



## STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR THE NEXT PRESIDENT, PART ONE: THE DOWNSIDE OF DEFEATISM

By Colin Dueck



*Colin Dueck is an associate professor in the School of Policy, Government, and International Affairs at George Mason University and Senior Fellow of the Foreign Policy Research Institute. Portions of this essay are drawn from his book *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).*

This is the first in a series of three essays on the challenge of strategic foreign policy planning for the next administration. Here in Part One, I briefly describe problems with the national security decision-making process under the current president, then consider and rebut the argument that any sort of strategy in US foreign policy is a practical impossibility. Subsequently in Parts Two and Three, I will outline specific policy recommendations for an improved strategic planning process, and offer some guidelines for the substance of an alternate strategic direction.

### The Current Problem

President Obama's foreign policy leadership style should be viewed as a challenge to conventional academic wisdom. Obama has many of the qualities commonly considered essential by scholars: intelligence, personal self-discipline, tactical flexibility, and a generally deliberate manner.<sup>1</sup> Yet American foreign policy on his watch has frequently been marked by unexpected pushback, failure, and dysfunction. The President's defenders maintain that such frustrations are inevitable, given the complexity of world politics today. But on closer examination, many of these frustrations appear to have been unnecessarily aggravated by Obama's particular way of handling the foreign policy decision-making process.

Most credible reports concur that foreign policymaking under Obama is highly centralized into the Oval Office. As Robert Gates notes, reflecting on his time as Secretary of Defense up to 2011: "The controlling nature of the Obama White House took micromanagement and operational meddling to a new level."<sup>2</sup> The President surrounds himself with a tight inner circle of de facto foreign policy advisers based inside the White House. Some of the people within this innermost circle possessed little national security, executive branch, or international expertise before taking on roles as top presidential advisers.<sup>3</sup> Moreover it is abundantly clear that foreign policy is monitored closely by the White House in part to minimize domestic political risk.<sup>4</sup> Under this modus operandi, the NSC staff has ballooned to something approaching 400 members. NSC meetings are so frequent and time-consuming that they leave top officials from State and Defense less ability to actually implement decisions or manage their own departments. At the same time, these very same officials feel less involved in the actual development of policy. Among other things, this situation creates mistrust, and deprives the President of true exposure to alternative expert

<sup>1</sup> For example, Stephen Wayne, "Obama's Personality and Performance," in James Thurber, ed., *Obama in Office* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2011), 68-71.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Knopf, 2014), 587.

<sup>3</sup> James Mann, *The Obamians: The Struggle Inside the White House to Redefine American Power* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 66-75.

<sup>4</sup> Gates, *Duty*, 584-88; Mann, *The Obamians*, 69; and Vali Nasr, *The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat* (New York: Doubleday, 2013), 2.

points of view. The interagency foreign policy process churns tremendously, but in many cases seems marginal to the final outcome.<sup>5</sup>

Obama takes his time making decisions, keeps his own counsel, and has a strong aversion to being pinned down. He is exceptionally tolerant of ambiguity, and regularly expresses it in his own carefully crafted foreign policy speeches. The overarching style is one that tends to be especially valued and appreciated within academic circles. But the qualities that make for a successful academic, community organizer, or legal instructor – and even the qualities that make for an effective politician – are not necessarily the same qualities required for a successful commander-in-chief. Indefinite pliancy, profound ambivalence, and a disinclination to commit are hardly unmixed virtues in the field of foreign policy strategy. There comes a time when a president's role is to make a decision, even a potentially risky one, and then enforce that decision so it sticks. The paradox under Obama is a highly centralized decision-making process, in which actual decisions regarding foreign policy are too often delayed or altogether avoided. As one official described their experience inside the Obama NSC: "It was like 'Groundhog Day'...with no progress, no refinement. In fairness, these are all tough questions. But eventually, you've got to make a choice."<sup>6</sup>

Of course, a good part of this pattern is due to Obama's substantive policy preferences, not just his procedural ones. The President regularly blocks or waters down more assertive foreign policy options because he does not believe in their merit. No doubt he sincerely thinks that accommodating international rivalries and limiting US military commitments is appropriate not only internationally, but for the achievement of a progressive domestic policy agenda. Insofar as he has a grand strategy, this is it. Yet he apparently feels no compelling need to impose a rigorous coherence between declared ends and given means in US policy when it comes to specific cases like Syria, ISIS, or Ukraine. This is the sense in which the decision-making process matters, interacting with substance. At the very least - if he chooses to utilize it - a professional foreign policy process can help a president to impose some capable order on implementation and execution, whatever his chosen approach. It is one thing to adopt a deliberate strategy of limited liability. It is something else to allow presidential words and actions to become dangerously disconnected in one case after another. In a very real way, Obama does both. Now after seven years, not only the overarching direction but the president's characteristic decision-making style have proved increasingly problematic.<sup>7</sup>

### **Strategic Realism Versus Strategic Defeatism**

To be clear, this is hardly the first US president to struggle with foreign policy frustration and dysfunction. At one time or another, every single president has, and over the past quarter century the problem only seems to have grown worse. Current US foreign policy appears to lack a coherent strategic planning process. There seems to be no locus for the proper coordination of ends and means in US national security strategy. The historical and institutional roots of this situation go deep, including persistent patterns inside the interagency process and in relationships between the White House, the State Department, and the Department of Defense. For example, over the years the Department of Defense has taken on a prominent role in the implementation of US foreign policy, powered in part by immense talent and resources both civilian and military. The Secretary of Defense is now one of several leading foreign policy advisers to the President, as well he should be. The Pentagon has impressive capabilities when it comes to military planning in the strict sense. But for all its resources, the Pentagon cannot actually coordinate the full range of tools necessary to pursue broad US foreign policy objectives, nor does it have a mandate to do so, as career military know full well.

There are of course policy planning staff at the State Department – the staff George Kennan once directed – with a mandate to help bring broad strategic coherence to US foreign policy. But since Kennan's tenure, the role of the State Department has shifted, not only relative to Defense, but relative to the White House. Long before Obama, presidents during the middle of the Cold War began taking increasingly direct control over the foreign policy process into the Oval Office. They did so because it met a variety of their needs, and that pattern is unlikely to be completely reversed.<sup>8</sup> So even assuming relationships of influence and trust from the director of policy planning, to the Secretary of State, and then up to the President – a very big

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<sup>5</sup> Karen DeYoung, "How the Obama White House runs foreign policy," *The Washington Post*, August 4, 2015. For a sharp assessment, see Peter Feaver and William Inboden, "Implementing an Effective Foreign Policy," in *Choosing to Lead: American Foreign Policy for a Disordered World* (The John Hay Initiative, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in De Young, "How the Obama White House runs foreign policy."

<sup>7</sup> Colin Dueck, *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Ivo Daalder and I.M. Destler, *In the Shadow of the Oval Office: Profiles of the National Security Advisers and the Presidents They Served* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009); Peter Rodman, *Presidential Command: Power, Leadership, and the Making of Foreign Policy from Richard Nixon to George W. Bush* (New York: Vintage, 2010); David Rothkopf, *Running the World: The Inside Story of the National Security Council and the Architects of American Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005).

assumption, not all that common in practice – State’s precise role is not what it was in Kennan’s day.<sup>9</sup> Nor is the current moment identical to the late 1940s internationally. Advocates of strategic planning should accept these altered realities, instead of trying to replicate the author of US containment strategy. Effective policy planning at the State Department can do a great deal of good, but Kennan was simply unique. There will not be another George Kennan.

Insofar as there is today any plausible institutional locus within the federal government for the imposition of strategic rigor on US foreign policy, it is really the president himself. So when the United States has a president who is either incapable or unwilling to impose such coherence, or who does not see its necessity, no amount of reshuffled organizational flowcharts or expert opinion can make up the difference. Indeed no less an authority than former President Bill Clinton once confided his view that when it came to grand strategy, presidents just “made it up as they went along.”<sup>10</sup> Certainly, Clinton would be in a good position to know whether or not that was true.

This recurrent frustration with various US foreign policy approaches over the last three presidential administrations has led some observers to conclude that any effective “strategy” in America’s international affairs is quite unlikely. The reasons given are several. The end of the Cold War deprived US foreign policymakers of a single great focus; there are now multiple, shifting threats. Consequently, some say that the international system itself is now so complex, even wildly uncertain, as to make any overarching strategy beside the point.<sup>11</sup> Others suggest that perennial patterns of bureaucratic politics, especially within the byzantine apparatus of US foreign and national security policy, render the implementation of any coherent strategy highly improbable.<sup>12</sup> Observers have sometimes noted an “un-strategic” element in the culture of US foreign policy – for example a striking emphasis on technological fixes and idealistic pronouncements, rather than on the need to match ends and means within an internationally competitive environment.<sup>13</sup> The American political and electoral system has tremendous virtues, but the cultivation of leaders with an international strategic sensibility is not always one of them.<sup>14</sup> On another level, the appalling, widespread practice of government leaks has had an unfortunate chilling effect on comprehensive internal examinations of alternative US foreign policy strategies, since participants fear that such analysis might be printed in the next morning’s newspapers and thereby rendered moot before it has even had a chance to make a positive impact.<sup>15</sup> Moreover the sheer quantity of information now processed by government officials on a daily basis, together with expectations for rapid response, make it exceptionally challenging to carve out time for genuine strategic analysis as opposed to crisis management.<sup>16</sup>

Taken to their extreme – which not all of the above critics do - these observations can lead to the conclusion that any sort of serious US foreign policy strategy is literally impossible. I call this latter position *strategic defeatism*, not as a pejorative term, but as an accurate description of the stated conclusion: namely, that any attempt at strategy is downright futile. A good recent statement of strategic defeatism can be found in the last November/December issue of *Foreign Affairs*, where David Edelstein and Ronald Krebs argue that “it is all but impossible to identify the ideal strategy ahead of time,” and that “strategizing is more than unhelpful; it is also dangerous....It does not make Americans feel more secure.” The article ends with a call for policymakers to “leave strategizing behind.”<sup>17</sup>

Many of the above objections to strategy do carry considerable weight. The creation and execution of a sensibly coherent foreign policy truly is extremely difficult today, for all of the reasons just cited. Nor are critics like Edelstein and Krebs wrong when they say that “credibility cannot be gained merely by issuing a public document,” and “strategic outcomes that appear poorly calculated to one analyst may seem sensible to another.”<sup>18</sup> In a classic article these authors reference, entitled “Is Strategy an Illusion,” Columbia University’s Richard Betts points out that “among academics, many do not take seriously the barriers to effective strategy....Thus few of them anymore learn enough about the processes of decision-making or military operations to grasp how hard it is to implement strategic plans, and few focus on the conversion processes that open up gaps between what government leaders decide to do and what government organizations implementing those decisions actually

<sup>9</sup> Richard Haass, “Planning for Policy Planning,” in Daniel Drezner, ed., *Avoiding Trivia: the Role of Strategic Planning in American Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2009), 25.

<sup>10</sup> Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy* (New York: Random House, 2002), 133.

<sup>11</sup> Amy Zegart, “A Foreign Policy for the Future.” *Defining Ideas*. Hoover Institution, November 20, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Zegart also makes this point forcefully.

<sup>13</sup> Colin Gray, *The Geopolitics of Superpower* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1988), 42-43.

<sup>14</sup> Dale Walton, *Grand Strategy and the Presidency* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> Aaron Friedberg, “Strengthening U.S. Strategic Planning,” *Washington Quarterly* 31:1 (Winter 2007-8), 53-54.

<sup>16</sup> Shawn Brimley et al, *Enabling Decision: Shaping the National Security Council for the Next President* (Washington DC, Center for a New American Security, 2015), 1, 4, 7-8.

<sup>17</sup> David Edelstein and Ronald Krebs, “Delusions of Grand Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs* 94:6 (November/December 2015), 110, 114-116.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 111, 113.

do.”<sup>19</sup> But the obvious answer would seem to be to learn more about these processes in order to master them, not to quit and go fishing. Indeed this is Betts’ own conclusion – including the part about fishing.<sup>20</sup> Despite a healthy realism on the subject, Betts’ answer to his own question is in fact that “effective strategy is *not* impossible,” and that “there is no alternative but to engage in strategy unless one is willing to give up the use of force as an instrument of policy.”<sup>21</sup>

Strategic defeatism may arise from a misunderstanding of what strategy actually is, and what it can do. A strategy articulates clear, achievable national interests; identifies concrete threats to those interests; and then recommends specific policy instruments by which such threats can be met and overcome. A foreign policy strategy may not be entirely coherent, preplanned, or well-coordinated – in fact, very often they are not. But the inescapable nature of limited resources, hard choices, and policy trade-offs means that decisions regarding strategy are both implicit and inevitable.<sup>22</sup> If we define grand strategy – wrongly – as a prefabricated plan, carried out to the letter against all resistance, then clearly no president and probably no world leader has every had such a strategy, nor ever will. But if we adopt a less stringent and perhaps more realistic definition, we see that all presidents necessarily make choices and decisions based at least partly upon their own preexisting assumptions. Even a president’s refusal to make a decision on some leading international or military issue is itself a choice, with significant material consequences. This leads to several observations relevant to American foreign policy today:

1. *Strategic choices are inescapable.* To paraphrase what Leon Trotsky is supposed to have said about war: you may not be interested in strategy, but strategy is interested in you.<sup>23</sup> The issue in judging any president’s foreign policy is not whether he can avoid difficult strategic choices. He cannot. The real issue is the accuracy, fitness, and coherence of his strategic choices, however vague or implicit. In practice, virtually all critics of the concept of strategy – up to and including some US presidents – end up offering what amounts to some other recommended strategic direction. Edelstein and Krebs, for their part, state in their *Foreign Affairs* critique of grand strategy that “the nation’s external security environment is extraordinarily benign,” and therefore the US should pursue “a more restrained foreign policy that avoids the distraction of peripheral interventions.”<sup>24</sup> This sounds an awful lot like an alternative grand strategy. It makes clear assumptions regarding threats, as well as interests. So why not admit that strategy is inescapable, and make this explicit?
2. *Strategy has always been difficult.* We flatter ourselves that we live in a uniquely “complex” era. But a little historical familiarity reveals that the formation of strategy has always been difficult and complicated.<sup>25</sup> It was certainly difficult and complicated at the start of America’s Cold War struggle. Later during that struggle, in the 1970s, prominent academics and some political leaders insisted that the rise of multiple new challenges and complex international issue dimensions rendered irrelevant any strategy of the traditional type. Such claims have a familiar ring. There are of course multiple threats internationally today. But these threats are not *entirely* unpredictable. We know there are great power challenges, such as Russia and China; there are rogue states such as North Korea and Iran; there are jihadist terrorists such as ISIS and Al Qaeda. Past leaders in many countries have also faced situations in which there were multiple threats. Rather than reiterating how impossibly complicated things are in our time, it might be useful to learn from successful examples of past strategies in similar eras.<sup>26</sup>
3. *Some strategies are better than others.* Here we hit upon one of the favorite terms in political science: variation. If there were really no variation in the quality of foreign policy strategies across time and place, then of course strategy would be useless. But this is simply not the case. There is in fact an astonishing variety in the quality of strategic thought and action, with tremendous practical consequences, not only from one situation to the next – and sometimes from one

<sup>19</sup> Richard Betts, “Is Strategy an Illusion?” *International Security* 25:2 (Fall 2000), 7.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 20: “If there is no hope of discerning and manipulating causes to produce intended effects, analysts as well as politicians and generals should all quit and go fishing.”

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 20, 47. My italics.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Art, *A Grand Strategy for America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003); Hal Brands, *What Good is Grand Strategy?* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014); Colin Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders: Power, Culture, and Change in American Grand Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Colin Gray, *The Future of Strategy* (Cambridge, England: Polity, 2015); B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (New York: Praeger, 1954); Edward Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard, 2001 edition); Williamson Murray and Richard Hart Sinnreich, eds., *Successful Strategies: Triumphant in War and Peace from Antiquity to the Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>23</sup> Brands, *What Good is Grand Strategy*, 6.

<sup>24</sup> Edelstein and Krebs, “Delusions of Grand Strategy,” 114, 116.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Gallagher, Joshua Geltzer, and Sebastian Gorka, “The Complexity Trap,” *Parameters* (Spring 2012), 5-16.

<sup>26</sup> Emily Goldman, *Power in Uncertain Times: Strategy in the Fog of Peace* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

president to the next - but even occasionally within a single administration. Take for example the presidency of George W. Bush. As Edelstein and Krebs suggest in their article, and as is now widely understood, the initial planning for the 2003 occupation of Iraq was marked by numerous flawed assumptions, including insufficient preparation for possible stability and counterinsurgency operations. Ultimately, the responsibility for this was the president's. Yet that same president later oversaw a remarkably effective review and redirection of US strategy in Iraq, starting in late 2006 and implemented during 2007-08.<sup>27</sup> If the very same president, in relation to the same foreign country, can show such dramatic variation in the quality of strategic decision-making, then we might want to understand how and why national strategies can improve from one case to the next.

4. *Strategic defeatism is of no practical help.* The question is not whether difficult foreign policy choices are coming, but how they will be made. Refusing to think strategically will not allow the United States to escape what are in effect strategic dilemmas - it will only exacerbate existing frustrations. As Duke University's Hal Brands points out, if conditions are daunting, this is all the more reason to think systematically about ends and means.<sup>28</sup> It's hard to see how deliberately avoiding strategic thought might improve the quality of American decision-making. Policymakers need practical assistance. To put it bluntly: those who do not believe that improvements in the quality of US foreign policy strategy are possible, should probably not be entrusted with the implementation of same. This is true from the president on down.
5. *Responsibility for US foreign policy strategy is up to the President.* There should be no pretense that mid-level officials with the title of planner can somehow single-handedly draft a grand strategy for the United States, and then see it implemented in Washington and abroad. This is a misunderstanding of the process. American foreign policy is president-centered. It can hardly be otherwise. No other individual is truly able or empowered to weigh, judge, and act upon conflicting domestic and international priorities on behalf of the national interest. Obviously the demands on any president are immense, and conflicting pressures are legion. Still, it is the president who decides how these conflicting pressures will be resolved, through particular foreign policy decisions. Choices and alternatives do exist. A key question is one of priorities, including whether a given president is willing to spend political capital on behalf of sensible foreign and national security policies. In the end, there is simply no substitute for sustained attention in this area from the nation's commander-in-chief. If the president does not impose some sort of order and coherence on American foreign policy, together with his cabinet, then nobody else either can or will.<sup>29</sup>

At moments like the current one, when US foreign policy strategy is neither particularly well-conceived nor well-executed, this inevitable reliance on presidential leadership can seem discouraging, because it acts as a kind of overpowering executive blockage against the formation of effective strategies. Yet this conclusion also contains a glimmer of hope, for the very same reason. It is not humanly impossible to develop a reasonably effective foreign policy strategy. More than one past US president has done so, and in those cases where they have, it really does make a difference. If the next president is determined to craft and implement such a strategy, this in itself would alter the current situation dramatically. It can be done.

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<sup>27</sup> Peter Feaver, "The Right to Be Right: Civil-Military Relations and the Iraq Surge Decision," *International Security* 35:4 (Spring 2011), 87-125; Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, *The Endgame: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq, from George W. Bush to Barack Obama* (New York: Pantheon, 2012), chapters 15-27; Peter Mansoor, *Surge: My Journey with General David Petraeus and the Remaking of the Iraq War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

<sup>28</sup> Brands, *What Good is Grand Strategy*, 195-197.

<sup>29</sup> Rodman, *Presidential Command*, 277-78, 289.