

The Shadowboxer: The Obama Administration and Foreign Policy Grand Strategy

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President Obama's foreign policy grand strategy can be described by the terms shadowboxing or shadowboxer. Shadowboxing is a technique that boxers use to practice, sparring with imaginary opponents or attacking shadows in preparation for the real fight. Similarly, President Obama attacks covert threats but rarely responds to visible or viable threats. Like a practicing boxer, President Obama is fighting the murky shadows while refusing to engage the main stage in the international arena. Obama's foreign policy grand strategy consists of the following five tenets. (1) Modest Retrenchment in Foreign Policy Spending. (2) Rebuilding America's Reputation: The Anti-Thesis of George W. Bush. (3) Multilateralism. (4) Nonintervention and Avoiding "Boots on the Ground." (5) Assertive Counterterrorism.

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La gran estrategia de política exterior del Presidente Obama puede ser descrita por el término boxeo de sombra o sombreo. El boxeo de sombra es una técnica que los boxeadores usan para practicar, peleando con un oponente imaginario o haciendo golpes al aire en preparación a una pelea real. De forma similar, el Presidente Obama ataca amenazas encubiertas pero rara vez responde a amenazas visibles o viables. Al igual que un boxeador practicante, el Presidente Obama está luchando contra sombras mientras al mismo tiempo se niega a participar en el escenario principal de la arena internacional. La gran estrategia de política exterior de Obama se basa en los siguientes cinco principios: 1) Modesta reducción del gasto en política exterior. 2) Reconstrucción de la reputación de los Estados Unidos: La antítesis de George W. Bush. 3) Multilateralismo. 4) No intervención y evitar la guerra a toda costa. 5) Medidas anti terroristas aseritvas.

Barack Obama entered the White House on January 20, 2009 with sky-high expectations, having brought enthusiasm to previously disaffected members of the electorate and promises for a transformation of Washington politics. The Obama Administration returned to earth almost immediately dealing with the financial crisis inherited from the Bush Administration, struggling with efforts to rebuild the American economy, and battling over health-care reform. President Obama's approval ratings have been somewhere in the 40-50 percent range since the beginning of 2010 (Gallup Poll 2015).

While much of the gap between expectations and results has centered on domestic policy, a gap also exists in the area of foreign policy. While there was some caution about extreme foreign policy rhetoric during Obama's presidential campaign and the early stages of his first term, there remained significant expectations for a major positive transformation of U.S. foreign policy under an Obama Administration. It is fair to say that this transformation has not materialized.

This article does not seek to undertake a thorough examination of the results of President Obama's foreign policy. Rather, it seeks to examine the larger issue of Obama's foreign policy grand strategy. Has there been a coherent foreign policy strategy guiding the Obama Administration? If so, how can we describe it? What are its fundamental principles? If there is no such strategy, why is this so? In addition, has the Obama Administration come up with anything to guide its foreign policy besides reaction and *ad hoc* decision making?

We argue that President Obama's foreign policy grand strategy can be described by the terms *shadowboxing* or *shadowboxer*. Shadowboxing is a technique that boxers use to practice, sparring with imaginary opponents or attacking shadows in preparation for the real fight. Similarly, President Obama has attacked covert threats but rarely responds to visible or viable threats. He has tried to avoid putting boots on the ground, while simultaneously using the United States' Air Force, Joint Special Operations Command, and the Central Intelligence Agency to attack terrorist "elements" in the Middle East in secret. Using drones is beneficial and covert; most of the American public is unaware of the extent of the drone warfare program or related constitutional issues. Like a practicing boxer, President Obama has fought the murky shadows while generally refusing to engage the main stage in the international arena. On those rare occasions when he has stepped out of the shadows, he has done so with extreme caution and only with the support and participation of key allies. The central claim in this article is that Obama's foreign policy grand strategy consists of the following five tenets. (1) Modest Retrenchment in Foreign Policy Spending. (2) Rebuilding America's Reputation: The Anti-Thesis of George W. Bush. (3) Multilateralism. (4) Nonintervention and Avoiding "Boots on the Ground." (5) Assertive Counterterrorism.

This article begins with an explanation of the term *grand strategy* and what it has meant to presidential administrations in recent history. We continue with a literature review of how other scholars have classified Obama's foreign policy grand strategy, or lack thereof. The third section provides an explanation of the Obama Administration's rhetoric. The last section applies our analogy of the shadowboxer to Obama's foreign policy. We conclude with recommended avenues of future research.

The History and Definition of Grand Strategy

Containment was the foreign policy grand strategy of the Cold War period (1947-91). Despite the ups and downs of four decades, the United States pursued a foreign policy strategy of: (1) focusing on the actions of communist countries, especially the Soviet Union, (2) preventing the further expansion of communism throughout the world, (3) deterring a Soviet attack upon the United States and its allies, and (4) creating an international environment where the Soviet Union (and other communist states) would be forced to reform or collapse. While there is considerable disagreement concerning costs of containment, it is difficult to argue with the conclusion that, overall, the grand strategy of containment was generally successful. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, much of the 1990s and beyond was consumed with administrative and scholarly efforts to create a new grand strategy to replace containment.

As the number of potential new grand strategies proliferated, the Clinton Administration declared their approach to be one of "Enlargement and Engagement" (Lake 1993). While the Clinton Administration settled on

“Enlargement and Engagement,” many observers argued that this was much more a foreign policy slogan than a coherent strategy. The Clinton Administration had its share of foreign policy successes and failures, but the consensus was that President Clinton’s foreign policy was reactive, vacillating, tentative, and lacking in any overall strategic coherence (see e.g., Haass 2000; Walt 2000).

The George W. Bush Administration seemed to be on a similar path until the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 transformed U.S. foreign policy. In a year or so, a foreign policy strategy of American hegemonism—unilateralism, assertive militarism, preemption, and the possibility of regional transformation (especially in the Middle East)—became fundamentals of the U.S. Global War on Terror (White House 2002). The Bush Administration reversed the ambiguity of the Clinton years with an assertive and coherent foreign policy grand strategy of hegemonism whereby the United States would act forcefully to spread democracy. Unfortunately, by 2006, it was becoming clear that this new framework was not successful, especially in the area of transforming Iraq and Afghanistan into stable democracies. The Bush Administration began to resort to a more *ad hoc* and pragmatic approach toward foreign policy, including the war in Iraq, in its last few years. The Bush Administration left office with foreign policy results that were criticized by much of the political establishment (see e.g., Brzezinski 2008).

President Obama entered the White House following a Clinton Administration, which never was successful in creating a coherent grand strategy and a Bush Administration whose grand strategy was generally rejected. Obama also assumed the presidency in the midst of the most serious economic crisis since the 1930s and in a world where America’s power and leadership was fundamentally questioned. This was not an environment conducive to the creation of a new successful foreign policy grand strategy.

Let us consider what we mean by the term *grand strategy*. Not surprisingly, there is considerable disagreement on definitions. An early definition by B. H. Liddell Hart (1991) ties grand strategy with military strategy. Liddell Hart (1991, 322) explains that, “grand strategy should both calculate and develop the economic resources and man-power of nations in order to sustain the fighting services.” Liddell Hart also highlights the need to go beyond military matters in that “grand strategy looks beyond the war to the subsequent peace” (322). Later definitions expanded the concept. Rosa Brooks (2012) explains that: “grand strategy is ‘the big idea’ of foreign and national security policy—the overarching concept that links ends, ways and means, the organizing principle that allows states to purposively plan and prioritize the use of all instruments of national power.” A grand strategy cannot be just a list of goals, wishes, or top priorities. Grand strategy is the overarching idea, which “guides the tough decisions, helping policymakers figure out which of those top ten priorities should drop off the list, which aspirations are unrealistic and impossible, and which may seem like good ideas on their own, but actually undermine the nation’s broader goal” (Brooks 2012). Hal Brands (2014, 3) adds that, “grand

strategy represents an integrated conception of interests, threats, resources, and policies. It is the conceptual framework that helps nations determine where they want to go and how they want to get there.”

While the number of potential U.S. grand strategies sometimes seems endless, this is not the case. Barry Posen and Andrew Ross (1996) outlined a useful typology of four possible grand strategies back in the 1990s—primacy, cooperative security, selective engagement, and neo-isolationism. This typology is still relevant today.

Primacy¹ calls for America to pursue supremacy and dominate the international system economically, politically, and militarily, rejecting any return to bipolarity or multipolarity, and preventing emergence of any peer competitor. Cooperative security is an updated version of collective security, relying on preponderant American military power and growth of democratic states with common interests to overcome some of the failings of traditional collective security efforts. Selective engagement focuses on great power relations and proposes that the United States should make sure that instability does not arise in Eurasia and protect oil supplies in the Persian Gulf. Selective engagement attempts to assure peace among Eurasian great powers through careful use of American power. Neo-isolationism² focuses on national defense—protection of the security and liberty of the American people—as the only vital U.S. interest. Neo-isolationists believe that the United States should withdraw much of its military forces from abroad and avoid additional military engagements, both major and minor.

Many, though certainly not all, grand strategies suggested by scholars over the last 20 years can fit into this typology discussed by Posen and Ross (1996). Some candidates are so narrow that they do not deserve the title “grand strategy.” A few, like ethical realism (Lieven and Hulsman 2008) and sustainability (Doherty 2013), are truly distinct. The strategies outlined by Posen and Ross, along with their close relatives, demonstrate the complex nature of contemporary scholarly thinking on the topic.

Some consider the quest for a coherent grand strategy difficult in the twenty-first century world. The international environment has become far too complex to allow a single, overarching strategy to provide answers to the question of how the United States interacts. In fact, Fareed Zakaria (2011) suggests that the search for a new grand strategy is misplaced, explaining that, “the doctrinal approach to foreign policy doesn’t make much sense anymore. In today’s multipolar, multilayered world, there is no central hinge upon which American foreign policy rests. Policy making looks more varied, and inconsistent, as regions require approaches that don’t necessarily apply elsewhere.”

Stephen Krasner (2010) is also skeptical about grand strategies. He compares the search for a grand strategy to the historical quest for the “holy grail.”

¹ Other terms for this strategy include “hegemony,” “preponderance,” or “dominion.”

² Other terms for this strategy include “retrenchment,” “restraint,” or “off-shore balancing.”

Most attempts at grand strategy fail. Krasner (2010, 4) explains that, “it is hard to align vision, policies, and resources. Some fail because they envision a world that cannot be realized. Others fail because resources cannot be aligned with policies because of institutional constraints or a lack of domestic or international political support.” The disappointments of post-Cold War attempts to create a national security strategy point to the difficulty of the task more than the competence of the Clinton, Bush, and Obama Administrations.

Hal Brands (2014) also calls for a more modest approach toward grand strategy. He warns that too frequently grand strategy is “thought of as a transformative project to remake the global order, or as a panacea that will wipe away the complexity of world affairs (Brands 2014, 206). Both of these formulations are unrealistic, and the United States “will probably not be able to undertake any grand transformative schemes in the near future” (206). Nor can a single grand strategy allow the United States to go beyond immense complexities of the twenty-first century world. Brands (2014, 206) concludes:

At best, grand strategy can provide an intellectual reference point for dealing with those complexities, and a process by which dedicated policymakers can seek to bring their resources and their day-to-day actions into better alignment with their country's enduring interests. Achieving this would be enough; expecting more would be quixotic.

Some scholars are convinced that grand strategy is not only possible, but their particular formulation is the correct one (see e.g., Art 2003; Dueck 2015; Haass 2013; Layne 2006). Others believe that grand strategy is critical, but they are quite skeptical that the United States is capable of creating such a strategy in the near future (see e.g., Doherty 2013; Drezner 2011). Finally, some scholars deny the possibility of creating a grand strategy and are willing to settle for establishment of one or more general foreign policy principles or merely a pledge for policy makers to proceed with great caution as they guide American foreign policy (see e.g., Brands 2014; Krasner 2010). Because of the complexity and confusion over the ideal grand strategy for a twenty-first century America and the uncertainty over the nature of the contemporary international situation—it should not be surprising that the Obama Administration has struggled to create a coherent and successful foreign policy grand strategy since 2009.

Despite the confusion over the concept of grand strategy and its application toward the Obama Administration's foreign policy, it is undeniable that scholars have discussed and analyzed the grand strategies of all presidential administrations in the last 70 years. As mentioned, many have spent considerable time studying the grand strategies of all three post-Cold War presidents, criticizing these policies, and often concluding by proposing their own “ideal alternative” (see e.g., Art 2003; Dueck 2006; Layne 2006; Mead 2004; Posen 2014). Thus an examination of the dynamics of an Obama grand strategy is a

useful scholarly enterprise and fits well with many other such undertakings from the past 25 years.

The authors argue that President Obama does have a weak grand strategy³ that we call “shadowboxing.” Shadow boxing is neither preconceived, nor purposefully invented. Rather, it has come about with the passage of time as a reaction to a sequence of events. Shadowboxing is an *ad hoc* response to a difficult and often confusing world that President Obama has embraced.

A Scholarly Assessment of Obama’s Foreign Policy Principles

There is considerable disagreement as to the identity of President Obama’s foreign policy grand strategy. He has been described as a liberal-internationalist, a progressive pragmatist, a declinist, and as someone who has continued the policies of the Bush Administration (Dueck 2015; Lizza 2011; Sestanovich 2014; Walt 2012). Others have argued that Obama has no foreign policy strategy at all (see e.g., Brooks 2012; Zakaria 2011).

Some view President Obama’s supposed lack of a grand strategy in a positive manner, while more view it negatively. Michael Hirsh (2011) argues that, “Obama’s biggest problem is not that he is seen as a hypocrite or that he has lost credibility. It’s that he hasn’t taken enough of a clear stand on any foreign issue to stake his credibility in the first place.” Zbigniew Brzezinski, an early informal adviser to the Obama campaign, was originally impressed with Obama’s insight. By 2011, Brzezinski (cited in Lizza 2011, 55) concluded: “I greatly admire his insights and understanding. I don’t think he really has a policy that’s implementing those insights and understandings. The rhetoric is always terribly imperative and categorical: ‘You must do this,’ ‘He must do that,’ ‘This is unacceptable.’” Brzezinski added: “He doesn’t strategize. He sermonizes” (cited in Lizza 2011, 55).

At times, Barack Obama described himself as a realist, drawing parallels between himself and President George H. W. Bush. Rahm Emmanuel, former chief of staff, agrees with this view of Obama as a realist (Baker 2010). While campaigning in Pennsylvania, Obama said, “The truth is that my foreign policy is actually a return to the traditional bipartisan realistic policy of George Bush’s father, of John F. Kennedy, of, in some ways, Ronald Reagan” (cited in Lizza 2011, 46).

Conversely, Obama has sometimes positioned himself as halfway between realism and idealism or even outside that continuum. Accepting the Nobel Peace prize, Obama noted that, “within America, there has long been a tension

³ A weak grand strategy is not particularly effective and does not meet the academic standard of all the pieces fitting together in a tight, coherent whole. However, a strong grand strategy is almost impossible in the complex world of the twenty-first century. Even the “successful” grand strategy of containment was weak at times or had some notable failures such as the Vietnam War or the policy of *détente*.

between those who describe themselves as realists or idealists—a tension that suggests a stark choice between the narrow pursuit of interests or an endless campaign to impose our values around the world. I reject these choices” (Obama 2009). In 2011, Obama told NBC News: “When you start applying blanket policies on the complexities of the current world situation, you’re going to get yourself into trouble” (cited in Lizza 2011, 55).

Charles Kupchan believes that what is very distinctive about the Obama foreign policy is the absence of ideological baggage. Obama has been “the consummate pragmatist, guided by three hard-headed questions: What’s the problem? How do we fix it? Who will help the United States fix it?” (Hounshell 2010).⁴ He seems content working with democratic and nondemocratic countries, as long as they work toward common objectives. Kupchan finds this “problem-solving approach both sensible and refreshing” (Hounshell 2010).

Ryan Lizza (2011, 47) reports that Obama’s aides insist that he is anti-ideological and focuses only on what works. They describe him as “a consequentialist.” Martin Indyk, Kenneth Lieberthal, and Michael O’Hanlon (2012, 23-4) describe President Obama’s approach as “working the case”—examining the particulars of each foreign policy dilemma from multiple angles—as a legacy from his law school training and law professorship.

Much of the Obama approach to foreign policy has to deal with problems left by the Bush Administration. Benjamin Rhodes, one of Obama’s deputy national-security advisers, said. “If you were to boil it all down to a bumper sticker, it’s ‘Wind down these two wars, reestablish American standing and leadership in the world, and focus on a broader set of priorities, from Asia and the global economy to a nuclear-nonproliferation regime’” (cited in Lizza 2011, 47).

In summary, there is no consensus concerning President Obama’s foreign policy. For those who admire him, Obama has maneuvered gracefully through the foreign policy quagmire, making decisions as needed with thought and foresight. For those who do not favor him, President Obama has been a preacher although rarely a practitioner. In the next part of the article, we portray what we see as the weak grand strategy of a President Obama.

President Obama’s Foreign Policy Rhetoric

As President Barack Obama completes his final year in office, it is difficult to remember the excitement and power of the 2008 campaign. The Obama campaign was a true phenomenon that electrified the nation and much of the world. A good deal of Obama’s appeal was the promise of transformation, in both domestic and foreign policy. The slogans of “Change We Can Believe In”

⁴ In this article, Hounshell (2010) interviews Charles Kupchan on his view of Obama’s foreign policy.

and “Yes, We Can” along with the iconic poster of Obama’s face combined with the word “Hope” symbolized Obama’s potential for fundamental reform. While much of this aspiration focused on domestic issues, there was an important foreign policy component as well.

Barack Obama’s quest for a fundamentally different kind of a campaign began when he made his announcement to seek the presidency in early 2007. He was running “not just to hold an office, but to gather with you to transform a nation,” and he reminded listeners that even “in the face of impossible odds, people who love their country can change it” (Obama 2007a). Senator Obama (2007a) continued:

That is why this campaign can’t only be about me. It must be about us – it must be about what we can do together. This campaign must be the occasion, the vehicle, of your hopes, and your dreams. It will take your time, your energy, and your advice – to push us forward when we’re doing right, and to let us know when we’re not. This campaign has to be about reclaiming the meaning of citizenship, restoring our sense of common purpose, and realizing that few obstacles can withstand the power of millions of voices calling for change.

Part of Obama’s appeal was the very vagueness of his promises. Change can mean different things to different people. Outside of ending the war in Iraq and rebuilding America’s image abroad, no one was quite sure what the candidate wanted to accomplish in the area of foreign policy. One author went so far as to characterize the candidate as “a human ink-blot” (Singh 2012, 21-38). Barack Obama was not the first presidential candidate who blurred his persona to appeal to different constituencies.

There were some foreign policy specifics. Candidate Obama strongly criticized the Bush Administration’s decision for, and execution of, the Iraq War and promised to bring American troops home by 2011, in accord with the Status of Forces Agreement negotiated by the out-going Bush Administration. During a Democratic debate, he answered that he would meet with leaders of countries such as Iran, Syria, Cuba, and North Korea—without preconditions (Mann 2012, 84). Senator Hillary Clinton and other Democratic candidates for this particular statement criticized Obama. Obama countered by reminding his critics that President Kennedy had advised “to never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate” (Obama 2007c). A consistent emphasis was placed on counter proliferation and reducing the threat of nuclear war. On many occasions, Senator Obama emphasized his desire to create a nuclear-free world. Obama pledged that he would “work with other nations to secure, destroy, and stop the spread of these weapons in order to dramatically reduce the nuclear dangers for our nation and the world” (Obama 2007a). In addition, Obama pledged to seek a new agreement with Russia to reduce the number of nuclear weapons, to strengthen international efforts to prevent terrorists from

acquiring any nuclear capability, and to “create a strong international coalition to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons and eliminate North Korea’s nuclear weapons program” (Obama 2007a).

Obama’s candidacy also became a global phenomenon. A unique development was Obama’s visit to Europe and the Middle East at the height of the general election. It was unheard of for an American presidential candidate to have a campaign event in another country. Two hundred thousand people in Berlin greeted Obama (2008) as he stated:

Now is the time to build new bridges across the globe as strong as the one that bound us across the Atlantic. Now is the time to join together, through constant cooperation, strong institutions, shared sacrifice, and a global commitment to progress, to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

In a sense, he seemed to be campaigning for the proverbial title of “leader of the free world.” In a poll conducted by the BBC World Service in 22 countries, respondents preferred Barack Obama to John McCain by a four-to-one margin. In addition, nearly half the respondents stated that an Obama victory would fundamentally alter their view of the United States (BBC News 2008).

Obama used his personal story—a Kenyan father, an Indonesian stepfather, a mother with a striking interest in foreign cultures, and a childhood in Indonesia and Hawaii—to construct a “cosmopolitan persona.” In Berlin, Senator Obama (2008) stated that, “I speak to you, not as a candidate for president, but as a citizen—a proud citizen of the United States, and a fellow citizen of the world.” Obama (2008) told the excited crowd that, “the burdens of global citizenship continue to bind us together.” Senator Obama’s cosmopolitanism appealed to Americans and world after eight years of parochialism and braggadocio from President George W. Bush. Obama seemed to be tapping into post-American mind-set. Obama’s commitment to global citizenship is deeply personal and political. Carl Pedersen (2009, 170) commented:

A cosmopolitan American national identity actively promoted by a rooted cosmopolitan president will inevitably have an impact on notions of American exceptionalism that elide national differences in favor of an us-versus-them worldview . . . Furthermore, cosmopolitanism can function as a bulwark against the cultural myopia that has plagued American foreign policy since 1898, by nurturing deep knowledge of other societies. Instead of seeing cosmopolitanism as a threat of disunion, Americans could regard it as an opportunity to become citizens of the world even as they maintain their allegiance to the U.S.

Who could be better to deal with a post-American world than a post-American president? Senator Obama explained:

If you can tell people, ‘We have a president in the White House who still has a grandmother living in a hut on the shores of Lake Victoria and has a sister who’s half-Indonesian, married to a Chinese-Canadian,’ then they’re going to think that he may have a better sense of what’s going on in our lives and in our country. And they’d be right (cited in Traub 2007).

No doubt, Obama’s cosmopolitanism got him in trouble with portions of the American audience. George Will warned that “cosmopolitanism is not, however, a political asset for American presidential candidates” (Will 2008, B7). Barack Obama was straddling a difficult line—proud of his American heritage but ready to move beyond it, in appealing but unclear ways. This was an attractive message to much of the American electorate (and the world) which had grown fatigued of jingoism of the Bush Administration. Still, there were plenty of doubters. At a rally, Republican vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin (2008) pointed out that “I am just so fearful that this is not a man who sees America the way that you and I see America, as the greatest source for good in this world.”

Despite rhetoric and expectations of foreign policy transformation, there were early signs of a more realist-based, cautious Obama. In a foreign policy speech in August 2007, Senator Obama (2007c) announced that he would be willing to sanction an attack within Pakistan to target Osama Bin Laden, even without express cooperation of the Pakistani authorities. Later in debates, Senator Clinton and others sharply criticized this statement and suggested it would represent a violation of Pakistan’s sovereignty. Of course, Senator Obama’s statement in 2007 is a good description of the nature of the raid into Pakistan, which would kill Bin Laden in May 2011.

In an interview with David Brooks (2008), Senator Obama compared his views on foreign policy of with those of President George H. W. Bush. Elsewhere he noted that, “George H. W. Bush’s management of the end of the Cold War was masterly” (cited in Lizza 2011, 46). In an article for *Foreign Affairs*, Obama (2007b, 8) called for efforts to rebuild the U.S. military, by adding up to 100,000 soldiers. He stressed that he would “not hesitate to use force, unilaterally if necessary, to protect the American people or our vital interests whenever we are attacked or imminently threatened” (Obama 2007b, 7).

President Obama surprised many with his remarks at the acceptance of his premature Nobel Peace Prize Award in 2009. Several commentators called it a “pro-war” speech. While touching on many issues, Obama highlighted the issue of “just war” and his role as commander-in-chief of the world’s only superpower. Obama (2009) cautioned his audience that, “the instruments of war do have a role to play in preserving the peace.” He continued:

We must begin by acknowledging the hard truth: We will not eradicate violent conflict in our lifetimes. There will be times when nations –

acting individually or in concert – will find the use of force not only necessary but morally justified.

... I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people. For make no mistake: Evil does exist in the world. A non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler's armies. Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda's leaders to lay down their arms. To say that force may sometimes be necessary is not a call to cynicism – it is recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason. (Obama 2009)

While there is no doubt that Senator Obama's promises of transformation spilled over into the realm of foreign policy, it important to specify that most of this talk of foreign policy change was at a very abstract level. There were also a number of instances in which Barack Obama laid out foreign policy positions, which demonstrated continuity with the mainstream foreign policy establishment. Thus uncertainty concerning President Obama's foreign policy strategy was born in the campaign of 2008.

President Barack Hussein Obama: The Shadowboxer

We argue that Obama does have a foreign policy grand strategy, albeit a weak one. We identify Obama as the shadowboxer and characterize his strategy as "shadowboxing." It is doubtful that the Obama Administration consciously chose this particular strategy, but "shadowboxing" is what has emerged. Combining the complicated international situation, including the threat of terrorism, along with the cautious and risk-averse preferences of this particular president, and "shadowboxing" is the result. Do we believe that Obama's grand strategy fits some idealized form as drafted by numerous academics? No, we do not. As we have already established, a comprehensive and coherent grand strategy is highly unlikely in the twenty-first century world.

Table 1 provides an overview of the occurrences and foreign policy actions, or lack thereof, that President Obama has taken since he came to office. We will refer to this table throughout the present section of the article to summarize Obama's grand strategy and provide the reader with a reference to the history of Obama's foreign policy. We argue that Obama's foreign policy grand strategy consists of the following five tenets: (1) Modest Retrenchment in Foreign Policy Spending; (2) Rebuilding America's Reputation: The Anti-Thesis of George W. Bush; (3) Multilateralism; (4) Nonintervention and Avoiding "Boots on the Ground"; (5) Assertive Counterterrorism.

Modest Retrenchment in Foreign Policy Spending

President Obama entered office with the United States facing its worst economic crisis since the 1930s. Despite considerable criticism for particular actions, some give President Obama credit for preventing another economic

Table 1. President Obama's Foreign Policy Strategy

Topic	Start Date	Event	Date and Obama's Response
The War on Terror	September 11, 2001	Drone Warfare	Obama continued Bush's drone war in the Middle East including some weekly drone targeting in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, and Libya. Obama removed most of the troops from Afghanistan to less than 10,000 (Shear and Mazzetti 2015)
Iran's Nuclear Program	2002	Iran's Nuclear Program began (Christy and Zarate 2014) March 2010, Iran continues to enrich uranium in great quantities (Christy and Zarate 2014)	March-September 2009-Obama starts nuclear diplomacy with Iran through letters (Shear and Mazzetti 2015) October 2009-Obama proposes a fuel swap but Iran refused and relations erode (Shear and Mazzetti 2015) January 27, 2010-Obama promises consequences for Iran if they ignore obligations (Shear and Mazzetti 2015) July 1, 2010-Obama signs comprehensive <i>Iran Sanctions Accountability and Divestment Act of 2010</i> (Shear and Mazzetti 2015) May 22, 2011-Obama states that Iran will not create nuclear weapons (Shear and Mazzetti 2015) February 5, 2012-Obama signs Executive Order 13599 freezing Iranian assets (Shear and Mazzetti 2015)

Continued.

Table 1. Continued

Topic	Start Date	Event	Date and Obama’s Response
Fast and Furious (Project Gunrunner)	October 2009	Fast and Furious begins January 25, 2011-DOJ announces end of <i>Fast and Furious</i> after 34 indictments of drug and fire arm trafficking and the deaths of civilians and U.S. personnel	<p>July 30, 2012-Obama signs Executive Order 13622 freezing more Iranian assets (Shear and Mazzetti 2015)</p> <p>August 10, 2012-Obama signed <i>Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act of 2012</i> (Shear and Mazzetti 2015)</p> <p>January 1, 2013-Obama signed the <i>National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2013</i>, which expanded Iranian sanctions (Shear and Mazzetti 2015)</p> <p>April, 2015-Obama reaches an interim nuclear compromise with Iran to stop Iran from creating nuclear weapons. Bill is in Senate and rejected (Koran 2015)</p> <p>July 14, 2015-Obama creates Iran nuclear deal (The Data Team 2015)</p> <p>January 16, 2016-IAEA visits Iran and declares it peaceful (Whitehouse.gov 2016)</p> <p>June 20, 2012-Obama asserts executive privilege over documents sought by House investigation committee (CNN Library 2014)</p>

Continued.

Table 1. Continued

Topic	Start Date	Event	Date and Obama's Response
Egyptian Revolution	January 25, 2011	Arab Spring begins in Egypt	February 4, 2011-Obama states that long-time ally Mubarak should step down (U.S. News and World Report 2011)
	June 24, 2012	Mohamed Morsi of Muslim Brotherhood elected president in Egypt (Kirkpatrick 2012)	
	July 3, 2013	Morsi arrested and deposed by military (BBC News Middle East 2013)	
	February 24, 2014	Military coup government resigns (Alsharif and Saleh 2014)	
Libyan Revolution	February 15, 2011	Abdel Fatah al-Sisi elected president of Egypt (Kingsley 2014)	July 3, 2012-Obama states US should respect democratic process of Egypt (Office of the Press Secretary 2013)
		Libyan revolution begins (The Economist 2015)	
		March 19, 2015-U.S. led coalition launches air strikes against Libyan forces (Daalder and Stavridis 2012)	
Syrian Civil War	March 2011	Syrian Civil War begins	August 20, 2012-Obama threatened Syria with military intervention if unconventional weapons were moved or prepared for use (Landler 2012)
	April 13, 2013	First chemical weapons attack in Syria by Assad (Rodgers <i>et al.</i> 2014)	
	August 30, 2013-Obama states chemical weapons attack that killed 1400 people requires response (Pleitgen and Cohen 2013)		
Iraq War	March 2003	George W. Bush invaded Iraq looking for weapons of mass destruction	September 15, 2014-Obama threatens to oust Assad if U.S. planes are shot down in Syrian airspace (AGB 2014)
		December 2011-Obama removed all American troops from Iraq (Jeffrey 2014)	

Continued.

Table 1. Continued

Topic	Start Date	Event	Date and Obama's Response
ISIS/ISIL	March 2013	ISIS invades Raqqa, Syria	January 2014-Obama compares Junior Varsity ISIS to the NBA Lakers (Grenell 2014)
	June 9, 2014	ISIS takes Mosul Airport invading Iraq (CNN Library 2015)	June 2014-Obama states, "American forces will not be returning to Iraq" (Grenell 2014). July 25, 2014-Susan Rice asks House to repeal "2002 Authorization for Use of Military Force in Iraq" (House Armed Services Committee 2014)
Ukraine Crisis	February, 2014	Pro-Russian unrest in Ukraine begins (Al Jazeera and Agencies 2014)	August 8-September 7, 2014-US launches 143 airstrikes against ISIS (BBC News Middle East 2014)
	March 4, 2014		September 11, 2014-Obama threatens actions against ISIS in Syria and 475 military personnel are sent to Iraq
	March 6, 2014		September 23, 2014-US and five Arab countries launch airstrikes against ISIS in Syria (Barrabi 2014)
	March 18, 2014		February 11, 2015-Obama sent ISIS fight request to Congress-AUMF and strikes continue (Acosta and Diamond 2015)
	March 22, 2014		March 12, 2014-Obama states world rejects Crimean referendum (Al Jazeera and Agencies 2014)

Continued.

Table 1. Continued

Topic	Start Date	Event	Date and Obama's Response
	February 11, 2015	Putin states he can use force to protect Russian citizens in Ukraine (Al Jazeera and Agencies 2014)	March 21, 2014-Obama targets Putin's inner circle for sanctions (Al Jazeera and Agencies 2014)
		Crimean Parliament votes in favor of joining Russia (Al Jazeera and Agencies 2014)	April 14, 2014-Putin and Obama talk on the phone (Al Jazeera and Agencies 2014)
		Putin signs treaty absorbing Crimea into Russia (Al Jazeera and Agencies 2014)	April 25, 2014-Obama threatens more sanctions against Russia (Al Jazeera and Agencies 2014)
		Russia annexes Crimea (Al Jazeera and Agencies 2014)	June 5, 2015-Obama and Cameron threaten further sanctions against Russia (Al Jazeera and Agencies 2014)
		France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine hold peace talks without success (Polityuk and Pineau 2015)	July 16, 2014-Obama announces sanctions against state-owned defense firms (Polityuk and Pineau 2015)
			February 10, 2015-Obama urges Putin to accept peace with Ukraine (Liptak 2015)
Cuban Relations	December 17, 2014		Obama takes steps to restore relationships with Cuba including trade and travel. US removed Cuba's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism (Somnander 2015)

depression. The Obama Administration's primary task was to forestall an economic collapse and strive toward economic renewal although his domestic policies have more than quadrupled national debt. Considering that George W. Bush broke new ground on increasing national debt to over \$10 trillion, Obama has continued to climb to more than \$18 trillion (Jackson 2012; United States National Debt 2015). President Obama's top priorities in the first few years reflected this emphasis on domestic issues—policies to manage the Great Recession and move toward recovery and passage of health-care reform. Spending on national security would have to be restrained to allow America to focus on its domestic needs.

The National Security Strategy stated that, “the foundation of American leadership must be a prosperous American economy” (Whitehouse.gov 2010). This document emphasized that “we must renew the foundation of America's strength,” because ultimately “the welfare of the American people will determine America's strength in the world, particularly at a time when our own economy is inextricably linked to the global economy” (Whitehouse.gov 2010).

Some scholars and others have called for a foreign policy of restraint or retrenchment (see e.g., Haass 2013; Posen 2014). The American people appeared to agree that some kind of retrenchment was needed. During the 2008 election, over three-fourths of Democrats and Republicans agreed that the country should pay less attention to overseas issues and focus more on domestic problems (Sestanovich 2014, 302). Stephen Sestanovich placed the Obama Administration, along with Administrations of Eisenhower, Nixon, Ford, and Carter, into the category of presidents who have pursued policies of retrenchment (Sestanovich 2014, 8-10).

President Obama's policy on the war in Afghanistan is evidence of the retrenchment approach. As can be seen in Table 1, after an initial increase of 17,000 troops to Afghanistan in early 2009, the stage was set for a further reconsideration of troop levels. After a long drawn-out debate, President Obama agreed to a surge of an additional 33,000 troops to begin in early 2010. When budget director Peter Orszag suggested a likely cost of \$900 billion over the next decade for Afghanistan, Obama responded: “This is not what I am looking for. I'm not doing ten years. I'm not doing a long-term nation-building effort. I'm not spending a trillion dollars. That's not in the national interest” (Woodward 2010, 251). Obama made it clear that he was not going to make a commitment that would leave more troops in Afghanistan after his term was up than when he first entered the White House. Before approving the new surge, Obama emphasized that the additional troops would begin to come home after one year.⁵ When announcing the return of some of the surge troops

⁵ The first troops began to leave Afghanistan in July 2011 and have continued over the next three years. Currently about 33,000 troops remain.

in June 2011, President Obama (2011) told the television audience “that it is time to focus on nation-building here at home.”

President Obama made it clear from the beginning that he was determined to rein in national security spending. The mantra was “can we afford this?” The administration’s ultimate decision to begin to draw down troop levels in Afghanistan following the surge of 2010 was partly based on costs of a more open-ended commitment. Heritage Foundation released its Index of U.S. Military Strength, the yearly nongovernment assessment of the state of the armed forces, in late 2015. The findings conveyed a shrinking of the armed forces, “The common theme across the services and the United States’ nuclear enterprise is one of force degradation resulting from many years of underinvestment, poor execution of modernization programs, and the negative effects of budget sequestration (cuts in funding) on readiness and capacity” (Carafano 2015).

The multilateral approach toward Libya was also based on sharing costs. Obama did not want to spend any more money than necessary to rid the world of a menace like Qadhafi. Stephen Sestanovich (2014, 323) concludes:

From the moment he took office Obama was the member of his own administration most firmly and consistently committed to rethinking both the ends and means of American foreign policy. As he saw it, shifting resources from problems abroad to “nation building” at home was necessary to assure the country’s long-term well-being. When his advisers challenged the specifics of this or that pullback, the president told them their plans and ideas were simply too expensive.

Outside of policies to reverse effects of the Great Recession and the passage and early implementation of health-care reform, President Obama has been unable to initiate new programs to address fundamental economic problems of the United States. While President Obama is continuing to focus on restraining national security commitments and spending, he has not had much success in corresponding nation-building efforts at home. As a shadowboxer, President Obama has deliberately shrunk the size of the actual boxing ring or has decided to avoid engaging major opponents because it is far too costly to do so. Costs include putting “boots on the ground” and President Obama is averse to that idea. Although drone warfare spending is currently unknown, it is commonly accepted that it does not compare to costs of the Iraq War and Afghanistan War.

Rebuilding America’s Reputation: The Anti-Thesis of George W. Bush

President Obama entered the White House with America’s worldwide reputation in a precarious situation. Most of this can be traced to the war in Iraq and the unilateralism of the Bush Administration. Senator Obama (2007b, 4) noted that, “in the wake of Iraq and Abu Ghraib, the world has lost trust in our purposes and our principles.” Revelations concerning torture and illegal renditions did even more damage to the image of the United States.

Obama infused his campaign and early presidential speeches with language recognizing America's past mistakes and pledging a return to a multilateral foreign policy. Senator Obama (2007b, 4) suggested that, "we can neither retreat from the world nor try to bully it into submission." As previously discussed, Obama's image as a cosmopolitan, post-American leader was attractive to many in the nation and the world. It should be noted that the Bush Administration was already turning toward a less confrontational approach in its last few years.⁶

President Obama came into office determined to improve the battered reputation of the United States. He visited 21 different countries in 2009, the most of any first-year U.S. president. He promised a Czech audience that he would "seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons" (Lindsay 2011, 774). In March 2009, he sent a videotaped message to Iran for the Iranian New Year, saying that, "my administration is now committed to diplomacy that addresses the full range of issues before us" (Indyk, Lieberthal, and O'Hanlon 2012, 190). As summarized in Table 1, recently, Obama has continued to try to broker a deal with Iran; although a taboo subject to most of America, Obama should be commended for trying to work with an untrustworthy and often difficult country. He continued his outreach to the Muslim world with a well-received speech in Cairo where he spoke of his desire to "to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world" (Lyndsay 2011, 774). In September 2009, he told the United Nations (UN) General Assembly that America was seeking a new era of engagement with the world. President Obama told his aides that these speeches obviously would not solve specific problems, but they would create space to solve such problems. These words gave him standing and credibility to move ahead on particular problems.

He called for a reset of relations with Russia as can be seen in Table 1. This eventually led to a new arms control agreement signed with Moscow in 2010. Obama visited countries that were ready for a new start with the United States. In December 2009, he received the Nobel Peace Prize not for any specific accomplishments but rather for the potential that his administration represented. Obama's embrace of diplomacy made him popular abroad and revived America's image around the globe. Polls showed significant improvement in the world's opinion of the United States (PewResearch Center Global Attitudes & Trends 2016).⁷ The one glaring exception was the Muslim world, where

⁶ Such actions included the appointment of the pragmatic Robert Gates as Defense Secretary in 2007, the 2008 signing of the Status of Forces Agreement with Iraq on the eventual withdrawal of American troops, the restarting of the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, and continuing growth in aid to Africa to combat HIV/AIDS.

⁷ Responses to the question "Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of the United States showed the following results: Germany 30 percent in 2007 and 64 percent in 2009, France 39 percent in 2007 and 75 percent in 2009, Indonesia 29 percent in 2007 and 63 percent in 2009, South Korea 58 percent in 2007 and 78 percent in 2009, China 34 percent in 2007 and 47 percent in 2009 (PewResearch Center Global Attitudes & Trends 2016).

America's reputation continued to languish despite the efforts at outreach. Yet this effort at "rebranding" faced its limits. James Lindsay (2011, 765-77) explained:

Yet even as Obama pledged to begin 'renewing American leadership,' the very trend he cited to criticize Bush's foreign policy—globalization—was at the least complicating his efforts and at the worst undermining them. As Obama discovered during his first two years in office, kind words, an open hand and a willingness to listen did not guarantee cooperation, let alone foreign policy success. His hoped-for partners often disagreed on the nature of the problem, what constituted the proper solution and who should bear the burden of implementing it. They had their own interests and priorities, and often they were not looking to Washington for direction.

This aspect of the Obama foreign policy was mostly complete by late 2009 or 2010. President Obama showed the world that he was a different kind of leader than George W. Bush, and America's reputation was partially restored, at least in many parts of the world. The PewResearch Center Global Attitudes & Trends (2008) found that 37 percent of Americans and 16 percent of the British thought Bush would do the right thing in global affairs. One year later in 2009, Pew found that 74 percent of Americans and 86 percent of Britains thought Obama would do the right thing in global affairs (Kohut 2010). At times, it seemed like the president was still campaigning as his stance was always opposite of George W. Bush, regardless of the issue and he would publicly refer to Bush. Eventually, the newness was gone, replaced with reality of international relations and some level of disappointment because of the gap between what Obama had promised and what he has been able to deliver. Transatlantic Trends (2014) found that a majority of Americans disapproved of Obama's international policies at 53 percent while a majority of Europeans approved at 64 percent. In 2013, the number of Europeans who approved of Obama's international policies was 69 percent (Transatlantic Trends 2014). As a shadowboxer, Obama's efforts at rebuilding America's image could be viewed as laying the groundwork to reduce the need to battle future opponents. By publicly restoring America's reputation throughout the world, Obama was doing his best to decrease the possible state adversaries throughout the world.

Multilateralism

President Obama has embraced multilateralism on many issues for better or worse as can be seen in Table 1. As a candidate, Senator Obama (2007b, 4) wrote that, "America cannot meet the threats of this century alone, and the world cannot meet them without America." Secretary of State Hillary Clinton spoke of the reality of not a multipolar world but a multipartner world (Kessler 2009).

A multilateral approach has become important because of the diffusion of power in the modern world, the globalized nature of many international problems and budgetary problems of the United States. In many ways, multilateralism was the response to a fiscally weakened United States.⁸ Dennis Ross, a former member of the Obama National Security Council, stated that the movement toward multilateralism is a complicated phenomenon. He explained that, “there is a desire, understandably, for our actions to have greater legitimacy on the world stage. But there is also an interest in burden-sharing and sharing the cost as well” (cited in Landler 2011).

The Obama Administration was crucial in pushing the G-20 group, including China and India and Brazil, as a replacement for the G-8, the leading economic council for wealthy nations. The G-20 group played an important role in the international response to the Global Recession of 2008.

After the diplomatic approach to Iran brought no dividends, the Obama Administration was successful in working with China, Russia, and other members of the UN Security Council to impose additional tough sanctions against Iran in June 2010 (Indyk, Lierberthal, and O’Hanlon 2012, 203). These sanctions seem to have led to the signing of an interim agreement in 2013 with Iran to suspend its nuclear activities and the establishment of a process for a long-term agreement with Iran. Democrats in Congress helped to pass the “The Iran Deal” that Obama created.

President Obama’s policy of intervening in Libya was a model of military multilateralism only in reference to the demise of Qadhafi, which was the ultimate goal. First, the Arab League invited the United States and others to take action (Indyk, Lierberthal, and O’Hanlon 2012, 162). Second, President Obama worked with Great Britain and France to win Chinese and Russian support⁹ for the UN Security Council to authorize intervention this time to protect Libyan civilians against attacks by Muammar Qadhafi’s forces. Finally, President Obama insisted that the air war be undertaken and commanded by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), not by the United States. Obama also made sure that certain Arab League states would participate in the intervention (Sestanovich 2014, 314). Obama wanted to make sure that the world did not see this as an American intervention in another Muslim country. Obama made it clear that the United States would play a supplementary role in the Libyan mission. Indeed, no American lives were lost during the intervention. In this case, Obama chose to intervene only with several allies at his side and avoided the United States unilaterally fighting in Libya. The commitment and the costs were inconsequential.

⁸ Fiscal constraints were not the only factor influencing multilateralism. Multilateralism is more frequently associated with Democratic administrations and is also more consistent with President Obama’s personal preferences.

⁹ China and Russia both abstained from voting on UN Security Council Resolution 1973.

David Skidmore (2011) explains that domestic and international constraints limit how multilateral a U.S. President can actually be. On the international front, other states, no longer as reliant on U.S. military protection, “now insist that the United States abide by institutional rules and procedures on an equal basis: no more hegemonic prerogatives” (Skidmore 2011, 44). For the United States, these expectations make multilateralism less attractive as they restrict American autonomy. On the domestic front, the lack of a great power menace “has rendered presidential authority in foreign policy once again open to challenge by the Congress, interest groups, and elements of the bureaucracy. Groups that oppose multilateral commitments, out of either ideological or self-interested motivations, can maneuver within the decentralized structure of American politics to veto U.S. engagement abroad” (45). Skidmore concludes that President Obama has made only modest strides on multilateralism, and has been even less successful in upgrading core international institutions.

Although a case by case approach can produce occasional victories for multilateralism, a president who believes that America’s interest lies in leading the way toward a more relevant and robust international institutional order must take the political risk of laying out an explicit and compelling vision that can attract support at home and abroad. No post-Cold War president has yet proven willing or capable of meeting this challenge. (Skidmore 2011, 61)

It is also true that the Obama Administration’s commitment to multilateralism has been conditional. As discussed below, President Obama has not hesitated to act unilaterally, especially in the realm of counterterrorism. David Sanger (2012, xv) explains:

If a threat does not go to the heart to America’s own security—it is a threat to the global order but not to the country—Obama has been far more hesitant. He has declined to act unless partners with far greater interests at stake take the greatest risks, and contribute the greatest resources. For example, his approach to Libya—contributing American power for a short period of time, and insisting that other NATO nations and the Arab League be at the forefront of the fight—sent a message.

Nonintervention and Avoiding “Boots on the Ground”

Perhaps the clearest component of Obama foreign policy has been the desire to end wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and to avoid any new large-scale military interventions. The war in Iraq ended in 2011 when the last American troops left the country. While the United States did seek an arrangement with the Maliki government to allow a remnant of 5,000 or so troops to stay behind, even this fell apart after the Iraqis refused to sign a new agreement. While

Obama agreed to a surge in Afghanistan, he placed strict time limitations on the deployment (Sestanovich 2014, 307). Most of the American troops left by the end of 2014. President Obama's actions are consistent with his often-stated desire to end these legacies of the Bush Administration.

The real test came with the uprisings of the Arab Spring, as can be seen in Table 1. While any intervention to support the protestors in Iran was extremely unlikely, the Obama Administration was very reluctant to provide moral support, partly so protestors would not be weakened by any identification with the United States (Lizza 2011, 50). After the Iranian attacks on the protestors, Obama "made no serious attempt to lead the international community in pressing for constraints on the regime's brutal crackdown (Indyk, Lieberthal, and O'Hanlon 2012, 144). Similar decisions were made concerning Egypt and Syria. When the Egyptian Revolution began in late January 2011, Obama ignored the situation and eventually asked the 30-year stable Middle Eastern ally to step down when protests got increasingly louder in Egypt. What followed in Egypt was a president from the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, a military coup, and a military interim government.

The Obama Administration was adamant that any intervention in Libya would be limited. It was clear that Obama finally agreed to support intervention because of pressure from France, Great Britain, and the Arab League. Stephen Sestanovich (2014, 316) argues that President Obama "acted only after a broad international coalition had formed and could no longer be ignored." President Obama made it clear that the United States would take a supplementary role in the Libyan intervention and promised that no American ground troops would be involved (Indyk, Lieberthal, and O'Hanlon 2012, 163). In the end, the Libyan intervention was considered a unique case, not likely to be repeated elsewhere and by 2016 was viewed by most as unsuccessful.

From a military standpoint, Operation Odyssey Dawn was effective as Qadhafi, the main objective was taken out of power. In addition, scholar Christopher Chivvis (2014) found that the Operation only cost the United States approximately 1.1 billion dollars. To put this number in perspective, the Kosovo air war in 2011 cost the United States about 2.7 billion dollars not including veterans' benefits (Chivvis 2014, 176-7). However, if success is to be gauged by the aftermath of Operation Odyssey Dawn, the Libyan intervention was not successful. Libya is definitely not in better shape since the dictator Qadhafi was taken out of power. In fact, Libya's situation is more dire/more severe now that the hated dictator is dead. The reasons for these deteriorating circumstances are numerous. Libya is now a failed state that has absolutely no power structure. After Qadhafi's death and transition to a new government with elections on July 7, 2012, Libya is still not doing well. Muhamad Magarief was elected the new President on August 8, 2012 and a new Constitution was drafted in 2013, but the Libyan Muslim Brothers won 17 out of 80 seats in March 2012 (Lobban and Dalton 2014). Pro-Qadhafi rebels use terrorism on a regular basis to create havoc. The American Consulate in Benghazi was

attacked on September 11, 2012 by members from Ansar al-Sharia and four Americans were tortured to death or killed (Chase and Pezzullo 2016). The revolutionary National Transitional Council has created its own power vacuum and self-proclaimed *ad hoc* police are roaming the streets providing vigilante justice. Clan and tribal identity is still a major obstacle for overcoming disunity and the economy is worse than when Qadhafi was in power (Al-Sumait, Lenze, and Hudson 2015).

The failure to intervene in Syria has been harshly criticized. There is no way to describe the Obama Administration's decision making on Syria as anything but flawed. While drawing a red line against President Assad's possible use of chemical weapons on several occasions, President Obama had to back down from possible military strikes after the U.S. Congress sent messages that it was unlikely to authorize such action and Obama would not take any actions on his own (Sestanovich 2014, 319). Upholding the ban on chemical weapons required a last-minute rescue by Russia's President Putin.

President Obama received considerable criticism for both his failure to intervene and for the indecision that he displayed. Anne Marie Slaughter, a former member of the Obama Administration, compared the Obama's failure to intervene in Syria with the Clinton Administration's shameful policy of failing to intervene in Rwanda in 1994. Slaughter (2013, A17) warned, "Obama must realize the tremendous damage he will do to the United States and to his legacy if he fails to act." In 2014 alone, over 100,000 Syrians died in the ongoing civil war. Slaughter accuses that "standing by while Assad gasses his people will guarantee that, whatever else Obama may achieve, he will be remembered as a president who proclaimed a new beginning with the Muslim world but presided over a deadly chapter in the same old story" (A17). On Syria Stephen Sestanovich (2014, 319) concludes:

The entire affair was vivid proof of how policy options can be narrowed by waiting. Yet whatever the prestige costs—and they were high—Syria was not a problem that Obama had ever believed he had to solve. He had wanted to keep his distance, and at that—in the most dismal fashion—he succeeded. Looking weak and foolish was perhaps an acceptable cost.

President Assad attacked his own people on several occasions and Obama did not take any military action even though the situation has escalated into a regional conflict and spawned ISIS. Obama eventually bombed ISIS, albeit not until after the group had advanced all the way to Baghdad. ISIS has become an international terrorist organization that has caused concern over homeland terrorist attacks and continues to wreak havoc in the region.

President Obama has been consistently using drones to kill members of ISIS (Woods 2013). However, these attacks are not advertised by the media nor are they criticized, even though they are a common occurrence. In this instance,

Obama uses covert drone warfare to attack ISIS elements and single-handedly protect American interests. Again, he is boxing with shadows and he is secretly attacking terrorist elements while refusing to publicly use American “boots on the ground.”

It seems highly unlikely that any U.S. president would contemplate some kind of direct military action to the current conflict between Ukraine and Russia, although the situation could become a ticking time bomb. As expected, President Obama has given no hint of any such military action since this conflict has emerged although he has threatened sanctions and implemented sanctions, which at this moment is still the wisest course of action. Although Russia and Putin are trying to reestablish Russia as a formidable world power, the Russian return to greatness is dubious, mostly because of a lack of economic prosperity and a political system plagued by post-Soviet corruption and intolerance.

Avoidance of new major military engagements is perhaps the clearest example of Obama's shadowboxing strategy. He is extremely reluctant to engage real opponents in actual combat. When forced to do so, he seeks as many partners as possible, he is sure to limit the potential damage to the United States, and he is quick to withdraw when “the going gets tough.”

Assertive Counterterrorism

The one component of the Obama foreign policy, which seems somewhat out of place is counterterrorism, yet it still complies with the term “shadowboxing.” In this area, the hyper-cautious Obama has acted with great decisiveness. President Obama has continued the War on Terror in the Middle East that George W. Bush started with even greater intensity targeting the following countries: Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen. President George W. Bush ordered about two drone strikes per day while he was in office. President Obama has ordered almost 10 drone strikes per day in the Middle East up until the end of 2015. George W. Bush ordered around 5,000 drone strikes during his presidency and Obama has ordered around 25,000 drone strikes until the end of 2015 (Sixta Rinehart 2016).

President Obama (2013) explained that, “the United States has taken lethal, targeted action against al Qaeda and its associated forces, including with remotely piloted aircraft commonly referred to as drones.” He described these actions as effective and legal and argued that the administration “has worked vigorously to establish a framework that governs our use of force against terrorists—insisting upon clear guidelines, oversight and accountability.” Obama (2013) continued: “Dozens of highly skilled al Qaeda commanders, trainers, bomb makers and operatives have been taken off the battlefield. Plots have been disrupted that would have targeted international aviation, U.S. transit systems, European cities and our troops in Afghanistan. Simply put, these strikes have saved lives.”

David Sanger (2012, 243) points out that the Obama Administration sees drone attacks as one way for the United States to retain its military superiority around the globe “without resorting to the lengthy, expensive, and unpopular wars and occupations that dominated the past decade. They are the perfect tools for an age of austerity—far cheaper than landing troops in remote deserts and mountains, and often more precise.” These drone strikes have raised tremendous controversy. They have raised the ire of local populations where they are used; they have been strongly resisted by the government of Pakistan; and they have been criticized for the number of civilian casualties that accompany their use. At home, drone strikes have been described as “targeted assassinations” and have raised critical constitutional and humanitarian issues (Singh 2012, 71). The Bush and Obama Administrations have been guilty of killing at least six American citizens with drones, including a 16-year-old boy who was purposefully targeted with his father (Woods 2013).¹⁰ In addition, President Obama had his administration prepare the “White Paper” now known as “Lawfulness of a Lethal Operation Directed against a US Citizen Who is a Senior Operational Leader of Al-Qa’ida or An Associated Force” (Greenwald 2013). This memo allows the American military to kill American citizens anywhere in the world for suspected terrorist actions despite the *Bill of Rights* that gives a citizen the right to a trial by jury. Despite these and many other controversies, it is questionable whether drone strikes have been effective in breaking down the remnants of al Qaeda forces as there is no decisive verdict as to whether these drone strikes have accomplished their goals reflective of their costs (Sixta Rinehart 2016).

President Obama has been directly involved in the process of identifying likely targets for drone attacks. The American media was saturated with coverage of President Obama’s role in the planning and execution of the raid against Osama bin Laden. He was also heavily involved in the execution of “Olympic Games,” the cyber-attack on the Iranian nuclear facilities. David Sanger (2012, xiv) summarizes Obama’s approach:

When confronted with a direct threat to American security, Obama has shown he is willing to act unilaterally—in a targeted, get-in-and-get-out fashion that avoids, at all costs, the kind of messy ground wars and lengthy occupations that have drained America’s treasury and spirit for the past decades. The examples are clear: the bin Laden raid, the escalating drone strikes that have brought al Qaeda to the brink of strategic defeat, and—perhaps most important as a symbol of Obama’s approach—Olympic Games.

¹⁰ The Fifth, Six, and Eighth Amendments guarantee that no American citizen shall be deprived of life, liberty, or property without due process, a right to a speedy and public trial, and no cruel and unusual punishments. Six American citizens have been killed by drones: Anwar al-Awlaki, Abdulrahman al-Awlaki, Samir Khan, Jude Kenan Mohammad, Abdullah al-Shami, and Kamal Derwish. There is disagreement as to whether most of these men were propagandists or immediate threats.

Of course, there are real terrorist threats that are sometimes the focus of Obama's drone policy. There is no doubt that some of the drone attacks have targeted significant terrorist actors. However, because of the significant number of civilian deaths and the overall uncertainty over the usefulness of these policies, Obama on counterterrorism is in many ways still fighting phantoms. On many occasions, the Obama Administration's drone policy is "killing the wrong people." President Obama has come out of the shadows on counterterrorism, but he still is a shadowboxer because the actions are doing relatively little to fundamentally deal with the real issue of terrorism.

The Shadowboxer: Barack Obama

To summarize Obama's foreign policy captured in brief in Table 1, the best term that we can use to describe and identify Obama's grand strategy is that of *shadowboxer*. While terms like "apologist" (Halpin 2015) or "multilateralist" (Wilner 2016) have been used to describe Obama's foreign policy, words like "decisive" or "proactive" are not typically associated with Obama's foreign policy. Obama has not been overtly active from a military or foreign policy perspective. He has tended to sit on decisions and rarely acted unless forced to at a negotiating table—where this forced action is typically a result of public opinion surveys or even criticism from his own party.

Obama's words are his only tool unless, of course, his counterterrorism policies are considered. In this arena, and *only* in this arena, is Obama proactive and decisive. Obama makes unilateral decisions to kill terrorist targets on a weekly basis and most of this decision making is secret and performed at the highest levels of the American military and intelligence communities. The American public does not actively seek out this information, neither does the press feel any need to educate the public concerning the amount of drone attacks that have been committed in the Middle East, which as stated earlier is somewhere in the area of 30,000 that have been recorded. The true number is much higher as there is often confusion and difficulty in identifying fragments of drones and the American Government does not publish their actions (Sixta Rinehart 2016).

Like a shadowboxer, Obama fights the shadows but unlike a true boxer, he rarely fights in public unless many friends or allies are present—and even then, his commitment is small and minor. Even from the perspective of rhetoric, Obama has threatened Russia in the Ukraine situation and Syrian President Assad if he used chemical or biological weapons against his people, yet these threats were empty. Perhaps it would be better to publicly condemn but not to threaten as empty promises present a weak United States, once described by Osama bin Laden as a "paper tiger" (Middle East Forum 1998). Only covertly, does Obama actually use the military and his powers as Commander in Chief and the American public rarely knows what the Commander in Chief is doing.

Conclusion

Although it has been difficult to pin down President Obama's grand strategy, this article has set out five tenets to Obama's weak grand strategy: (1) Modest Retrenchment in Foreign Policy Spending; (2) Rebuilding America's Reputation: The Anti-Thesis of George W. Bush; (3) Multilateralism; (4) Non-intervention and Avoiding "Boots on the Ground"; and (5) Assertive Counterterrorism. To summarize his overarching grand strategy we have used the term *shadowboxer* to describe President Barack Obama: one who refuses to fight in public but secretly attacks elements that he considers dangerous to the United States. In his speech to Cuba on March 22, 2016, Obama acknowledged his use of shadowboxing in American foreign policy. "Before 1959, some Americans saw Cuba as something to exploit: ignored poverty, enabled corruption. And since 1959, we've been shadow boxers in this battle of geo-politics and personalities" (Obama 2016).

History may not be kind to Obama in its consideration of his foreign policy. When he should have acted, he threatened. When he should have carried out his threats, he defaulted. In the end, he will be remembered for his words, not any successful *grand strategy* or brilliant foreign policy action. After his term has ended, will anyone really be able to state that the world is a better place because of President Barack Obama? The consensus on this question may take several decades to come to realization as the effects of Obama's foreign policy are eventually assessed.

The purpose of this study was to identify some type of coherent grand strategy in the foreign policy of President Barack Obama. This research is important to citizens, students, and scholars of foreign policy so that some common understanding of the present and future relationships between the United States and other countries can be ascertained and assessed. It is also important to the president and policy makers as to how their actions are perceived by the public, the scholarly community, and, most importantly, the rest of the world. Future planning of foreign policy is also based on past actions and relationships. It is clear to everyone that some type of plan must be in order, whether realized or not, to understand how things work.

Useful avenues for future research stem from this. They most certainly include a final assessment of Barack Obama's foreign policy identifying the areas in which planning was less than successful. It is not impossible that changes could materialize in the last few months of his presidency, although it has to be said this seems unlikely. The present study also highlights a need for more and deeper scholarly research on the effectiveness of Obama's targeted killing strategy in the Middle East. There is much controversy concerning the legality and effectiveness of this counterterrorism strategy, yet descriptive research and international legal research have dominated the scholarship. A comprehensive study needs to be completed.

Like all presidents, Obama will leave office with a combination of successes and failures. There has been very little transformation of foreign policy under Obama, at least of the kind envisioned by candidate Barack Obama.¹¹ Instead, there has been the winding down of two wars, a modest effort to rebuild America's image in the world, a rejection of most forms of unilateralism in favor of a return to multilateralism, a reorientation from the turmoil of the Mideast to the complexities of Asia, and keeping America out of any new major conflicts anywhere in the world. Transformation of U.S. foreign policy *grand strategy*, whether necessary or even possible, will have to wait until Barack Obama leaves office in 2017.

The creation of a grand strategy is neither a "make nor break" component in U.S. foreign policy. However, if the United States expects to remain the world's sole superpower and to maintain its *status quo*, a coherent grand strategy is helpful. The world should be able to recognize a coherent strategy as to how the United States seeks to confront problems. A predictable superpower that is both reliable and understandable is more conducive to sustainable state relations and, hopefully, to lasting peace.

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¹¹ It should be noted that some opponents of President Obama argue that there has been a foreign policy transformation, with mostly negative results (see e.g., Dueck 2015).

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