

America's Post-Obama Foreign Policy Dilemmas*

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Hal Brands:

American Grand Strategy in the Age of Trump

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The book aims at outlining a “*grand strategy*” (a comprehensive interpretation of the global situation and global events by arranging apparently conflicting efforts into a single system) that explains the steps and efforts in the USA’s foreign politics. Brand thinks that the USA did not change its foreign policy radically after the Cold War. It would be wrong to say that this foreign policy has not been efficient and that it was especially harmful to the world. It is not true that the USA missed the opportunity offered by the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is also not true that the US-dominated world order has ended and there is no alternative to accepting the changed status quo and to integrating among the other nations. On the contrary, the author argued that the USA did not change its Cold War methods – the trade deals, military interventions, supporting local opponents to aggressive authoritarian regimes, economic liberalism and promoting human rights. Although certain foreign policy moves deserve criticism (e.g. military interventions in Iraq, Somalia and Libya); the goal of creating a stable and gradually expanding alliance system has been accomplished. It is not a true statement that the USA has lost its leading position, but its advantages are indeed decreasing. In 1994, the USA produced 25 per cent of global GDP (the 2015 figure was 22.4 per cent) and accounted for 40 per cent of total global military spending (the 2015 figure was 33.8 per cent). In 1994, China produced 3.3 per cent of global GDP (the 2015 figure was 11.8 per cent) and accounted for 2.2 per cent of the total global military spending (the 2015 figure was 12.2 per cent). Encouraged by the narrowing power gap, authoritarian regimes aim at changing the status quo.

* The papers in this issue contain the views of the authors which are not necessarily the same as the official views of the Magyar Nemzeti Bank.

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Brand thinks that maintaining the US-led global order depends on a few fundamental principles: Well-functioning systems should not be changed radically; it is enough to tackle current challenges only. The USA must see that the primary key to its global influence is its military supremacy. To maintain it, it needs to increase its military spending to 4 per cent of its GDP. A more efficient exploitation of the existing alliance system is also crucial. Dividing up military tasks and encouraging specialisation could lead to a more cost-effective protection for the US-led alliance which might require new allies (e.g. Brazil, Vietnam, India, United Arab Emirates) even to the detriment of old ones. Military force must be used in a disciplined way only. The USA continues to promote economic and political freedoms in the world and should rely on military interventions in the current circumstances as well, but it is imperative that it should not engage in protracted, endless wars. Finally, the public also must take seriously the fundamental principles that have made the USA successful. The political elite must make the basics of the strategy that has been successful for 25 years desirable.

Offshore balancing used to be a topic of academic discourse; since 2012, however, analysts have seen it assume an important role in Washington's decision making. The USA would do best if it did not rely on military means to enforce its global influence (its key regions are Europe, East Asia, Persian Gulf), but returned to the continent. Foreign policy experts agree that major influence in any key region by the adversaries must be prevented. Globalists wish to primarily deploy military force, while advocates of *offshore balancing* think that supporting other nations would be more expedient, which would not be isolationism, but say that ideological interventions (e.g. humanitarian aids) should be abandoned unless something puts the status quo at grave risk. This strategy would cost between 100 and 200 billion US dollars less but would still not push the US budget into the black. Brand thinks that this strategy's security benefits are overrated in terms of combatting terrorism and the nuclear arms race. He thinks that key regions could fall under the influence of adversaries if allied small states do not feel the proximity of the US military and are strong enough to resist if they are attacked. An aggressive power could, therefore, put the nations in key regions under pressure without direct aggression as well.

Obama upheld the consensus in many aspects and the USA's military spending was still three times as much as that of the country ranked second to it. Obama also promoted liberal values all over the world. His military actions were narrower and more precise and he wanted to correct Bush's mistake (overexpansion in Iraq) and shifted the focus to East Asia. The author thinks that Obama's approach relied primarily on diplomacy, which sometimes discouraged allies, for example when the promised retaliation for Assad's chemical attacks did not take place. Overall, less loss of human life and less use of resources (e.g. by eliminating al-Qaeda leaders with drone strikes) still led to good results. His Afghanistan campaign was, however,

unsuccessful. The war became costly and failed in the long run. Obama did not assess Russia's militancy correctly, he did not move to hold Russia back in time and could not stop Russian attacks (including in Ukraine). NATO does not spend enough on the protection of its eastern borders; it is, therefore, not protected from Russian attacks. After the shift in the balance of power, Obama strengthened diplomatic relations in East Asia and funded military development projects.

Brand thinks that Trump's election means that American voters are no longer satisfied with the decades-long consensus, i.e. that America should also intervene in other countries' affairs, promote multilateral agreements, advocate the values of democracy and freedom and make free-trade deals. Trump's election success was supported by a steep increase in social disparities, the stagnation of (lower) middle-class wages, and dissatisfaction with global free trade. Trump could also choose isolation from the world and building an "American fortress". This would, however, be positive in the short run only (obligations under international relations and military spending would decline, the forced return of illegal immigrants would increase blue-collar wages, and industries impacted by free trade would become strong again). Brand thinks, however, that this strategy's results would be the opposite in the long run.

The other path would be building a USA that places more emphasis on its international interests, but in the existing international setting. This would mean a stronger assertion of the USA's interests, acting against countries that misuse free trade and break its rules and expecting more from allies for the protection given to them. This would also mean higher military spending, engaging in minor military interventions, although stronger assertion could entail more aggression which could alienate allies. Trump's campaign speeches and the early measures of his presidency imply that he identifies himself rather with the American fortress idea, but Brand thinks that international relations are deeply embedded, the Congress is determined and public opinion also leans towards upholding and developing the current global status quo.

After the Cold War, the USA did not have any military opponents. Brand thinks that nowadays, however, Russia and China are aggressive in the field of armaments, and the spread of various military technologies could turn North Korea or Iran into real threats. The USA's military supremacy is not obvious anymore. The US Army set the so-called 1.7 goal in 2012 (it can support a war with full force while being capable of imposing burdens that are unbearable in the long run on the enemy on other fronts) but it is not enough. Cost-cuts would be accompanied by aggressive major and medium-sized powers filling the power vacuum, which might gravely threaten the liberal world order and national interests.

The desirable option is that the USA spends again as much on military developments as it is necessary to leave its primacy unquestioned. This would be an economic and political burden, but only this could guarantee a relatively peaceful and free development of the world. Brand thinks that Trump regards global politics and trade relations as a zero-sum game. But the author thinks that his presidency will not lead to the American fortress policy and that the USA will spend more on keeping its military leadership, will be able to strengthen its global influence and will continue to promote the values of freedom and free trade in the world.

Brand's approach is an interesting one. He first outlines an ideal type (offshore balancing, America fortress, international nationalism), then shows how the actors moved in the light of them. He demonstrates that offshore balancing is not much cheaper and does not ensure much more security. The American fortress policy is based on economic nationalism and withdrawals from military alliances, which would not help to uphold the USA's hegemony. Brand thinks that post-Obama presidents should move towards international nationalism. He more or less protects Obama, who made mistakes but did not embrace offshore balancing, while Trump fights against America's tradition of internationalism, undermines America's soft power and it is unclear whether he would upgrade the army to the level necessary. Brand is not pro-Trump, he condemns him for withdrawing from the Pacific Trade Agreement and the Paris Climate Agreement and the Iran Nuclear Deal. He is also angry for Trump's uncourtly style and thinks that his presidency has its risks.

Brand's book not only describes and assesses Obama's and Trump's foreign policy efforts, it also tells what he thinks would be right. He is not alone. Wess Mitchell (who later became Trump's Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs) and his co-author wrote a study¹ during Obama's second term. In their study they wrote that the USA is doing the right thing if it maintains intense relations with countries surrounding the three countries they consider dangerous (Russia, China and Iran)—from the Baltics to the Balkans, Saudi-Arabia, Thailand, Vietnam and Japan. These "border-control countries" are key partners. Their trust in the USA must be upheld, and the surrounded dangerous countries will test them (annexing Crimea, making artificial islands near China, setting up terrorist groups and funding them in the Middle East). The USA must give all support to global border-control states, no matter what they do (e.g. a military coup or grave violations of democratic rules or deteriorate the rule of law), because those are their own affairs.

¹ Grygiel, J.J. – Mitchell, A.W.: *Nyugtalan határvidék (The Unquiet Frontier)*. Publishing House of the Antal József Knowledge Centre, 2017.

Summing it up, Brand has written a great book. He not only shows what Obama and Trump have done, but also explains what they could have done. He also praises them if he thinks that they avoided the worst scenario. He has his own ideas about what Trump should do (should have done) while he has an agenda (perhaps one from Wess Mitchell) different from what Brand thinks good. The reader might think that Brand is a bit out of pace and does not deal with what is ahead of us now, i.e. geopolitical answers to the challenges of the post-globalisation robotic age, but with what we have left behind.