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Strategic Engagement's Track Record

The word often used to describe President Barack Obama's approach to foreign policy is "engagement." Obama has expressed his instinctive willingness to talk to the enemies of the United States, promised a new era of engagement with the Muslim world, extended an olive branch to Iran, spoken of his desire to engage new partners in global governance, and articulated a vision of international politics premised on the existence of shared interests among nations. Yet, engagement is an amorphous and vague concept. Its purpose, parameters, and promise remain unclear. To some, it is a tactic, not a strategy.

The Obama administration's strategy of engagement, hereafter called strategic engagement, can be best understood as the first part of a worldview developed during the 2000s whereby U.S. foreign policy was conceptualized into two—engagement to build cooperative partnerships with those states and non-state actors who operate within, or seek to join, the international order, and war, containment, or coercive diplomacy toward those—such as terrorist organizations, the Taliban, and North Korea—who seek to undermine, destroy, or operate outside of it. Strategic engagement is premised on the assumption that most states increasingly share the same interests, and it seeks to increase global cooperation near to the heights achieved among Western countries during the Cold War.

The Obama administration has disaggregated strategic engagement into five components: engaging civilizations, allies, new partners, adversaries, and

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institutions. Strategic engagement began as a foreign policy experiment with hypotheses about how states were likely to respond to the offer of greater cooperation. But now, after almost a year and a half of the Obama administration, there is a track record that can be used to test its assumptions and propositions, and adjust course accordingly—keeping the ideas that have been validated and amending those that have not. The evidence thus far suggests that strategic engagement has largely succeeded in meeting its ambitious goals in only one category—engaging civilizations. Ambitions in others have been scaled back given geopolitical realities, which have also called into question some of the strategy's underlying assumptions and propositions.

In particular, the experience of 2009 suggests that while some major powers, including China, accept parts of the international order, they also have significant differences with the United States about the order's shape, purpose, and future direction as well as their role in upholding it. Relations between the member states of this global order will require sustained cooperation, but they will also be more competitive and prone to limited rivalry than relations among members of the Western order were during the Cold War. In the old Western order, member states enjoyed a "security community" where war and conflict was not only unlikely but unthinkable. In today's global order, the necessity for cooperation sits uneasily alongside the fact of geopolitical competition with some of the new member states such as China.

In light of this evidence, the United States should change course. *Cooperative strategic engagement*, which assumes shared interests among major powers and provided a sound way of managing relations among members of the old international order of Western powers, must give way, at least for the foreseeable future, to a concept of *competitive strategic engagement*, which recognizes that the core interests and preferences of members of the emerging international order will often diverge and will sometimes be driven by concerns about relative power. This competition will occur within the general limits of the international order, although on occasion some states will seek to shift the equilibrium in their favor without completely overthrowing it. Its essence will be a geopolitical struggle for influence, as distinct from the normal economic competition that occurs between allies. Therefore, strengthening the U.S. economy and education system, as described in the Obama administration's National Security Strategy, is necessary but not sufficient. The competition will be largely diplomatic in nature, as distinct from the militarized Cold War struggle, although military strength will help determine diplomatic and political power. Relations with

other states occur along a spectrum of entente to détente, rather than being defined by the ideological struggles of the past that pitted the United States against revolutionary powers.

The principal challenge facing the United States is to blend engagement and competition to advance its vision of international order. What linkages among issues can it create, and what multilateral mechanisms, including coalitions, can provide alternatives to more inclusive forums that may be prone to deadlock because of diverging interests?

The Logic of Strategic Engagement

Strategic engagement is deeply rooted in a U.S. foreign policy discourse as experts with a predisposition to multilateralism, including many who have become Obama administration officials, sought to come to terms with certain questions, critiques, and ultimately propositions about the future direction of U.S. foreign policy animated by two critical developments. The first, and by far the most dramatic, was the collapse of the post–Cold War peace and the onset of war following al Qaeda's attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001. This ensured that any future administration would need to concern itself with the prosecution of a long war, not just against al Qaeda but also in the counterinsurgency campaigns in Afghanistan, Iraq, and parts of Pakistan.

The second was the erosion of the multilateral order of alliances, institutions, and norms that had defined the contours of U.S. strategic choices since the early Cold War period. This erosion, driven by a combination of changing international realities and by the Bush administration's policy of freeing the United States from multilateral obligations, meant that a new president committed to multilateralism would have to repair and reform the architecture of the international order, which had been left relatively untouched during and since the Clinton years. In addressing these two developments, a strategic worldview developed, establishing some of the ideas that have shaped the Obama administration's approach.[1]

An Interdependent Premise

These strategists developed three main critiques of post-9/11 U.S. foreign policy strategy. First, organizing U.S. foreign policy around important threats like al Qaeda and Iran's nuclear program neglected the broader international environment and U.S. interests in it. Specifically, a threat-focused approach sidelined globalization in U.S. thinking, even though it had emerged as the preeminent driver of international politics in the twenty-first century, creating a network of complex interdependencies that shape challenges as diverse as the radicalization of Western European Muslims to financial imbalances between China and the United States. These strategists believed that a fuller appreciation

of the interdependence brought on by the key driver of globalization would facilitate a foreign policy focused on protecting long-term U.S. interests as well as combating near-term threats.

Second, the frame of a "Global War on Terror" with radical Islam as the named enemy alienated ordinary Muslims and empowered extremists by defining U.S. relations with over 1.5 billion people through the lens of counterterrorism. Making counterterrorism or "World War IV" the organizing principle of U.S. foreign policy promised to unify the enemies of the United States by playing into their desire to fight a religious war, rather than seeking to divide the adversary by seeking fissures within it.[2]

Third, U.S. exceptionalism had the effect of decoupling the United States from the international community and weakening the international order. From this perspective, the United States could only ask other nations to join it in enforcing international norms, such as nonproliferation, if it led by example. Similarly, while the United States needed to retain a military edge, U.S. allies, partners, and friends also needed to be reassured about that power and its uses, returning to a tradition held for over 60 years that bounded U.S. power and limited its freedom of action in a series of international rules and norms governing peace and security. U.S. alliances and multilateral commitments, not its unilateral power, helped strengthen the international order and, consequently, U.S. influence in it.

Strategic Engagement in Theory

Although it has never quite been expressed this way in a single document, in essence this interdependent worldview divided the world in two—1) those partners, which include the vast majority of states, that are inside the international order, and 2) those state and non-state actors who are outside of it and cannot be coaxed in. Strategists developed two key corresponding elements for a positive U.S. foreign policy vision.

First, "strategic engagement" focused on how to expand, reform, and deepen the international order so that the United States and others could be better equipped to address the threats, challenges, and opportunities posed by globalization. By the 2008 election, Democratic foreign policy experts generally expressed the belief that the United States and the rest of the international community shared the same major threats and challenges including terrorism, climate change, pandemic disease, instability in the global economy, and nuclear proliferation. States would continue to have their differences—e.g., China and the United States over Taiwan, Russia and the United States over Georgia—but these differences were secondary to what they held in common. Perhaps the most in-depth treatment of this view was offered after the election by Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton in July 2009,

when she said that while states have shared interests, they also "face very real obstacles–for reasons of history, geography, ideology, and inertia" which "stand in the way of turning commonality of interest into common action." Consequently, the "heart of America's mission in the world today" is to create new partnerships and to "promote universal values through the power of our example and the empowerment of people" in order to "forge the global consensus required to defeat the threats, manage the dangers, and seize the opportunities of the 21st century."[3]

The U.S. is building relationships with ordinary Muslims, not just their governments.

Defining the problems of the United States as the problems of all states redefines international politics as a complex problem-solving exercise. Therefore, the key task of U.S. foreign policy is to generate the levels of international cooperation required to solve these problems. The Obama administration's National Security Strategy, released on May 27, 2010, stated that "the starting point for collective action will be our engagement with other countries" and identified as an enduring American interest an "international order advanced by U.S. leadership that promotes peace, security, and opportunity through stronger cooperation to meet global challenges."[4] The United States' convening power, its vast tool kit, the relatively nonthreatening nature of its power once it is embedded in international rules, and its ability to connect at multiple levels to other actors in an interdependent world means that the United States is ideally placed to overcome or manage some of the obstacles that stand in the way of cooperation. This, however, also means that the United States must build cooperative capacity beyond the historic alliances of the Cold War era. Concerns about the feasibility of universal cooperation remained, but these were eased by support for what strategist Francis Fukuyama called "multi-multilateralism," whereby the United States could choose from a new, more flexible set of multilateral forums to find the one that would best suit the task at hand.[5]

The second element of this worldview defines security threats to the United States as principally emanating from terrorist networks, failed states, and rogue regimes that reject the opportunity, offered in good faith, to integrate into the international system. As the 2010 National Security Strategy put it, "Rules of the road must be followed, and there must be consequences for those nations that break the rules—whether they are nonproliferation obligations, trade agreements, or human rights commitments."[6] Thus, partnerships and alliances with members or prospective members of the international order should be expanded, while waging war or pursuing containment or coercive diplomacy, either multilaterally or bilaterally, should be pursued with those actors who fell

outside it.[7] Consequently, the core tenets of strategic engagement are entirely consistent with a surge in Afghanistan, extending the tour of duty for combat troops in Iraq, expanding a drone war against al Qaeda, or seeking tougher sanctions on Iran.

Strategic Engagement in Practice

With the election of 2008, these ideas were moved from theory to practice, influencing policy in how to approach five separate actors: civilizations, allies, partners, adversaries, and institutions. The results of strategic engagement's first year in practice have varied among those five categories quite substantially.

Civilizational Engagement

On June 4, 2009, in a speech at Cairo University, Obama promised to open a new era of engagement with Muslim communities and Muslim majority states.[8] This speech launched a major change in U.S. foreign policy with two distinctive characteristics.

> The results of engaging with allies have been generally disappointing.

First, the United States is building relationships with ordinary Muslims, not just the regimes or governments of Muslim majority states. The regimes are losing popular support and have become increasingly discredited as a result of regime corruption, repression, entrenched authoritarianism, and the growth of an alternative religious-nationalist identity and ideology. From the perspective of civilizational engagement, the Bush administration correctly recognized the danger of relying upon alliances with authoritarian regimes, but it erred in trying to impose a new form of democratic governance from abroad. Instead, the United States now seeks to build relationships with "Muslim communities," which has replaced the term the "Muslim world" in official U.S. communications, including presidential speeches.

Second, the Obama administration is seeking to create a comprehensive relationship between the United States and Muslim communities that moves beyond national security issues like terrorism and radicalization to include education, entrepreneurship, science and technology, and the empowerment of women.[9] Muslims should not view the United States through the lens of counterterrorism alone. Over the long run, directly engaging Muslim communities on matters of mutual interest is necessary to create a positive relationship between the United States and ordinary Muslims, in much the same way that the relationship between the United States and Europe is multi-faceted.[10] Engagement should make Muslim communities more active

participants in their own societies, and it should mitigate the risk that movement toward democracy would result in empowering anti-Americanism.

The administration's engagement of Muslim communities has met its core objective of expanding the relationship between the United States and ordinary Muslims beyond counterterrorism. The Cairo speech was followed by the development of broad-based engagement by U.S. government officials, which includes: contact between U.S. officials and local communities on issues of mutual concern; an effort to create a sustainable partnership with Muslim communities on entrepreneurship; a series of initiatives relating to women's issues, science and technology, as well as education; and the overall adoption by the U.S. government of an approach that includes departments not normally associated with U.S. foreign policy. Multilateral organizations and other governments have followed suit to assist with some of these efforts, such as the April 2010 summit on entrepreneurship. While the regimes of many Muslim majority states appear uneasy with U.S. efforts to outreach to their citizens, they have facilitated it so far. Ordinary Muslims remain opposed to aspects of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East and Afghanistan, but appear to be generally receptive to the U.S. attempt to lay the foundations of comprehensive engagement.[11] The fruits of the strategy will not be immediately apparent, but the administration has created a framework that may prove sustainable. Two significant challenges remain.

The first is how to reorganize the bureaucratic infrastructure of U.S. foreign policy to include domestically-focused agencies and departments that have expertise critical to engaging Muslim communities, including the departments of Commerce, Education, Health and Human Services, and Labor. The Obama administration has set up an interagency task force coordinated by the National Security Council, but much remains to be done in securing the funding necessary for government engagement, ensuring it remains a priority for all departments, and developing the skill sets and standards for officials more used to domestic policy than foreign policy.

Second, over the long run, there is some concern that comprehensive engagement of Muslim communities will come up short if it cannot engage directly with mainstream Islamic political parties in opposition, which tens of millions of Muslims throughout the Middle East perceive as their legitimate representative organizations. The United States must also reconcile its general support for political freedom and democracy with the practice of allying with authoritarian regimes and tacitly supporting the marginalization of anti-American political parties. The Obama administration has reached out to representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood (those who hold local elected office in Egypt) and others, but does not engage with these parties more generally. The U.S. government also does not engage with Hamas and Hezbollah partly because

both are officially designated as terrorist organizations by the U.S. Department of States.

In a lecture on the Obama administration's Cairo strategy, Emile Nakhleh, the former director of the Central Intelligence Agency's Political Islam Strategic Analysis Program, argues that a failure to engage "mainstream Islamic political parties" will limit the ability of the United States to implement the post–Cairo agenda, and could damage U.S. efforts to reverse the tide of extremism. Nakhleh observes that many of these Islamic parties, including Hamas, face a rising threat from pro-al Qaeda Salafi groups that espouse an extreme, exclusivist, and violent ideology.[12] This conflict is currently playing out in the Gaza Strip where Hamas is locked in violent conflict with pro-al Qaeda Palestinian groups, such as the Salafi Jund Ansar Allah group.[13] According to Nakhleh, U.S. engagement of moderate elements of relatively mainstream Islamic parties could empower them against the al Qaeda groups, but such engagement is severely complicated by the fact that some of these mainstream Islamic parties are also involved in terrorist activities and are identified as "fundamentalist" (albeit of a more pragmatic and less ideological variety than the Salafi groups). To successfully create a comprehensive relationship with the Muslim world, the Obama administration will either need to consider ways to prudently engage mainstream Islamic parties like the Muslim Brotherhood or develop the means of connecting with ordinary Muslims without going through Islamic political parties. John Brennan, assistant to the president and deputy national security adviser for homeland security and counter-terrorism, indicated that the administration may be preparing to engage the political parties directly. In May 2010, he told a conference:

China has become much more assertive and may view the U.S. as a power in decline.

> there are certainly the elements of Hezbellah that are truly a concern to us with what they're doing. And what we need to do is to find ways to diminish their influence within the organization and try to build up the more moderate elements.[14]

Engaging Allies

Upon taking office, the Obama administration intended to restore the United States' good standing with the governments and peoples of allied nations by demonstrating good faith through a series of unilateral acts of cooperation (e.g., closing Guantánamo, working on climate change, and reengaging with the International Criminal Court) and treating allies as equal partners instead of

subordinates. In exchange, they expected allied nations to deepen their cooperation with the United States and take on a greater share of the burden in dealing with global challenges. The results have been generally disappointing.

The administration invested the president's time in the transatlantic relationship in 2009—for instance the president visited Europe on six occasions during the course of the year, with the hope of securing a greater commitment in Afghanistan. Yet, European support fell far short of U.S. expectations. There were also difficulties on other issues; for instance, individual states were reluctant to take in prisoners from Guantánamo. U.S. hopes that Europe would capitalize on the provisions of the Lisbon treaty to develop a common foreign policy were dashed when the EU missed an opportunity to choose a heavy-weight foreign policy chief. Overall, Americans worry that the transatlantic alliance remains largely irrelevant to U.S. challenges in the Middle East or East Asia. For their part, Europeans worry that the administration is neglecting its interests in Europe. For instance, in February 2010, Obama pulled out of the U.S.–EU summit scheduled for May which, as events unfolded, would have provided an ideal opportunity for the United States and Europe to coordinate their responses to the euro crisis.

U.S. alliances are also under pressure. The election of the Democratic Party of Japan put the U.S.–Japan alliance in a state of near crisis and led to an intensive effort by the Obama administration to bridge the gap on contentious issues such as the U.S. Marine base in Okinawa. South Korea is concerned by the U.S. failure to lead on matters of trade, including the moribund South Korea–U.S. Free Trade Agreement. India, which some U.S. experts believe to be a natural future ally of the United States, feels that the Obama administration has done little to build on the Bush administration's bilateral engagement. In the Middle East, U.S.–Israel relations are at a low point following a very public disagreement over settlements.

Taken as a whole, the emerging conservative critique of Obama's foreign policy is that it fails to distinguish between friends and potential adversaries, thus allowing traditional U.S. alliances to wither on the vine.[15] Some of the evidence of 2009 and 2010 suggests that the Obama administration has a relatively instrumentalist view of alliances that judges their importance by their relevance to U.S. strategic challenges of the twenty-first century, rather than by historical bonds of common experience or shared values. It is also true that a series of minor mistakes and incidents—including the timing of the announcement of the missile defense decision (on the 70th anniversary of the Soviet invasion of Poland), the exclusion of allies from the Afghanistan review process, and others—have not been helpful. These instances, however, are also of limited significance and obscure a much larger issue.

U.S. relations with its allies have been in trouble for about a decade. Although neoconservative and conservative foreign policy thinkers now speak up on behalf of Europe, they and the Bush administration belittled and dismissed traditional U.S. alliances during George W. Bush's first term.[16] Now, the Obama administration has to deal with the fact that many U.S. allies are unwilling and/ or unable to play a large role in tackling global security challenges. Across all fronts, U.S. alliances continue to suffer from the lack of clarity about their purpose and their role in a changing world. In many cases, weakness in the domestic political system of an ally—whether it be Japan's decline, Europe's divisions, or Israel's weak coalition governments—lie at the heart of the matter. Strategic engagement has failed in its attempt to reverse this trend, but there is no reason to believe that it has exacerbated the problem. In fact, it may have performed a service by clarifying the reasons for the difficulties in the United States' system of alliances.

Obama admitted in an interview on the first anniversary of his inauguration that his administration "overestimated our ability to persuade" Israel and the Palestinians to take steps to advance the peace process "when their [domestic] politics ran contrary to that."[17] That admission reflects a broader failure to appreciate the domestic constraints operating in allied nations and to understand how to deal with these constraints in a way that allows those governments to do what they can to strengthen their relationships with the United States.

Building New Partnerships

The centerpiece of the Obama administration's effort to reform and deepen the international architecture of cooperation has been an effort to forge new partnerships with major countries that are not formal allies of the United States. In practice, this meant an ambitious attempt to forge new partnerships with China and Russia, while placing much less emphasis on efforts to do so with other candidates like Brazil and India. It is unclear why the administration chose to prioritize China and Russia but it may be that they intended to start with the two most powerful states in the hope that the other elements would fall into place later. A contrary view is that working with other democracies may have provided China and Russia with an incentive to cooperate.

The Bush administration expressed the hope that China would be a "responsible stakeholder" in the international order; the Obama administration began by treating China as if it was already a responsible stakeholder in that order, expecting that it shared U.S. goals, ambitions, as well as interests, and was prepared to take on a much greater share of the burden of international leadership.[18] Although the administration avoided the use of the term G-2 for fear of offending U.S. allies, it behaved as if a de facto G-2 was its near-term objective.[19] The Obama administration sought to deepen cooperation with

China in 2009—multilaterally through the G-20, and bilaterally through the Strategic and Economic Dialogue (SED) and a presidential visit to China in November 2009. U.S. officials avoided actions that could aggravate Chinese officials, such as deferring the president meeting the Dalai Lama in the fall of 2009 and exploring adjustments in its relations with India to change policies that could rile China.[20]

Can the Russian government be a partner in advancing the goals of international order?

By early 2010, this policy collapsed as the administration and outside observers questioned whether China shared U.S. objectives and was willing to take on the burdens of leadership in the international order.[21] The difficulties piled up. China was widely believed to be manipulating its currency in a way that contributed to financial imbalances with the United States and rebuffed U.S. efforts to address it. Obama's trip to China in November 2009 was much more tightly controlled and choreographed than previous presidential visits, ending with few clear accomplishments.[22] In December 2009, China's hard-line at the Copenhagen summit on climate change was widely blamed for the collapse of the negotiations. In January 2010, Google announced its intention to pull out of China amidst allegations of cyber attacks emanating from Chinese nationals. China became more aggressive in projecting its power in the South China Sea. Overall, U.S. officials sensed that following the financial crisis, China had become much more assertive and viewed the United States as a power in decline.

In early 2010, the administration moved away from the initial premise underpinning strategic engagement with China—which was that they share the same interest in tackling challenges to the international order. Instead, the United States gradually made use of various levers to put pressure on China, something it avoided doing in 2009. In January 2010, Clinton made a major speech defending internet freedom; Obama met the Dalai Lama in February 2010; the United States sold defensive weapons to Taiwan. Initially, Beijing reacted vociferously, raising the prospect of a long-term deterioration in U.S.–China relations. The Cable, a blog for *Foreign Policy*, quoted a senior Obama administration official as saying:

> The Chinese Foreign Ministry has lost confidence in how to respond [to the U.S. decisions on Taiwan and Tibet] . . . There are many inside the Chinese system with an increasingly hard-line view, saying 'It's our time,' while another group is saying about the U.S., "Don't count these guys out, we still need them for a while."[23]

China Daily, the official English language newspaper of the Chinese government, carried a quote saying a visit of U.S. officials to China was "just a start" to "save strained bilateral ties."[24] During that visit, Chinese officials indicated that they

see U.S. support for Taiwan and their support for tougher sanctions on Iran as linked.[25]

By April 2010, however, the Chinese government changed its approach and made a number of important overtures to Washington. President Hu Jintao attended the nuclear security summit in April 2010, and there were signs of cooperation on currency as well as on a UN resolution on Iran.[26] In other spheres, such as in the South China Sea, Chinese assertiveness continued and even accelerated.[27] The turbulent experience of late 2009 and early 2010 caused the Obama administration to move away from its original G-2 approach toward a broader focus on Asia. The administration continues to engage China, but no longer assumes that the two countries share a common assessment of global challenges. It is also clear that U.S. officials responsible for Asia see the United States as engaged in a competition for influence with China in the region. As Henry Nau has pointed out, power politics may no longer be zero-sum, but it can be relative sum where one country can gain more than the other in a way that is of benefit to its long-term position.[28]

With such a dynamic relationship, it is important not to exaggerate the significance of a single moment in time for the simple reason that there are powerful incentives constantly pushing for cooperation as well as rivalry. Whenever one appears to be ascendant, the other pushes the pendulum back the other way. The lessons from the first year and a half of the administration are that the United States and China do not always see eye-to-eye, and strategic engagement will not always result in increased cooperation. If anything, better relations appeared to coincide with increasing steadfastness by the Obama administration in early 2010.

The Obama administration's other major initiative to engage new partners was its Russia policy. Toward the end of the Bush administration, the United States and Russia were drifting back toward an adversarial relationship due to rising oil prices which gave Russia a new sense of confidence; Russian anti-Americanism that encouraged an assertive foreign policy; differences over missile defense; the Russian invasion of Georgia; and plans for further NATO expansion. The Obama administration offered to reset relations with Russia: meeting in London during the G-20 in April 2009, Obama and President Dmitri Medvedev issued a joint statement declaring that they are "ready to move beyond Cold War mentalities and chart a fresh start in relations between our two countries."[29] Russia and the United States signed a new Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START) treaty in April 2010. The Obama administration placed much less emphasis than its predecessor on the idea of further NATO expansion. The two presidents appear to have a relatively close relationship.

Complications, however, remained. Negotiations over the new START treaty took much longer than expected, which may have been a signal that Moscow

wanted to prolong talks with Washington.[30] Although Medvedev told Obama that Russia would support "smart sanctions" on Iran, he later said that Russia would oppose "paralyzing, crippling sanctions."[31] Differences also continue over the U.S. role in Afghanistan and Russia's proposal for reform of the security architecture in Europe.[32] Meanwhile, anti-Americanism remains pervasive in Russian society, particularly among the political elites.[33]

While the "reset" with Russia appears to have borne some fruit, the evidence is only sufficient to suggest that it may have stopped the drift toward adversarial relations, and that it has been relatively successful in clearing the air of mutual suspicion and anger. Although Moscow and Washington are well placed to improve their relations, they have not demonstrated that Russia and the United States are of a similar mind on how to manage the challenges of international order, such as Iran's nuclear program. None of these developments rule out greater cooperation, but it does raise a question about whether the Obama administration can rely upon the Russian government to be a partner in advancing the goals of international order in anything close to the same way that it might rely on France or the United Kingdom.

Engagement of adversaries has clarified that the threat is driven by the preferences of the other states.

Meanwhile, the administration has come up short in attempts to reach out to rising mid-tier powers, such as Brazil and India. Both have opposed tougher sanctions with Iran, with Brazil even brokering a deal on nuclear energy with Iran in May 2010, much to the dismay of the Obama administration. Both lined up with China at the Copenhagen summit, and there are signs that both feel left behind by the administration's focus on China and Russia.[34] The task for the Obama administration is to understand the potential of these rising powers, and the extent to which that potential can be realized, by a sustained high-level attention of the sort currently being lavished on Beijing and Moscow. There have been some positive signs. For India, the 2010 National Security Strategy endorsed "a strategic partnership that is underpinned by our shared interests, our shared values as the world's two largest democracies", but it remains to be seen if this is a sign of a substantive shift from the early focus on China.[35]

Engaging Adversaries

In the July 2007 CNN/YouTube Democratic primary candidates' debate, then-Senator Obama was asked if he would "be willing to meet separately, without precondition, during the first year of your administration, in Washington or

anywhere else, with the leaders of Iran, Syria, Venezuela, Cuba, and North Korea, in order to bridge the gap that divides our countries."[36] Obama replied in the affirmative, setting off a firestorm of controversy. In the weeks that followed, the campaign refined and clarified the position to mean that an Obama administration would be willing to negotiate with U.S. enemies following careful preparation. In office, Obama maintained this policy and sought to use it as a game changer for the thorny problem of Iran's nuclear program.

Originally, the Obama administration's policy of engaging the Iranian regime was designed with two pathways in mind. At one end of the spectrum, a good faith engagement of Iran would allow the administration to take the first steps to a new Persian Gulf regional security framework that would include Tehran by recognizing its rising power and increasing influence but also imposing strict limits over its nuclear program and support for terrorism.[37] At the other end, engagement would clarify the Iranian regime's hostility toward the West, its determination to pursue nuclear weapons capability, and its intention to upset the equilibrium in the Middle East. Such a clarification would enable the United States to secure the support of other nations for tougher actions. Although these two pathways diverged dramatically, they both required the same opening gambit—a good faith effort to engage Iran.

In early 2009, the Obama administration put this into practice. Obama's 2009 Nowruz message on the Persian New Year referred to Iran by its official title, "the Islamic Republic of Iran" and offered an "engagement that is honest and grounded in mutual respect."[38] The president sent two personal letters to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, exploring whether he was prepared to enter into a dialogue. The administration also took a series of actions designed to set the Iranian regime's mind at ease and create a benign environment for engagement. Senior officials communicated with all regional actors to shelve immediate plans to prepare for hostilities with Iran. Talk of regime change and Iranian assistance of the anti-U.S. insurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq were dropped. Arrangements were made for U.S. diplomats to meet their Iranian counterparts in multilateral settings. And, the administration offered to assist Iran on its medical reactor.[39]

In May 2009, Obama told Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel that he was "not going to have talks forever" and expected to know by the end of the year whether Iran was making "a good-faith effort to resolve differences" in talks aimed at ending its nuclear program.[40] Whether or not this strategy ever had any prospect of reaching its more optimistic goal can be debated, but what is clear is that the summer 2009 upheaval in Iran dramatically tilted the equation toward continued Iranian intransigence. The regime's brutal repression of protestors stripped away whatever legitimacy Tehran had in Europe and the United States, left it even more reliant on anti-Western rhetoric to mobilize domestic support,

and made it much less likely to prepare for bold compromises over its nuclear program.

By early 2010, the administration appeared to have given up hope of a change of course although the door remained open. In his Nowruz greetings in March 2010, Obama said that upon taking office he "offered a new chapter of engagement . . . with no illusions" following three decades of alienation, mutual hostility, and substantive differences. A year later, he said "we know what you're against; now, tell us what you're for."[41] Regardless of the cause, the goal of strategic engagement toward Iran is now almost exclusively defined as the second pathway of clarifying Iran's intentions and mobilizing international pressure against its nuclear program.

The only silver lining is that the administration's engagement may be somewhat disorienting for Iranians and could deny the regime a powerful tool of anti-Americanism to relegitimize their rule, although this is unknowable and speculative. Thus, the administration is left in much the same position as the Bush administration—pressing China and Russia to agree to tough sanctions favored by the Obama administration, as well as its European allies, to target the revenues that fund Iran's nuclear program. Whether support for genuinely tough sanctions will be forthcoming remains unclear. Moreover, even if such sanctions were agreed, it is highly uncertain that they will have the desired effect of making the Iranian regime more pliable. The absence of plausible alternative strategies means that the administration has little option except to pursue this course.

Today's competition takes place *within* the framework of the existing international order.

In light of the setbacks to its Iran policy, the Obama administration points to its strategy on North Korea as a more successful instance of how engagement can build support for tougher sanctions. The administration's policy toward North Korea, however, has taken a very different form than its Iran policy and has been much more consistent, in substance and style, to that of its predecessor. In essence, U.S. policy has been to rally the international community to tighten sanctions on North Korea in response to its provocations, while maintaining a dialogue through its envoy Stephen Bosworth in the hope of encouraging North Korea go back to the Six-Party Talks.

The record thus far can be categorized into three phases. The first six months saw a series of North Korean provocations—the launch of a long-range missile in a failed effort to place a satellite into orbit, a second nuclear test, the launch of a ballistic missile, and defiant diplomatic rhetoric—which resulted in tougher international sanctions through UN Security Council resolution 1815. The

second six months saw North Korea refrain from additional acts of aggression and send some signals indicating a desire for talks with the United States and for closer relations with South Korea. The first few months of 2010 have been dominated by speculation about a potential crisis inside North Korea as a result of currency reform, the illness of Kim Jong-il, and the effects of tougher sanctions.[42] On March 26, 2010, North Korea torpedoed a South Korean naval vessel, killing 46 sailors and dramatically escalating tensions with South Korea and the United States. This erupted into a full blown crisis in late May 2010 when an international investigation announced that North Korea was responsible. At the time of writing, the crisis is still unfolding with South Korea and the United States struggling to get Chinese support for tougher sanctions on North Korea.

The Obama administration was never given the opportunity to engage with North Korea. Strategic engagement was already in place with U.S. support for the Six-Party Talks. The general support for tougher sanctions on North Korea appears to have been primarily driven by North Korea's bellicose behavior in the first half of 2009 and its rejection of the talks framework rather than because of any new strategic departure on the part of the United States.

Policymakers need to generate the means to play in this new competition and prevail.

Overall, strategic engagement of adversaries has clarified that the threat is driven by the preferences of other states, rather than by an American refusal to seek a negotiated settlement. Critics will argue that this was apparent anyway and valuable time was lost; supporters of engagement will counter that there is greater consensus in the international community now and the major gambit was worth a try, particularly given the absence of alternatives.

Engaging Institutions

Despite the strong support of many leading strategists for fundamental reform of international institutions, the Obama administration has generally adopted a pragmatic approach toward multilateral organizations—seeking to work with those that work and pushing for incremental reform in those where deficiencies or weaknesses can be identified. The G-20 formally became the primary world leaders forum for coordinating global economic policy in September 2009, almost a year after it was convened to facilitate a global response to the international financial crisis.[43] The Obama administration adopted a cautious approach in international climate change negotiations leading up to the

Copenhagen Summit in December 2009, and responded to the failure of the summit by talking up the limited agreement that was reached.

At the UN, the United States was elected to run the UN Human Rights Council and is trying to gradually redirect its focus by building a coalition of like-minded countries. The administration has not championed far-reaching Security Council reform, even as it gathered steam in the UN General Assembly. It engaged with the International Criminal Court's review conference, essentially renewing the stance taken by the Clinton administration. There has been some progress below the level of treaties and fundamental reform. The secretary of state and the White House have sought to put Internet freedom on the international agenda and a greater emphasis has been placed on informal networks of cooperation between governments.

Much of this caution is laudable. As analyst Stewart Patrick has argued, major reforms are likely to fail in the present international environment because of a lack of demand among the major states.[44] They may even be counterproductive if they are solely focused on expanding membership, as a greater number of member states may make existing institutions less effective.[45] The incremental approach, however, is also at odds with some of the core ideas of the discourse of strategic engagement prior to 2009, which argued that the international architecture failed to deliver the levels of cooperation necessary to address global challenges because they were outdated in terms of membership, areas of focus, and structure. The administration may be counting on the possibility that incremental changes in the status quo, such as increasing effectiveness at the Security Council or the emergence of the G-20, will lead to more comprehensive reform down the road, but there is little reason to believe that the preferences of major states will change without a major crisis that causes all actors to fundamentally reassess their attitude toward international cooperation.

Thus, the key challenge for the United States is to develop a strategy that increases net cooperation by making use of the institutional mechanisms that do exist. On climate change, for example, this may mean engaging a wide range of international institutions not normally associated with the issue including the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, the International Civil Aviation Organization, the International Maritime Organization, and the International Atomic Energy Agency as well as the Major Economies Forum.[46]

The administration's major multilateral initiative has been on nuclear nonproliferation. Obama made transforming the role of nuclear weapons in world politics one of his top foreign policy priorities and has deployed all of the tools at his disposal—convening U.S. power, the power of example, and diplomatic pressure—to advance his vision. In 2009 and early 2010, the United States successfully negotiated the new START treaty with Russia, released the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review which restricted the circumstances when the

United States would use nuclear weapons, and hosted the April 2010 nuclear security summit. Some of these achievements, however, were more modest in scope than originally anticipated, others (such as ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty) appear stalled, and it remains unclear how these steps fit into the broader picture of repairing the nonproliferation regime. In particular, progress appears contingent upon the U.S. ability to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, which could have the effect of sparking a regional arms race and forcing the United States to consider new missions for its nuclear arsenal. Nevertheless, the administration's nuclear policy stands out as an exception to the more general incremental approach, given that it has clearly identified a transformational goal and has made some progress, however incremental, toward it.

In terms of the broader multilateral order, a continuation of the status quo is likely, which raises some difficult questions. How will the administration deal with issues of conflict that exists amongst the views of the various members of international institutions? For instance, what international institution or alliance can be tasked with cybersecurity, a particularly thorny issue given the divergent perspectives of the United States and China? How can the international architecture be changed to address climate change if China or the U.S. Congress continues to block the adoption of significant targets for reduction of carbon emissions? What will the administration do if faced with a global version of the 1999 Kosovo crisis, where the Security Council does not approve of military intervention proposed by the United States? The rules governing preventive war and a discussion about how to legitimate such actions internationally featured prominently in the decade of the 2000s, but there has been little sign of official thinking in this area. Will the administration continue to treat each of the issues—such as climate, global economy, and nonproliferation—separately or will it try to link them, holding up progress in one area until there is progress in another?

Rethinking Strategic Engagement

The evidence of 2009 and 2010 suggests that strategic engagement has largely succeeded in the realm of relations with the Muslim world, but it has encountered unexpected challenges in the other spheres. The most pressing questions concern relations with new partners, which also affect the role of alliances, and policies toward adversaries as well as within international institutions.

The Obama administration took over the reins of U.S. foreign policy with the intention of transforming the international architecture of cooperation to enable the international community to effectively tackle shared problems. In essence,

they wanted to approach the management of the global order in much the same way that previous U.S. administrations had managed the western order during the Cold War. Today's global order, however, is not the same as the Western order of political allies. China, Russia, and others may share many of the transnational foreign policy challenges facing the United States, but they do not necessarily attach the same importance to them. They differ on the degree to which Iranian nuclear weapons threaten international stability, whether or not developing countries have a responsibility to cut carbon emissions, how financial imbalances in the global economy can and should be addressed, and whether or not (and how) cybersecurity should be advanced. Authoritarian states, in particular, are unlikely to share the Obama administration's desire to consolidate and deepen a liberal and democratic global order. In addition, some of the newer member states of the global order continue to see themselves in geopolitical competition with the United States—China in Southeast Asia and Russia in the states of the former Soviet Union. Some of the United States' closest allies share its geopolitical goals, but are unwilling to take on a greater share of the burden of international leadership. And they are unlikely to change their mind in the foreseeable future.

Elements of the Obama administration have begun to prepare for geopolitical competition with the international order. As described above, the United States has indicated that it is moving toward a more competitive strategy with respect to China. Other elements of the administration, however, continue to speak of a fundamental change in international politics whereby the interests of states within the order are shared. For instance, speaking at the Brookings Institution on the release of the 2010 National Security Strategy, Clinton said:

Three new skills are particularly important.

> We are looking to turn multi-polar world into a multi-partner world. I know there is a critique among some that somehow talking this way undercuts American strength, power, leadership. I could not disagree more. I think that we are seeking to gain partners in pursuing American interests. We happen to think a lot of those interests coincide with universal interests.[47]

U.S. interests on Iran and North Korea may be in the interests of the people of the world but, as the difficulties of 2009 demonstrate, they are often not the interests of some of the major states as defined by their governments. Even where governments agree with U.S. objectives, as in the case of European policy toward Afghanistan, they may not judge it in their interest to share more of the burden.

Unfortunately, the administration has done little to think through how it might deal with the fact that the member states of the international order have

fundamental differences of interest. The section of the 2010 National Security Strategy that addresses this problem states:

> When national interests do collide—or countries prioritize their interests in different ways—those nations that defy international norms or fail to meet their sovereign responsibilities will be denied the incentives that come with greater integration and collaboration with the international community.[48]

But, this formulation is more applicable to a rogue state like North Korea than to a major power like China or Russia. The fact that China has different interests in the Middle East or Northeast Asia does not necessarily mean it is defying international norms or failing to meet its sovereign responsibilities; it just means they have different interests. The solution—to deny the incentives that come with greater integration—may work for Iran but is meaningless for Brazil or China, both of whom have clashed with the Obama administration. More likely, this passage was designed to apply to rogue regimes but, in that case, the document says nothing about addressing the divergence of interests or differing priorities of states inside the order.

The obstacles to a new international order are not just due to free-riding, barriers to coordination, misunderstandings, or relatively minor differences, which can eventually be overcome in pursuit of the common good. There are also significant divergences in preferences and perceived interests. In the Western order of the Cold War, the closest economic partners of the United States were also its political allies. These allies not only shared the same problems but also had a broadly similar view about how to tackle the problem. In today's global order, however, the United States needs the support of countries with which it not only disagrees but also views international politics as a relative-sum game. Unlike the geopolitical competition between the United States and the Soviet Union or European great power competition of the first half of the twentieth century, today's competition takes place *within* the framework of the existing international order. It is a competition bound by limits—a struggle for influence within the order, over the rules, and even limited disputes over borders and boundaries, rather than a struggle against a belligerent revisionist power intent on overthrowing the status quo in its entirety. Henry Kissinger noted this distinction in his book, *A World Restored*:

> A legitimate order does not make conflicts impossible, but it limits their scope. Wars may occur, but they will be fought in the name of the existing structure and the peace which follows will be justified as a better expression of the 'legitimate,' general consensus. Diplomacy in the classic sense, the adjustment of differences through negotiation, is possible only in 'legitimate' international orders.[49]

What we may be witnessing is the reemergence of competition within the boundaries of a legitimate order as some major powers seek to use existing

structures to advance their own goals, which could include economic mercantilism, the absolute right of sovereign states to act as they wish within their borders, constraints upon the use of coercive diplomacy against proliferators, or quickening the decline of American influence in key regions.

Strategic engagement's great asset is its recognition that states need to cooperate to address the challenges of the twenty-first century; its weakness thus far is the failure to recognize that this cooperation will sit alongside geopolitical competition. The United States will have to compromise in order to generate the levels of cooperation it needs from rising powers but the key task facing policymakers is how to do this without sacrificing the pillars of the liberal and rules-based international order. As a starting point, U.S. strategists and policymakers need to identify the core elements of the liberal international order, recognize that they must compete with others to protect and advance this vision, and concern themselves with how to generate the means to play in this competition and prevail in it. The United States can no longer take what its major partners want from the international order for granted. It must look for leverage to advance its vision of that order and in doing so preserve those aspects of the order that have served it so well since 1945. Such an approach includes elements of current thinking, such as leading by example and being willing to negotiate and compromise, but it also means developing new skills. Three are particularly important.

First, the United States must show that it understands that contemporary international politics is competitive and a relative-sum game. U.S. relations with major powers like China and Russia will move along a spectrum of entente to détente. In such a context, the United States will strive for cooperation with non-allies, but it will also recognize that the interests of various parties can diverge. Success for one power can come at the expense of the other. For instance, rapidly increasing Chinese influence in Southeast Asia may come at the expense of the United States, whereas rapidly increasing EU influence in Eastern Europe would not, given that the latter is composed of formal allies of the United States and the EU is not a constant competitor. The adoption of a competitive mindset will allow the United States to better understand international challenges and to know where to invest resources.

Second, the United States needs to generate leverage for use in international negotiations. Without leverage, other countries are free to ignore U.S. proposals if they are not in their regime's or government's short-term interests. Generating leverage should include resurrecting Kissinger's concept of linkage, whereby the United States would only move forward on a matter of mutual interest that was of disproportionate importance to the Soviets if the Soviets moved forward on a matter of mutual interest that was of disproportionate importance to the United States. For instance, the Nixon administration sought to make strategic arms talks and relaxing trade barriers with the Soviet Union contingent upon the Kremlin's

political behavior in Europe or the third world.[50] In December 1971, Kissinger even threatened to cancel a U.S.–Soviet summit unless Soviets prevailed on their ally India not to invade West Pakistan.[51] In 2009, the Obama administration pursued policies desired by other countries, such as the change in missile defense systems, as long as they were also deemed to be in the interest of the United States. In the future, such initiatives should be linked to other matters despite the inevitable efforts of other states, and elements in the U.S. government bureaucracy, to compartmentalize issues. The decision to redeploy U.S. missile defenses may have made more strategic sense if it was made contingent upon a successful negotiation of START or of progress at the Security Council on sanctions on Iran. The United States should also build new multilateral forums of like-minded countries that would provide policymakers with backup options if more inclusive organizations are deadlocked. For instance, the United States should consider creating an organization of like-minded countries dedicated to cybersecurity. Such a grouping could concern itself with questions about when and how to deter and respond to cyber attacks.

Third, the United States should seek to deepen its relations with countries with which it shares a common view of how to tackle a problem, not just with those who are most important to solving a problem. This means rethinking traditional U.S. alliances. Existing alliances should shift their focus to problems that U.S. allies are committed to addressing in a similar fashion. European nations may not want to fight counterinsurgency wars, but maybe they can help the United States in engaging Muslim communities abroad or in protecting the global commons. The United States has a wide range of problems. If allies are reluctant to take on a greater share of the burden on one mission, then the United States should consider changing the mission that the alliance tackles. It is more important that the alliances are active and important than that they address the most topical challenge of the moment.

Competitive Strategic Engagement

The Western order in the Cold War set the stage for a more inclusive global order following the defeat of the Soviet Union. Globalizing that order was a tremendous success, but it raises new and unfamiliar challenges whereby the United States and major powers like China will be partners and rivals simultaneously, cooperating where possible but also competing to shape the future of the international order. This may be a more complex and nuanced challenge than the ideological struggles against revolutionary states in the twentieth century, but it is no less important. The preservation and improvement of a tried and tested open, liberal and rules-based international order hangs in the balance. Moving toward a more competitive mindset accepts

geopolitical realities while remaining faithful to the core insight that the world is interdependent and many of today's foreign policy challenges can only be tackled multilaterally.

Notes

1. This discourse from 2001–2008 occurred in books, journals, newspapers, blogs, television, and public and private conferences. A representative sample of books and reports includes Zbigniew Brzezinski and Brent Scowcroft, *America and the World: Conversations on the Future of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Basic Books, 2008); Richard N. Haass, *The Opportunity: America's Moment to Alter History's Course* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005); Nina Hachigian and Mona Sutphen, *The Next American Century: How the United States can Thrive as Other Powers Rise* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2007); G. John Ikenberry and Anne-Marie Slaughter, *Forging a World of Liberty Under Law: Final Report of the Princeton Project on National Security* (Princeton, NJ: 2007); Anne-Marie Slaughter, Bruce W. Jentleson, Ivo Daalder, et al., *Strategic Leadership: Framework for a 21st Century National Security Strategy*, July 2008, http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2008/07_national_security_brainard.aspx.
2. For examples of the view that War on Terror should be the organizing principle of U.S. foreign policy, see Norman Podhoretz, "World War IV: How It Started, What It Means, and Why We Have to Win," *Commentary Magazine*, September 2004, http://www.commentarymagazine.com/viewarticle.cfm/world-war-iv--how-it-started--what-it-means---and-why-we-have-to-win-9785 and Charles Krauthammer, "In Defense of Democratic Realism," *The National Interest* 77 (Fall 2004). For the critique that this view unified the enemies of the United States instead of disaggregating them, see Samantha Power, "Our War on Terror," *New York Times*, July 29, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/29/books/review/Power-t.html.
3. See Hillary Rodham Clinton, speech, Council on Foreign Relations, Washington, D.C., July 9, 2009, http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/july/126071.htm.
4. "National Security Strategy", May 2010, p. 3, 7, http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf. (hereafter 2010 National Security Strategy).
5. Francis Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neo-conservative Legacy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 163.
6. 2010 National Security Strategy, p. 3.
7. This logic is most evident in Obama's Nobel Prize speech. See Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, "Remarks by the President at the Acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize," Oslo, Norway, December 10, 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-acceptance-nobel-peace-prize.
8. See Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, "Remarks by the President on a New Beginning," Cairo, Egypt, June 4, 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-Cairo-University-6-04-09/.
9. Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Address to the Sixth Forum for the Future," Marrakech, Morocco, November 3, 2009.
10. Interview by author with Obama administration official on March 24, 2010.
11. For evidence of opposition to U.S. foreign policy see "Egyptian Public to Greet Obama with Suspicion," WorldPublicOpinion.org, June 3, 2009, http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/brmiddleeastnafricara/613.php?lb=brme&pnt=613&nid=&id=. For signs

of support for engagement see Julie Ray, "Majority of Yemenis See Benefit from Relations with West; Like Others in Region Many Believe Violent Conflict can be Avoided," Gallup, January 8, 2010, http://www.gallup.com/poll/124976/Majority-Yemenis-Benefit-Relations-West.aspx.

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