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U.S. Grand Strategy  

Note: Below are informal notes taken by a JHU/APL staff member at the Seminar.

Dr. Posen began by noting that some people believe the concept of a Grand Strategy is really a form of political science fiction. He disagrees and stated that his talk would start with the idea that there is a general consensus view about what US Grand Strategy is or should be. However, a serious debate over Grand Strategy would be a good idea. His talk would also touch on where the Obama Administration appears to be going and on an alternative Grand Strategy.

Consensus and Problems of US Grand Strategy

- Liberal hegemony is a new term that has the US as the dominant power in the world
  - Liberal with a small “l”
  - Involves support for democracies since they generally do not fight each other
  - Involves a belief in capitalism which also has an effect on security issues
- US has a long list of security objectives
  - Standing against terrorism – currently the first on the list
  - Fighting weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and proliferation
  - Rescuing and helping the recovery of failed states
    - There used to be different political views about whether the US should be doing this
    - Now both sides generally agree that some of this needs to be done
  - Security of the Persian Gulf and its energy supplies
  - Containing and handling of “rogue” states (we need a better term for this)
  - Being watchful of China’s rise
  - Retaining the old Cold War alliances
  - Spreading democracy and free market economy concepts
  - In summary – a very big project
- American views
  - Generally see selves as superior
  - No one asks:
    - How superior does the US Military really need to be?
    - How far / in how many places should the US Military be active?
  - The few debates that there are tend to be more about the tactical level of US military activities
  - Democrats usually see international organizations as good things that deserve to be nurtured and expanded (UN)
  - Republicans prefer international organizations that are more like alliances – especially if they are military and the US is clearly the leader (NATO)
  - Democrats are generally more willing to give diplomacy a chance
  - Republicans are less patient with diplomatic moves
  - Can expect the Obama Administration to depend more public diplomacy
    - The President is a skilled speaker and an interesting personality to the rest of the world
    - He will be reaching out to the people directly over the heads of their governments
  - Democrats want more arms agreements
  - Republicans want to retain more of a free hand about weapons and defenses

Problem: There has been no deep assessment of what has or has not worked well since the Cold War

- Iraq was a mistake that we are backing out of slowly
- No one is talking about resource restraints on what the US can/will do in the world
  - Socio-economic elements are never brought up in debates about US Grand Strategy activities
US military activity is costly and state building is very costly when considering COIN / stabilization ops

- Iraq is costing more in dollars (but not lives) than did Vietnam
  - At a time when we no longer need to worry about the Soviets
  - In a situation where there is no northern haven to provide support for adversaries
- US military power is eroding – pressures have stretched military manpower about to their limits
- Part of problem is that there is no decisive victory so the bad guys learn to fight better
  - We are also educating others outside Iraq on how to fight the US
  - Raises the costs all around

US activism can upset the balance of power in the world

- Others see the US as a threat just because of its presence and overall power
- Must expect a reaction to this power and presence
  - Maybe we have been too active in Europe, so we have upset Russia more than necessary
  - Russia’s concerns about missile defenses in Europe are not merely its own problem
- US becomes a magnet for terrorism just by being in other countries
  - US will inevitably run into a lot of other “isms” around the world
  - There will be identity politics that are unfamiliar to the US
  - US presence can energize those who might want to fight against us
  - It does not take very many troops who want to fight the US to cause us problems
- Moral hazard (to use an economist’s term) of free-riding or reckless driving
  - Free-riding: Europe and Japan have spent very little on their own defense all these years
    - US has tolerated this type of behavior
    - Europe is a little better than Japan but it could do more
    - Europe is a pretty stable place so why is the US there?
  - Reckless driving: Some countries feel they can do things because the US will watch out for them
    - Taiwan, Georgia, Afghanistan, others
    - They take US support for granted
    - They do the wrong thing even when the US asks them not to

There was a uni-polar world after the Cold War

- Some believe that this situation will last but Dr. Posen is not convinced
- Some changes are already appearing in minor statistics about economics and other activities
  - Example: US is dropping in its share of the world’s manufacturing capabilities
- US could see shifts in power around the world
  - There are a lot of actors now with significantly more capabilities / opportunities / education
  - All of this adds costs to being a Great Power

There is little evidence that the Obama Administration is likely to shift in its view of Grand Strategy

- Economic issues will require the most attention of the Administration for the sometime to come
  - Unemployment issues, no new source of demand, etc.
  - Health care changes will be costly
  - Afghanistan will also be costly
- Much different than in the first year of the Bush Administration

What to Expect from the Obama Administration

- Defense spending will stay high but only by cutting costs in Iraq
  - People are starting to look at big-ticket programs as sources for more cost-savings
    - Savings from cutting programs won’t be enough
US will likely avoid getting involved in other wars
  ▪ Dropping back on activities in Iraq first, then in Afghanistan
  ▪ But there are still many other places that could spawn wars

The Persian Gulf/Mid-East Region will be a focus because of the inter-related problems there and elsewhere which could be helped by:
  ▪ Disengaging from Iraq
  ▪ Disengaging eventually from Afghanistan
  ▪ Shoring up Pakistan
  ▪ Getting Iran to reduce its support of terrorism elsewhere and stop development of WMD
  ▪ There will a lot of work being done in the Obama Administration in this area

The Administration will want to work a great deal more on counter-proliferation efforts
  ▪ Grave concerns exist about not having a return address on WMD attacks – where do you retaliate?
  ▪ There may be talk of a nuclear-free world but Administration members are realistic enough to realize this is not likely
  ▪ Expect tinkering with various arms control agreements, for which the US will need Russian cooperation

This area will not need as much of the President’s attention as the Persian Gulf/MidEast will

Other significant issues
  ▪ Concerns about failed states – there was a lot of talk during the presidential campaign about this but not so much any longer (very hard to do)
  ▪ Playing it cool in Asia – be politely watchful with the Chinese
    ▪ Taiwan’s current government does not appear to want a confrontation with China
      ▪ So that should not be a problem
      ▪ But Taiwan has its own internal problems related to the government’s poor handling of recent emergencies
    ▪ North Korea seems to be reaching out somewhat lately
    ▪ Japan’s new government is providing some concerns
      ▪ It still won’t want to shift away from its cheap-ride in security issues
  ▪ NATO may actually get more focus because the US needs allies to help with military efforts in Afghanistan, etc.
    ▪ Problem: US will be asking for more help when the Europeans are wanting to do less
    ▪ There are also issues of both quality and quantity concerning allied forces in Afghanistan
      ▪ Many countries do not have much else left to give
    ▪ Probably will paper over problems as the alliance has done in the past
    ▪ Maybe could get the Europeans to do more with humanitarian situations
    ▪ To help with the Russia situation, expect the inclusion of Georgia and Ukraine to be left on the back burner

Where Grand Strategy Should Go
Complete consensus really is not that necessary
  ▪ Must remember that the US geo-political position remains strong
    ▪ Still has a strong technological and economic base
    ▪ Still protected by oceans and weaker neighbors
    ▪ No obvious candidates to take over hegemony in Europe or Asia
      ▪ China is not ready to
      ▪ Russia can’t come back to do so
      ▪ No other Great Power is likely to wake up one morning and want to take control
  ▪ Need a Policy of Restraint
    ▪ Sometimes called Isolationism but not quite right
    ▪ Should focus on some key areas
      ▪ Maintaining global balance of power
      ▪ Containing nuclear proliferation
      ▪ Constraining Al-Qaeda
      ▪ Husbanding and nurturing our own power – especially in economic issues
What the Obama Administration Should Be Doing

- Shape and constrain – not administer the world
  - US should influence from the outside
  - Could involve off-shore balancing and extended deterrence
- Strengthen the non-proliferation regimes
  - Having some sort of agreement will at least slow down proliferation even if it can’t be stopped
- Discourage others from trying to balance against the US
  - Stop making the US the central focus in other countries’ narratives
- Do something about all the free-riders by:
  - Reducing US military presence in Europe and (to a lesser extent) in Japan
  - Get Israel off the US military dole – make it more expensive for them to try to control the West Bank, etc.
  - Reduce or get out of the Taiwan commitments, which will be hard to do
- Increase Area Studies expertise
  - We may want to produce more Lawrences of Arabia – but we must remember that he was unique
  - We just barely managed developing an adequate number of Soviet experts
  - Currently trying to develop China experts
  - It will always be rare to have enough people who understand local politics to go with the military
    - Sending in just more troops won’t solve the problem
  - Must recognize that there are no cookbooks for peacekeeping and COIN
    - We are beginning to know something about best practices
    - Won’t work everywhere
    - We talk as though we know what to expect – we don’t
    - Should not expect that even 50% of what we do will work
- Maintain command of the commons – air / sea / space / etc.
  - This is America’s best strength
  - Does not involve administering anything
  - US must have tools for constraining others
  - Need to get out of COIN and state-building
    - No matter how many smart 18-year-old troops we produce, the other side will always be able to produce more 18-year-old troops
- Work on the WMD leakage issue
  - Attacks that come from states, especially nuclear attacks, will have a return address – where to send the response, thus they can be deterred
  - US must let the world know that it collects data on all elements of WMD including who gives what to whom and can retaliate against the source if needs be
    - US will know where to send a response even if a third party is involved
  - Also must remind others what happens when the US gets angry after it has been attacked
    - History shows that the US has done a lot of damage when angered
  - Deterrence has worked in the past and can work in the future – but it is not perfect
- Handle the Iraq / Afghanistan / Al-Qaeda problem
  - Al-Qaeda should have been handled as a political issue, rather under the radar, not as a military issue
  - US must maintain defenses against future attacks from Al-Qaeda, too

Objections to What the Obama Administration Might Want To Do

- US will not be able to constrain itself because this is what Great Powers do
  - Great Powers are only constrained by resource limitations – and we are getting to that point
- Rest of the world won’t let the US back out of its commitments
  - It saves them money and effort if the US does the heavy lifting with security issues
  - They are pleased that the US always gets to play the bad guy while they can be the good guys
  - Saying the US will pull back always scares Japanese audiences
    - They always say “We’ll go nuts! The military will take over!”
    - If they can’t control themselves, should we want them as an ally?
  - The Europeans will just bring up the 1930s and worries about a new Hitler – but from where?
US public won’t support a change to US predominance
  - Public also might not be willing to be taxed to pay for all of these activities
  - Americans are very used to being the leader
  - Hard to say which way the public would go

Costs for these activities would be more than the US could afford

Nuclear weapons change everything
  - Slowing down proliferation is not enough – preventing even one attack is more than worth the cost
  - Need a strong military as a response since we can’t expect to contain/deter Iran without one

Bad things will happen in regions once the US leaves
  - Regional arms races could happen
  - Could cause changes in the global balance of power
    - But China is not really interested in a change in the near future
    - No one else out there to take over

US influence will inevitably diminish
  - Others will no longer ask what the US wants them to do
  - Trade might be a little less free as others try to protect their own industrial bases
  - Oil may become a little more costly
  - The environment may be a little dirtier
  - But this can also be reversed as a list of what the US gets out of hegemony

Overall, the US needs to look at what all the costs might be in its Grand Strategy and determine what activities it can no longer afford to carry out.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

US pull back should begin with Europe, not Japan
  - Europe is ripe for peace
    - Test new policies there first
    - Harder to come up with a correct policy for Asia
      - Because of China’s increasing influence
      - Japan has not done much; it has fixated on the US rather than its own region
  - It would be a good idea for the US to tell the new Japanese government that there will be changes
    - Good time to make changes as a new government is coming in
    - Get Japan to focus more on the rest of its region
    - Good time to try new diplomatic efforts since government is new
  - Decreases in the US presence in Japan should go more slowly than in Europe
    - Must be more experimental and judicial about what the US does there
    - The Japanese fear “We’ll go nuts” without the US presence is nonsense
      - Who is there to go nuts?
      - They can’t handle their own militarists?
  - Certainly the US cannot sustain its current predominance for the next 100 years

Costs of Grand Strategy
  - Ground force numbers would definitely be cut back for this Grand Strategy
  - Must think about setting a limit for military spending
    - 2.5% of GDP is about as much as possible for the long term
    - Rather than billions of dollars should be talking about percent of GDP
    - May be saving 1% from current military expenses and 1% from health care reform
      - Still not enough to maintain high level of activities

Grand Strategy and Al-Qaeda
  - Original invasion of Afghanistan was a good idea
    - US needed it for deterrence against others trying to support Al-Qaeda and the like
    - US needed to chase Al-Qaeda – but this was not adequately done
Taliban was given many chances to get rid of Al-Qaeda, but they did not
- Had to be shown that they cannot harbor such criminals

Problem: reliable facts for political scientists outside the government about Afghanistan are rare / late / often contradictory so it is hard to make predictions

Obama Administration members are generally not restrainers
- COIN best practices may be generally agreed on but there is still debate about what should be first
  - Need lots of troops to make things secure for other state building activities
  - Need them to clear and hold territory
  - Really need locals to do the holding and rebuilding – otherwise it is a waste of US lives

Should use as few US troops as possible to make sure that the Taliban do not win
- Wait and see if the Afghans can get a government to gel on their own
  - Then the US can put in more troops to help
  - Current evidence suggests this is not likely but must try anyway
- US should have a Plan C ready for 12-18 months from now
  - US does have natural allies there – the Northern Alliance – but we did not support them adequately
  - Pashtuns in the south could not take them if the North had US help
  - Would wind up with a divided country, which would not be that nice but it is also not the first time this had happened
- Some think that the US should go to Plan C immediately and not bother to wait to see if the Afghans can develop a government
  - US would not be quite so tolerant as it is currently under Plan B
  - But it is not quite time to go to Plan C yet

US should not worry about building up deterrence in Europe
- We are not concerned that both the UK and France have small nuclear weapons forces and Russia is losing its nuclear force
- NATO should be a political alliance with the US pulling troops out
  - Could be done as an experiment
- US should also be reducing its military footprint in Japan but some should remain there
  - China and Japan would be mutually vulnerable in an oil supply cut off
- US should be around to help against any bald face nuclear stick-up
  - None has ever happened
  - US is the only force that could stop it
- The will of the Great Power depends on it having a story and having that story repeated often
- Support for Israel and Taiwan will likely remain because there is so much support for both in the US
- Taiwan is a peculiar situation
  - Both sides basically say it is part of China but have different views on what party should rule it
  - The extended deterrence commitment is not a good idea for the US
  - Less than half Taiwan’s people would support a war with China since they are now so closely tied economically as well as culturally
  - US could stop China from taking over Taiwan militarily, but the US could not give back to the Taiwanese the life they had before the conflict
  - US should weaken its commitment to Taiwan
    - If Taiwan acquires nuclear weapons, the US should pull out of its commitments completely
    - US should make sure that Taiwan understands that it can only go so far with independence efforts before losing US support
- Israel should not be cut loose but its financial/military support should be cut far back
  - Israelis do not make their security policy decisions based on available resource considerations
  - Israel should be made to pay for its own efforts in the West Bank
  - Israelis should be forced to have more debates about the value of holding on to the Territories
- There is so much consensus in the US about Grand Strategy issues that we are not discussing ways to do things that are less costly or less intrusive
Current situation cannot go on forever
Should have a “Break Glass in Case of Insolvency” alarm system
  • When the economy faltered Ben Bernanke had one ready based on his study of the Great Depression
  • We need something similar now about resources for the Grand Strategy

Great Powers generally do not behave in the restrained way that the US does
- Late in the 19th Century the Brits made it work for awhile
- The US Grand Strategy of restraint must continue
  - But must remain attentive to changes in balances of power in the world
  - The Brits were fairly watchful about the rise of Germany before WWI
- US could do well with this restraint for now
  - Brits did have relative peace from 1815 to 1914
  - This 100 years of peace was a pretty decent run