



America Adrift

Under the Obama administration, U.S. foreign policy lacks a strategic focus.

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October 15, 2014

Former Defense Secretary Leon Panetta's biography, released last week, provides a picture of a White House beset by crises and indecision. Panetta describes [a decision-making process](#) marked by vacillation and a reticence to engage with pressing problems. But while attention has mostly focused on his revelations about Syria, his biography also provides further evidence that the biggest problem in U.S. foreign policy isn't inaction, it's trying to do too much at once.

The world is not actually [more dangerous than ever](#), but you might think it is if you watch the news. The media bombards Americans with crises like the rise of the Islamic State group, failing states in Iraq and Syria, the growing Ebola epidemic, the failing ceasefire in Ukraine and widespread protests in Hong Kong. There is also civil strife in Yemen and Libya, nuclear negotiations with Iran, a potential coup in North Korea, the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, security concerns in Afghanistan and a civil war in the Central African Republic. And that doesn't even touch on non-security foreign policy issues like trade, climate negotiations or relations with China.

Foreign policy is about setting priorities. But Washington has been erratic in its approach, trying to tackle countless global issues in isolation with no reference to the bigger picture. The Obama administration has wavered between a desire not to get involved in conflicts and an apparent desire to be seen to be doing something.

The current situation in Syria is not dissimilar to last year, when [70 percent of Americans opposed](#) arming Syrian rebels, but shock and fear at Islamic State group atrocities has dramatically increased public support for airstrikes in Iraq and Syria. Although this level of support [is likely ephemeral](#), it quickly led to intervention. The White House's swift about-face on the issue obscures the fact that there is still no clear strategy for how the Islamic State group can be degraded as a threat using air strikes alone. Indeed, the militant terrorist group continues to make territorial gains despite several weeks of bombing raids.

Washington's approach to other recent crises has been similarly lacking in strategic focus. The White House's commitment to solving the Ukrainian crisis is unclear: The administration has denounced Russia, participated in sanctions and has agreed to train the Ukrainian military, but seems content to ignore the shaky ceasefire and growing violence in the Donbas while it focuses on the Middle East.

Most opponents of the administration also flit from issue to issue, usually calling for greater intervention while criticizing the president for not doing enough in any given situation. Note, for example, the numerous criticisms from Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., who has advocated military intervention in [more than a dozen countries](#), ranging from Nigeria to North Korea. Almost every Republican presidential hopeful has expressed support for a more "muscular" foreign policy, including various calls for increased defense spending equal to [4 percent of gross domestic product](#). Yet none provides any indication of which foreign policy issues they consider key and which are less important.

Attempting to address every crisis is expensive. In addition to standard deployments, current U.S. military commitments include air strikes in Syria and Iraq, an advisory role for troops in Iraq, continuing military presence in Afghanistan, [4,000 troops in Africa](#) as part of an anti-Ebola campaign, and continuing counterterrorism actions in countries such as Pakistan and Yemen. The war against the Islamic State group will cost an additional [\\$15 billion to \\$20 billion per year](#), supplemental to the existing defense budget. Intervening in other conflicts – for example, to take down President Bashar Assad in Syria – would cost a lot more. But limited resources are not the main problem.

Instead, attempting to address every crisis, especially in an ad hoc way, undermines our ability to address what's really important. When short-term crises occupy time and energy, long-term issues are neglected. Take the Obama administration's much-promoted "pivot to Asia," which has been swept away by a tidal wave of nonessential crises.

There are certainly cases where U.S. attention or intervention is a good idea, but most current crises are only tangential to U.S. interests. The Islamic State group is brutal and savage, but even the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey admits they pose [no direct threat](#) to the United States. The Ukrainian crisis is concerning because of Russia's resurgence, but in itself Ukraine is not a major strategic concern for the United States. Yet these crises dominate the agenda, pushing other issues aside.

In large part, this is because there doesn't seem to be any clear strategic framework for U.S. foreign policy or any prioritization of important issues. President Barack Obama's West Point speech in May, designed to better elucidate his foreign policy agenda, was unenlightening on the topic. The president described a wide variety of issues – counterterrorism, emerging threats in the Middle East, rebuilding global institutions, Iran's nuclear ambitions, etc. – as interests for the United States but provided no insight into which are most important. Likewise, no clear alternative has been proposed by opponents of the White House: Higher defense spending and increased intervention are equally bereft of strategic vision.

Ultimately, U.S. foreign policy needs to become smarter, not bigger. Policymakers need to think more clearly about what America's key interests are, instead of scrambling to manage every blot of instability and every outbreak of disease. When action is necessary – or when it is already initiated, as in Syria – there must be a clear goal in order to avoid mission creep. But most importantly, they need to make choices about which issues are foreign policy priorities and which are less important. Otherwise, U.S. foreign policy will continue to be aimless, wasting resources and energy on an endless series of "urgent" crises.