By George Friedman

Making sense of U.S. President Barack Obama's strategy at this moment is difficult. Not only is it a work in progress, but the pending decisions he has to make -- on Iran, Afghanistan and Russia -- tend to obscure underlying strategy. It is easy to confuse inaction with a lack of strategy. Of course, there may well be a lack of strategic thinking, but that does not mean there is a lack of strategy.

Strategy, as we have argued, is less a matter of choice than a matter of reality imposing itself on presidents. Former U.S. President George W. Bush, for example, rarely had a chance to make strategy. He was caught in a whirlwind after only nine months in office and spent the rest of his presidency responding to events, making choices from a menu of very bad options. Similarly, Obama came into office with a preset menu of limited choices. He seems to be fighting to create new choices, not liking what is on the menu. He may succeed. But it is important to understand the overwhelming forces that shape his choices and to understand the degree to which whatever he chooses is embedded in U.S. grand strategy, a strategy imposed by geopolitical reality.

Empires and grand strategy

American grand strategy, as we have argued, is essentially that of the British Empire, save at a global rather than a regional level. The British sought to protect their national security by encouraging Continental powers to engage in land-based conflict, thereby reducing resources available for building a navy. That guaranteed that Britain's core interest, the security of the homeland and sea-lane control, remained intact. Achieving this made the United Kingdom an economic power in the 19th century by sparing it the destruction of war and allowing it to control the patterns of international maritime trade.

On occasion, when the balance of power in Europe tilted toward one side or another, Britain intervened on the Continent with political influence where possible, direct aid when necessary or -- when all else failed -- the smallest possible direct military intervention. The United Kingdom's preferred strategy consisted of imposing a blockade -- e.g., economic sanctions -- allowing it to cause pain without incurring costs.

At the same time that it pursued this European policy, London was building a global empire. Here again, the British employed a balance-of-power strategy. In looking at the history of India or Africa during the 19th century, there is a consistent pattern of the United Kingdom forming alliances with factions, whether religious or ethnic groups, to create opportunities for domination. In the end, this was not substantially different from ancient Rome's grand strategy. Rome also ruled indirectly through much of its empire, controlling Mediterranean sea-lanes, but allying with local forces to govern; observing Roman strategy in Egypt is quite instructive in this

regard.

Empires are not created by someone deciding one day to build one, or more precisely, lasting empires are not. They emerge over time through a series of decisions having nothing to do with empire building, and frequently at the hands of people far more concerned with domestic issues than foreign policy. Paradoxically, leaders who consciously set out to build empires usually fail. Hitler is a prime example. His failure was that rather than ally with forces in the Soviet Union, he wished to govern directly, something that flowed from his ambitions for direct rule. Particularly at the beginning, the Roman and British empires were far less ambitious and far less conscious of where they were headed. They were primarily taking care of domestic affairs. They became involved in foreign policy as needed, following a strategy of controlling the seas while maintaining substantial ground forces able to prevail anywhere -- but not everywhere at once -- and a powerful alliance system based on supporting the ambitions of local powers against other local powers.

On the whole, the United States has no interest in empire, and indeed is averse to imperial adventures. Those who might have had explicit inclinations in this direction are mostly out of government, crushed by experience in Iraq. Iraq came in two parts. In the first part, from 2003 to 2007, the U.S. vision was one of direct rule relying on American sea-lane control and overwhelming Iraq with well-supplied American troops.

The results were unsatisfactory. The United States found itself arrayed against all Iraqi factions and wound up in a multipart war in which its forces were merely one faction arrayed against others. The Petraeus strategy to escape this trap was less an innovation in counterinsurgency than a classic British-Roman approach. Rather than attempting direct control of Iraq, Petraeus sought to manipulate the internal balance of power, aligning with Sunni forces against Shiite forces, i.e., allying with the weaker party at that moment against the stronger. The strategy did not yield the outcome that some Bush strategists dreamed of, but it might (with an emphasis on might) yield a useful outcome: a precariously balanced Iraq dependent on the United States to preserve its internal balance of power and national sovereignty against Iran.

Many Americans, perhaps even most, regret the U.S. intervention in Iraq. And there are many, again perhaps most, who view broader U.S. entanglement in the world as harmful to American interests. Similar views were expressed by Roman republicans and English nationalists who felt that protecting the homeland by controlling the sea was the best policy, while letting the rest of the world go its own way. But the Romans and the British lost that option when they achieved the key to their own national security: enough power to protect the homeland. Outsiders inevitably came to see that power as offensive, even though originally its possessors intended it as defensive. Indeed, intent aside, the capability for offensive power was there. So frequently, Rome and Britain threatened the interests of foreign powers simply by being there. Inevitably, both Rome and Britain became the targets of Hannibals and Napoleons, and they were both drawn into the world regardless of their original desires. In short, enough power to be secure is enough power to threaten others. Therefore, that perfect moment of national security always turns offensive, as the power to protect the homeland threatens the security of other countries.

A question of size

There are Obama supporters and opponents who also dream of the perfect balance: security for the United States achieved by not interfering in the affairs of others. They see foreign entanglements not as providing homeland security, but as generating threats to it. They do not understand that what they want, American prosperity without international risks, is by definition impossible. The U.S. economy is roughly 25 percent of the world's economy. The American military controls the seas, not all at the same time, but anywhere it wishes at any given time. The United States also controls outer space. It is impossible for the United States not to intrude on the affairs of most countries in the world simply by virtue of its daily operations. The United States is an elephant that affects the world simply by being in the same room with it. The only way to not be an elephant is to shrink in size, and whether the United States would ever want this aside, decreasing power is harder to do than it might appear -- and much more painful.

Obama's challenge is managing U.S. power without decreasing its size and without imposing undue costs on it. This sounds like an attractive idea, but it ultimately won't work: The United States cannot be what it is without attracting hostile attention. For some of Obama's supporters, it is American behavior that generates hostility. Actually, it is America's presence -- its very size -- that intrudes on the world and generates hostility.

On the domestic front, the isolationist-internationalist divide in the United States has always been specious. Isolationists before World War II simply wanted to let the European balance of power manage itself. They wanted to buy time, but had no problem with intervening in China against Japan. The internationalists simply wanted to move from the first to the second stage, arguing that the first stage had failed. There was thus no argument in principle between them; there was simply a debate over how much time to give the process to see if it worked out. Both sides had the same strategy, but simply a different read of the moment. In retrospect, Franklin Roosevelt was right, but only because France collapsed in the face of the Nazi onslaught in a matter of weeks. That aside, the isolationist argument was quite rational.

Like that of Britain or Rome, U.S. grand strategy is driven by the sheer size of the national enterprise, a size achieved less through planning than by geography and history. Having arrived where it has, the United States has three layers to its strategy.

First, the United States must maintain the balance of power in various regions in the world. It does this by supporting a range of powers, usually the weaker against the stronger. Ideally, this balance of power maintains itself without American effort and yields relative stability. But stability is secondary to keeping local powers focused on each other rather than on the United States: Stability is a rhetorical device, not a goal. The real U.S. interest lies in weakening and undermining emergent powers so they don't ultimately rise to challenge American power. This is a strategy of nipping things in the bud.

Second, where emergent powers cannot be maintained through the regional balance of power, the United States has an interest in sharing the burden of containing it with other major powers. The United States will seek to use such coalitions either to intimidate the emerging power via economic power or, in extremis, via military power.

Third, where it is impossible to build a coalition to coerce emerging powers, the United States

must decide either to live with the emerging power, forge an alliance with it, or attack it unilaterally.

Obama, as with any president, will first pursue the first layer of the strategy, using as little American power as possible and waiting as long as possible to see whether this works. The key here lies in not taking premature action that could prove more dangerous or costly than necessary. If that fails, his strategy is to create a coalition of powers to share the cost and risk. And only when that fails -- which is a function of time and politics -- will Obama turn to the third layer, which can range from simply living with the emerging power and making a suitable deal or crushing it militarily.

When al Qaeda attacked what it saw as the leading Christian power on Sept. 11, Bush found himself thrown into the third stage very rapidly. The second phase was illusory; sympathy aside, the quantity of military force allies could and would bring to bear was minimal. Even active allies like Britain and Australia couldn't bring decisive force to bear. Bush was forced into unilateralism not so much by the lack of will among allies as by their lack of power. His choice lay in creating chaos in the Islamic world and then forming alliances out of the debris, or trying to impose a direct solution through military force. He began with the second and shifted to the first.

Obama's Choices

Obama has more room to maneuver than Bush had. In the case of Iran, no regional solution is possible. Israel can only barely reach into the region, and while its air force might suffice to attack Iranian nuclear facilities, and air attacks might be sufficient to destroy them, Israel could not deal with the Iranian response of mining the Strait of Hormuz and/or destabilizing Iraq. The United States must absorb these blows.

Therefore, Obama has tried to build an anti-Iranian coalition to intimidate Tehran. Given the Russian and Chinese positions, this seems to have failed, and Iran has not been intimidated. That leaves Obama with two possible paths. One is the path followed by Nixon in China: ally with Iran against Russian influence, accepting it as a nuclear power and dealing with it through a combination of political alignment and deterrence. The second option is dealing with Iran militarily.

His choice thus lies between entente or war. He is bluffing war in hopes of getting what he wants, in the meantime hoping that internal events in Iran may evolve in a way suitable to U.S. interests or that Russian economic hardship evolves into increased Russian dependence on the United States such that Washington can extract Russian concessions on Iran. Given the state of Iran's nuclear development, which is still not near a weapon, Obama is using time to try to head off the third stage.

In Afghanistan, where Obama is already in the third stage and where he is being urged to go deeper in, he is searching for a way to return to the first stage, wherein an indigenous coalition emerges that neutralizes Afghanistan through its own internal dynamic. Hence, Washington is negotiating with the Taliban, trying to strengthen various factions in Afghanistan and not quite committing to more force. Winter is coming in Afghanistan, and that is the quiet time in that

conflict. Obama is clearly buying time.

In that sense, Obama's foreign policy is neither as alien as his critics would argue nor as original as his supporters argue. He is adhering to the basic logic of American grand strategy, minimizing risks over time while seeking ways to impose low-cost solutions. It differs from Bush's policies primarily in that Bush had events forced on him and spent his presidency trying to regain the initiative.

The interesting point from where we sit is not only how deeply embedded Obama is in U.S. grand strategy, but how deeply drawn he is into the unintended imperial enterprise that has dominated American foreign policy since the 1930s -- an enterprise neither welcomed nor acknowledged by most Americans. Empires aren't planned, at least not successful empires, as Hitler and Napoleon learned to their regret. Empires happen as the result of the sheer reality of power. The elephant in the room cannot stop being an elephant, nor can the smaller animals ignore him. No matter how courteous the elephant, it is his power -- his capabilities -- not his intentions that matter.

Obama is now the elephant in the room. He has bought as much time as possible to make decisions, and he is being as amiable as possible to try to build as large a coalition as possible. But the coalition has neither the power nor appetite for the risks involved, so Obama will have to decide whether to live with Iran, form an alliance with Iran or go to war with Iran. In Afghanistan, he must decide whether he can recreate the balance of power by staying longer and whether this will be more effective by sending more troops, or whether it is time to begin withdrawal. In both cases, he can use the art of the bluff to shape the behavior of others, maybe.

He came into the presidency promising to be more amiable than Bush, something not difficult given the circumstances. He is now trying to convert amiability into a coalition, a much harder thing to do. In the end, he will have to make hard decisions. In American foreign policy, however, the ideal strategy is always to buy time so as to let the bribes, bluffs and threats do their work. Obama himself probably doesn't know what he will do; that will depend on circumstances. Letting events flow until they can no longer be tolerated is the essence of American grand strategy, a path Obama is following faithfully.

It should always be remembered that this long-standing American policy has frequently culminated in war, as with Wilson, Roosevelt, Truman, Johnson and Bush. It was Clinton's watchful waiting to see how things played out, after all, that allowed al Qaeda the time to build and strike. But this is not a criticism of Clinton -- U.S. strategy is to trade time for risk. Over time, the risk might lead to war anyway, but then again, it might not. If war does come, American power is still decisive, if not in creating peace, then certainly in wreaking havoc upon rising powers. And that is the foundation of empire.