a set of ideas rather than utterances and while statements pronounced from the position of authority are useful in discerning the strategy’s key elements, so are the actual key strategic decisions taken by the authority. Third, national interest as the end of a grand strategy is a subjective category. National security and prosperity are indeed commonly understood as essential components of national interest. Yet precisely what constitutes the state of security and prosperity is necessarily subject to value choices conditioned on moral and ideological convictions (cf. Wolfers, 1952).
Competing visions for America

Obama: Realism continued

Starting with the incumbent, in the course of the campaign President Obama has not put forward a comprehensive vision of his foreign and security policy for the second term. His nomination acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention in Charlotte (Obama, 2012) indicated, however, that on order of the day would be the strategic continuity from the first term. It was more of a checklist of accomplishments (crowned with the killing of Bin Laden) than an outline of the future course of action. In hindsight, then, what has been the grand strategy his administration has been pursuing over the last four years?

Looking into key strategic documents issued by the administration and major foreign policy statements by its leading members, the world that emerges from these narratives is one of ‘transition’. This is not the same as the theme of ‘decline’ which dramatically entered the U.S. public debate with the credit crunch crisis. Yet, the transition’s key characteristics – the fluidity of the international system, increased interconnection and interdependence and a growing number of influential actors, including powers (Europe, Russia, China or India) but also non-state actors – are indeed seen as a challenge (National Security Strategy, 2010). The only adversaries defined as such, due to their obstinacy to the hegemonic drive for nonproliferation, are North Korea and Iran. But while the notion of great power balancing and spheres of influence is dismissed as a 19th century idea and ‘the days when empires could treat sovereign states as pieces on a chess board are over’ (Obama, 2009a), during his first presidential campaign Obama securitized also the ‘rising powers that could challenge both America and the international foundation of liberal democracy’ (Obama, 2007). His words on the empires of yore could moreover be read alternatively as a thinly veiled reference of the Kremlin’s imperial policies, made in the aftermath of the 2008 Russia-Georgia War.

The theoretical component of a grand strategy as defined above comprises not only the ideas about the world, but also one’s role in it and means to affect it. In the administration’s narratives, a consistent differentiation from the erstwhile concept of America as the hegemonic, and even exceptional nation is made. The United States may remain the most powerful nation on Earth, ‘for all the naysayers predicting our
decline’ (Obama, 2011), but it is only one nation while the problems related to the ‘transition’ era that it has a stake in (violent extremism or terrorism, climate change, nuclear proliferation, global prosperity, transnational crime or management of global commons) are of such nature that no one nation can solve them on its own.

The definition of the national interest beyond the general security and prosperity is closely linked to these ideas. For Obama’s administration, internalizing the theoretical assumption that in a foreseeable future America’s relative standing will decrease even as this may not be a fatal process, it is in the United States’ best interest to reinvent itself into a primus inter pares great power, indispensable yet aware of the limits and perils of unilateralism (cf. Obama, 2009b; Zakaria, 2012). Renewing American leadership in this context may not be just an empty phrase, but it certainly does not imply conventional domination. To preserve its influence most effectively, the administration has believed that it should refocus on the domestic reform (‘state-building’ at home rather than abroad) and limit the resources allocated to the foreign and security policy, including a turn away from long stability missions in favor of ‘lighter footprint’ missions (Department of Defense, 2012). Second, it should focus on the regions considered to be of greatest immediate strategic importance, namely the Pacific (with the increased onshore balancing of China), while limiting the presence in others, notably Europe – which now remains of interest to the United States primarily as a world’s largest economy suffering from a sovereign debt crisis which, due to the deep global interdependence, can substantially affect other parts of the world. (The strategic interest as such is limited to the continent’s northern and southern fringes because of the rising geopolitical importance of the High North and the Middle East and North Africa, respectively). Finally, the United States should cooperate more. This cooperation should be mediated through institutions. The key organizing metaphor is that of America as an architect of new, strengthened international institutions to meet global challenges (cf. Clinton, 2010; Department of State, 2010), and the administration often referred explicitly to the historical role America played in building institutions in the aftermath of the WWII seen as a medium of its quondam success (National Security Strategy, 2010).

The review of actual policies by the administration generally corroborates this rationality. Instances of trimming the sails include, first and foremost, winding down of exhausting military campaigns (Iraq, Afghanistan). Second, military spending cuts
have been effected, including envisioned downgrade of the U.S. military presence in Europe. In January 2012, the administration announced cuts in defense spending of $500 billion over the next decade, and this amount may yet increase (however the possibility of sequestration which would also impact military budget remains unlikely). Regarding the European deployments, the administration decided to deactivate two brigades based in Germany (the 170th brigade based in Baumholder, and the 172th brigade in Grafenwoehr), an A-10 squadron in Spangdahlem and the Air Control Squadron in Aviano, Italy in 2013-2014. Third, a ‘reset’ policy with Russia was initiated, leading to the conclusion of a new START treaty and contributing to reviewing the plans to deploy a third site of U.S. missile defense (GMD) in Poland and the Czech Republic and their substitution for a more flexible phased adaptive approach (EPAA) integrated in the NATO missile defense. Fourth, the administration embraced, in a rudimentary form, a format of great and regional powers’ concert to deal with global issues, e.g. through G-20 and 5+1 (for Iran’s nuclear program) frameworks, and has conditioned its military campaigns on broader regional and global consensus, as manifested in Libya (conversely, the absence of this consensus sets limits to U.S. activities in Syria). Fifth, despite resistance from the State Department the administration has shown more pragmatism on human rights.

On the other hand, drone wars targeting terrorist suspects in places like Pakistan, Somalia or Yemen are a clear continuation, of the ‘exceptionalist’ policies facilitated by technological development that the administration reserves for the United States in pursuit of its security (and domestically, they represent continuity in the use of executive privilege). Obama has not turned into a dove. The Libya case illustrates not only a new, more modest approach to establishing a casus belli by the administration, but also, alternatively, how it could not stay disengaged altogether and later became complicit in the mission creep that by and large discredited the R2P doctrine used in legitimizing the use of force under UNSC Res. 1973 (2011). Similarly, while it ostensibly remains uninvolved in the civil war in Syria, the presumed covert operations and the growing consensus in Washington on the need of a more serious action even in absence of great power consensus and the complex situation on the ground too suggest that liberal interventionism is not a policy easily shaken off.

The vision of the Obama’s administration for the next four years is marked by the extrapolation of a grand strategy that seeks the optimal responses to the current era of
‘transition’ in limiting global engagements, stabilizing the economy and fostering cooperation to share the cost of providing public goods such as security. Ideas of this strategy have occasionally conflicted with actions, but overall the statements and actual policies have formed a complex and more or less coherent assemblage. How is this assemblage challenged by Mitt Romney, and what alternative vision does he propose?

Romney: No apologies

The way Romney (and his advisers, a combination of neoconservatives and conventional realists, some with experience in the Bush administration) saw the world differs rather substantially from Obama. This is a ‘dangerous, destructive and chaotic world’ (Romney, 2012a). It is a world characterized by *agon*, rather than international society, and hence while it can be read through the friend/enemy distinction, ultimately it is a Hobbesian ‘jungle out there’. This *agon*, in the good neoconservative tradition, is based in normative and civilizational terms: a struggle between democracy and dictatorship, freedom and slavery. The adversaries include radical Islam (rather than more specifically Al-Qaeda or the global terror network), China (autocracy and unfair competitor due to currency manipulations and intellectual property theft) or Russia. The latter is particularly emphasized, being even awarded the status of the foremost ‘geopolitical foe’ due to the support given to rogue states (Syria) or the reconstitution of its empire, e.g. through the invasion of Georgia (cf. Romney, 2010a). The incumbent administration’s Russia policy was a subject of particular bashing by Romney, who announced a ‘reset of the reset’ and specifically has been critical of the new START treaty or the decision to review the GMD third site plans, in which Obama (allegedly) acted to appease the Kremlin while sacrificing America’s friends, namely Poland and the Czech Republic (cf. Romney, 2010b, 2012b, 2012c). While Russia may be the number one geopolitical foe, Iran is the most severe security threat (Romney, 2012a) – if only by extension, because it is the security of America’s foremost ally, Israel, which is considered endangered by the catastrophic possibility of Tehran’s building and using a nuclear weapon.

Romney made it clear that the position of America in this world is exceptional. ‘God did not create this country to be a nation of followers. America is not destined to be
one of several equally balanced global powers…’ (Romney, 2011a), or ‘… just one more point on the strategic map, one more power to be balanced’ (Romney, 2012a). From a temporal perspective, such positioning implies that this should be (yet another) ‘American century’ (cf. Romney, 2011b).

To be secure and to prosper in this world, it is in America’s interest to renew its hegemony, lest the alternatives – the world governed by multilateral institutions or a concert of great powers – prevail. ‘American strength’ should be cultivated, mustered and used with ‘no apologies’ (Romney, 2010; cf. also Romney 2012d). This seemed to encompass primarily military (mostly naval) and economic power, since it was directly juxtaposed to diplomacy which, after all, only makes sense in international society, being one of its fundamental institutions. (Diplomacy was specifically discounted as an instrument of policy with regard to the Iran issue; cf. Romney, 2012b.)

Romney’s vision on the organizational dimension of the grand strategy he would like to put forth as the future president was rather underspecified. In general terms, American leadership is claimed to depend on the triad of economic, military and moral strength (Romney, 2012a). Mentioning the first is a discursive opening in Romney’s speeches to his economic plan; mentioning the second is followed by his position on defense spending, which he insists on keeping at the present levels (cf. Romney, 2012d), leaving aside, however, how it could be maintained with the public budget diminished through lowered taxes; and the third links back to the unapologetic understanding – presumably in contrast to the Obama administration – of America’s power.

… And the case for continuity

Despite the apparent difference in the candidates’ visions for America, the central argument of this chapter is that whatever the November election results, the USFP were not to be subject to major revisions. The argument is based on the importance of structural drivers both inside the country and abroad. These drivers – among which the changing global balance of power, domestic economic situation and the strategic culture dominant in the USFP establishment stand out as key – are not assumed to
negate subjective agency (and hence any variation not caused by the change in these variables) altogether. They do, however, significantly shape its productive possibilities.

An example of how other factors can interact to shape USFP is a historical narrative of Obama’s vision came into being. It can be, I would argue, plausibly explained neither by the structural determinants or individual (the President’s) political preference alone. Indeed, Obama had to distinguish himself from the previous administration and his contender in the primaries, Hillary Clinton. The convenient issue to structure his position around was war to which he had consistently objected: Invading Iraq was a wrong decision based on the interventionist paradigm dominating Bill Clinton’s and George W. Bush’s presidencies. What was needed now was ‘a strategy no longer driven by ideology and politics but one that is based on a realistic assessment of the sobering facts on the ground and our interests in the region. This kind of realism has been missing since the very conception of this war...’ (Obama, 2006). But even if Obama turned into a foreign policy ‘realist’ primarily as a means of campaign strategy (his previous sympathies to liberal interventionism notwithstanding; cf. Lizza, 2011), this strategy could not be brought to life had he not, at the same time, ridden the broad liberal wave which in a countermove to Bush’s interventionist foreign policy moved closer to the ‘realist’ positions (an influenced the domestic structure) in a process conditioned on linkages to relevant knowledges mediating the global structure and produced by the likes of Thomas Friedman, Fareed Zakaria or Zbygniew Brzezinski.

While Obama and Romney read global politics in different ways, one seeing it as international society, the other interpreting it through the familiar neoconservative scheme of the clash between democracy and totalitarianism, they both are perceptive to the structural condition that is the relative change in the global distribution of power and the relative decrease of America’s standing and see this as a challenge. Due to their diverging theoretical understandings, their strategies to tackle this challenge diverge. For Obama, this process is irreversible and the best imaginable role for America is one of primus inter pares, sharing the costs of providing public goods while retaining capacity to shape the international order. For Romney, America can and must restore its hegemony through military and economic power and
unapologetic championing of its values around the world.

Romney’s actual grand strategy would however likely have been significantly affected by the domestic factor of economic stagnation and mounting public debt (currently at $15.93 trillion, or 103% GDP (Bureau of the Public Debt, 2012) and the limited amount of resources that may as a consequence be allocated to his ambitious USFP. It is therefore plausible that his aggressive neoconservative rhetoric notwithstanding, Romney’s would turn out to be more of a ‘business presidency’, focused on the Hamiltonian trade dominance through the support of major export companies rather than spreading the ‘fire of freedom to the darkest corners of the world’ (Bush, 2005). His would therefore have been an incoherent grand strategy in terms of poor linking of the theoretical, political and organizational ideas to actual policies; but ultimately more modest than his current statements (even after the customary discount resulting from their being made by a presidential candidate rather than the head of state) suggest.

Obama’s grand strategy defined at the ideational level by disengagement and power downgrade will face the same structural challenge that has accounted for its incoherence in terms of linking these ideas to some (‘exceptionalist’) practices during his first term: the strategic culture of the USFP establishment, understood as a distinctive mode of strategic thinking to which elites are socialized (Snyder, 1977; cf. also Booth, 1981; Grey, 1981; Johnston, 1995; Katzenstein, 1996). This strategic culture of ‘global leadership’ is deeply rooted in American exceptionalism with a strong transcendental dimension and nourished by the more recent and mundane imperial record. When combined with unmatched military means at immediate disposal, it has arguably been a powerful check on the politics of constraints that the administration sought to bring to life.

Therefore, unless major events with the potential to turn the tide of history take place, both candidates, for different structural reasons, would oscillate around the middle dictated by the structural conditions of global power rebalancing (relevant for both), limited material means at the administration’s disposal (more relevant for Romney), and the strategic culture of global leadership (more relevant for Obama). In key current issue areas, limited divergence could be expected. In Afghanistan, withdrawal
would take place under either administration, justified by redefinition of the mission as a component of the campaign against the global terror network rather than a state-building project. Relations with Russia and China would differ mostly in rhetoric. Obama’s administration may continue to strive for further arms control negotiations with Moscow. Given the latter’s increased intransigence, stalled talks on missile defense partnership and the importance it Russia ascribes to tactical nuclear weapons along NATO’s Eastern border in its strategic doctrine; their success is however far from certain. Pivoting to Asia continues no matter what, as the importance of the Pacific theater has now become the conventional wisdom inside the Beltway. Finally, Romney’s administration could have seen more favorably the possibility of Israel’s strike against Iran’s nuclear facilities, yet it is unlikely that at the start of his presidency Romney would like to launch a U.S. military strike, and the latter would thus only remain, as it is now, an option ‘on the table’.

**Conclusion: Implications for Central and Eastern Europe**

The difference in the candidates’ rhetoric notwithstanding, the next administration’s USFP will most likely be one of limited engagement in the global affairs, focusing on regions and issues deemed of utmost strategic importance to safeguarding America’s security and prosperity. For CEE, this will continue to translate into less attention paid to the region as a whole. Romney’s statements about ‘abandoned friends’ (which could not have been more misplaced with regard to Poland where they were made given Warsaw geopolitical recalibration in recent years) aside, the prospect of returning to the third site missile defense plans that the Atlanticist elites in the Czech Republic and Poland once interpreted as an ultimate protection against restoring Russia’s sphere of influence was always illusory.

In no way does this mean a ‘withdrawal’ from Europe and no immediate risks arise as a consequence of this trend. At the same time, it is more imperative than ever that CEE states are able to identify and respond to the risks they face on their own. It is also an unparalleled opportunity for the region, which the Obama administration correctly sees as the ‘finished business’ in terms of political and economic transition to take a greater share of responsibility for its security and prosperity. The best way to do so is to invest smartly in security and defense to protect its critical infrastructures
and continue to meaningfully contribute to NATO’s common security. Other goals should include enhancing regional cooperation, particularly in energy (as liberalization and infrastructure development are the best responses to the risks associated with single source dependency); cooperation on defense (including multinational projects, conditioned on strengthened security identity) and the Eastern neighborhood (as a source of potential instability); and investing political will and resources into preventing EU fragmentation and its own peripherization in the continent, threatening to weaken the foundations of the European security community.

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