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*U.S. GLOBAL POLICY*

Challenges to  
BUILDING A 21st CENTURY  
**GRAND STRATEGY**

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## **U.S. Global Policy: Challenges to Building a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Grand Strategy**

### **Disclaimer**

**On March 4, 2010 at the Meridian International Center in Washington, DC, The American Assembly, The Robert S. Strauss Center for International Security and Law, the Center for New American Security (CNAS), and the Meridian International Center convened an Assembly entitled “U.S. Global Policy: Challenges to Building a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Grand Strategy” as part of the Next Generation Project. This report is the cosponsors’ best representation of what was said at the meeting, where no attempt was made to reach conclusions or achieve consensus. The Next Generation Project Fellows did not review this report at the conclusion of their meeting nor prior to its posting.**

**The cosponsoring institutions do not take a position on subjects presented here for public discussion. Comments by the fellows were on a not-for-attribution basis, and the fellows spoke for themselves and not for the organizations with which they are affiliated.**

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### **Introduction**

President Barack Obama campaigned for office on the promise of a fresh approach to global policy in the United States. As we approach the midway point of his term in office, it is time to assess whether the Obama administration is guided by such an overarching grand strategy. If so, what are the elements of this grand strategy, how was it formulated, and how might it be implemented in the years to come? As discussed at the previous Next Generation Project Assembly “Obama – One Year Later,” the priorities and agenda of the Obama presidential campaign have not always translated into actual policy. As such, this Assembly set out to identify U.S. global policy goals in the Obama Administration and make recommendations for creating a successful grand strategy in the future.

Following a panel discussion on “Grand Strategy in an Age of Smart Power,” the Next Generation Fellows analyzed why the United States needs a grand strategy and what parts of government are responsible for crafting and implementing this vision. The Fellows then discussed the elements of its framework and how to make this grand strategy accessible and compelling to global policy audiences.

## **Is a Grand Strategy Necessary?**

### **No Grand Enemy**

A successful United States grand strategy should advance American interests while increasing peace, security, and stability in the international system. There was dissent among the fellows regarding its practical application, however. Some fellows argued that “grand strategy” is an outdated concept. Absent an existential threat akin to the Soviet Union during the Cold War, these fellows believe a narrowly defined grand strategy would be too difficult to achieve. It would also prevent the flexibility needed to confront the more complex, diffuse global challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

It is the very absence of a singular, grand enemy, several fellows rebutted, that makes having a fully thought-out, robust grand strategy all the more important. They noted that when the United States has a grand or great enemy, there is a clear direction to policy that allocates U.S. funding and resources. Therefore, the absence of such an enemy constitutes a more compelling reason to create and implement a grand strategy. For example, the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks upon the United States began a war on terrorism and subsequently, a greater defined global policy agenda. Most of the fellows feel that after nine years, however, a new framework and set of organizing principles are needed to replace the concept of the War on Terror.

### **Rise of the Rest**

The United States is no longer one of just two superpowers in the global arena. The fellows noted that the current distribution of strength, combined with factors such as trade, migration, open borders, and globalization, parallels international affairs more so 100 years ago than the more recent Cold War. One fellow described this international system as the “rise of the rest,” in which there are multiple important actors. Issues such as global climate change and energy security reveal the increased complexity of today’s international arena, however. Some fellows believe this proves that a world power must have a defined grand strategy to negotiate global policy, set international priorities and navigate a multitude of players.

However, now that the rest have risen, is grand strategy a necessity or merely a luxury? It stands to note that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, larger shares of world regimes are democracies and tend to be more peaceful towards other states and their own people. As such, many questioned the relevance of old-fashioned balance-of-power politics in an age of rapid globalization and interdependence. Some even believe that the U.S. is in fact pursuing a very straightforward grand strategy—promoting democratic regimes worldwide.

### **Pragmatism and the United States**

As one fellow noted, “having a grand strategy is un-American.” Pragmatism plays a large role in American thought, and it is impossible to approach every new situation or international trend

with pre-set strategy in mind. As a heterogeneous culture and people, some fellows noted that a unified vision is not plausible. On the other hand, given America's immense diversity, a grand strategy may become increasingly important in order to pursue a cohesive approach to policy-making and international development. If a grand strategy is necessary, the Assembly argued that it is vital we have a clear and effective process for crafting and implementing this framework. Without clear articulation of the challenges facing the United States, there can be no real strategy in American policy. In the end, when placed to a vote, more than seventy-five percent of the fellows agreed that some form of a grand strategy needs to be articulated.

## **Who Implements Grand Strategy?**

### **Role of Congress**

Most of the fellows agreed that the executive branch bears the responsibility of implementing a grand strategy. However, Congress has the "power of the purse" and therefore plays a critical role supporting grand strategy goals through resource allocation. As such, Congress' approval of a grand strategy is essential as even a small number of legislators have the power to stop or reverse policy. This creates challenges to long-term policy goals. Although legislators must focus on the immediate needs of their specific constituencies in order to be reelected, these conflicting interests must be balanced for effective change.

### **Leveraging the Private Sector**

The fellows agreed that the private sector has an important role to play in grand strategy, as well. Certain qualities found in the private sector – such as an emphasis on innovation and change—are useful in creating and implementing an efficient and flexible grand strategy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While corporations are not altruistic entities and the private sector tends to have a shorter shelf-life than the slow, sustained growth of the public sector, the key is to utilize the best elements of the private sector while realizing its limits. As such, public-private partnerships (PPP) are potential avenues to promote grand strategy in defense, diplomacy, and development. PPPs are collaborative, non-traditional relationships that require shared risk and shared reward, which allow the government to harness and coordinate private sector initiatives to address long-term issues such as climate change.

## **What is Grand Strategy in the Obama Administration?**

### **Global Policy Agenda—Renewal and Reassurance**

The principal goal of grand strategy is to promote peace, prosperity, and stability. This goal can only be accomplished if the current administration, Congress, the American people, and the private sector are able to effectively collaborate on end goals and values. Although bipartisanship and bureaucratic barriers impede cooperation in American politics, the Assembly agreed that reassurance and renewal has marked both the rhetoric and general approach of the

Obama administration. From a steady improvement in relationships with allies to the incremental break from the Bush administration, the Obama administration has made an effort to set aside unilateralism. As one fellow put it, this may be a “spectacularly unsexy” approach to grand strategy, but it is a driving factor in the Obama administration. From resetting relations with Russia to combating climate change and reinvigorating non-proliferation norms, foreign policy issues in this administration have followed these guiding principles.

### **Regional Strategy in an Interconnected World**

The opening panel noted that one way to implement a grand strategy while addressing the multidimensional policy challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to create an ecosystem of solutions. Threads of continuity must span global policy based on the themes of partnerships, engagement, balance, military/non-military investment, security, and development. These themes, then, will drive disparate actions in government. Webs of regional stability driven by both regional actors and the global community will sustain international peace and development across multiple administrations, as well.

An example of the necessity of an ecosystem of solutions is clear in U.S. policy goals in the Middle East. The Obama administration aims to preserve regional stability, protect strategic relationships, prevent conflict, and provide means for development and the growth of human rights. A combination of regional dynamics, from Arab-Israeli tensions to Sunni-Shi’a polarization, and interstate threats (such as Iranian nuclear ambitions) must be addressed in tandem to achieve this. The situation is further confounded by sub-state, non-state, and transnational threats for which solutions may include, for example, the establishment of terrorist safe havens in fractured states such as Iraq and Yemen. In order to address one of these issues, it is necessary to implement a cohesive, collaborative strategy that takes into account all these regional concerns.

### **Integrated Thinking**

Integrated thinking is essential in implementing a grand strategy and must leverage the promises of technology, as well. Although there is great room for improvement, this has been a signature of the Obama administration. There are compelling examples of how this might be done. For instance, there is currently a project in Afghanistan to extend the banking system on mobile phones to allow the transfer of funds electronically directly to the Afghan police force via their mobile phones. Another example is a tele-medicine initiative in Africa, which leverages a mobile iPhone application that has the capacity to act as a stethoscope. This allows doctors in California to hear heartbeats and diagnose patients in Africa. Integrated thinkers or “Renaissance officials,” people with experience in the public and private sectors, are vital for projects such as these to be sustainable and increase stability in the international system. With its current rate of growth, technology will only continue to grow in importance as part of the development of a grand strategy, in big and small ways, from our dealings with the Afghan police, to the government’s own obsolete information technology.

## **What are the Next Steps?**

### **Efficient Governance**

U.S. political realities challenge implementation of a global policy agenda. As mentioned briefly, the structure of federal funding hampers the ability of the government to act flexibly and respond to issues in a timely manner. As one fellow pointed out, we need to match resources to our greatest challenges and not the converse. One way to prioritize issues is to create mission-based budgeting versus department-based budgeting. Currently, however, a large gap exists between political rhetoric and the financial means to implement ideas set forth by this administration. A grand strategy must take into account domestic realities and the limitations they represent, as well. Relatively short presidential terms in the U.S. curtail broad agenda-making. For instance, Chinese leaders are able to think of a global policy agenda in terms of ten and twenty year increments, whereas limited U.S. presidential terms hinder the ability of American administrations to create and sustain long-term agendas.

A disconnect between people who think about policy and those who make policy can impair change management, as well. Until there is broader cooperation, grand strategy in an era of smart power will not succeed. Innovation is crucial yet there is neither a reward system nor incentives for federal employees to apply creative thinking. A model like the Defense Applied Research Projects Agency (DARPA), which has the primary responsibility to maintain U.S. technological superiority over potential adversaries, has the potential to generate ideas in a federal bureaucracy where poor coordination is quickly becoming a national security issue. Cross-departmental cooperation will also increase the likelihood of efficient change. Small steps can make a large difference, such as encouraging interagency assignment. For example, the Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR), a study by the U.S. Department of State, analyzes the short-, medium-, and long-term blueprint for U.S. diplomatic and development efforts abroad involving members from multiple departments. By emphasizing long-term planning, the QDDR seeks to integrate diplomacy and development missions under one planning process. This is an important step to core institutional reforms and corrective changes necessary for broad cooperation.

### **Strategic Engagement**

The foreign and national security policy worlds are populated by a small and at times insular group with similar backgrounds and experiences. A huge talent pool is missed as strategy is largely devised in New York and Washington D.C. at the highest levels. International cooperation would benefit a great deal if the U.S. government leveraged diverse pools of talents, experiences and ideas to a greater extent. Thousands of students study abroad, and U.S. cities have sister cities all over the world. By failing to coordinate with these public initiatives, as well as universities, healthcare systems, and the private sector, the government is losing valuable strategic partners. As previously stated, public private partnerships (PPPs) can serve as a successful model of strategic engagement to increase stability and create conditions

that are conducive to increased investment and growth. As most of the aid flowing into developing countries is, in fact, from the private sector, this avenue benefits all.

## **Conclusion**

The rate of change in economic and technological growth in the past century is beyond any other, and there is no sign the pace will slow. The United States is facing a growing slate of new global policy issues, increased voter awareness, and the growing role of private business in public policy. The way the federal government conceives and executes a grand strategy must take into account all these issues. Strategic engagement has become more critical than ever as foreign policy issues have become as multidimensional as the actors involved. As one of the fellows stated, recognizing alternative models for a grand strategy is *not* an admission of “declinism” but rather a realistic approach to governance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

As a leading exporter of high technology goods in conjunction with a dynamic, entrepreneurial economy, the United States possesses powerful and compelling tools to engage the international community from a position of credibility and leadership. As such, issues that have the potential to threaten this economic foundation, such as state instability and regional conflict, must be considered the greatest threats to U.S. national security. A global policy agenda or grand strategy must therefore address the balance of power, economic stability, and regional development while addressing a coordinated ecosystem of solutions.



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