RECENT HISTORY

In the first four years of the Obama administration, the United States pursued a relatively modest, internationally based foreign policy. The administration established policy priorities early on through a series of high profile speeches and the release of the National Security Strategy document. In the subsequent years, those priorities gradually became defined as a cooperative, low risk strategy in the international field. The administration made only slight overtures at Israel-Palestine peace, and hesitantly embraced the Arab Spring uprisings. Humanitarian efforts were little discussed, the President did not lead large initiatives for HIV/AIDS, malaria or other persistent problems in the developing world, largely leaving those projects to the State Department and USAID. The administration instead made a point to concentrate on Asia-Pacific affairs in an effort to refocus the American establishment and put the “Bush” wars behind the country. Central to the rebalancing effort has been the drawing down of the military in Iraq and Afghanistan and a “shift” to preventative and deterrent efforts in Asia. After more than a decade of war the White House is intent on avoiding entanglement in another sustained conflict.

As part of that desire, and in an effort to establish itself as a leader in international partnership, Obama has pledged to secure UN authorization before any intervention and work through multilateral coalitions on all issues not directly related to existential threats to US national security. The key exception remains counterterrorism, for which the administration has pursued a long standing policy of minimal use of U.S. troops through high impact aerial strikes and special operations missions even in the face of growing, if not telling, domestic opposition.

In 2013, the Obama administration re-evaluated their international priorities for the next four years. In what was seen as an agenda setting speech for his second term foreign policy, the President gave a high profile address in Germany in August 2013. The speech largely reiterated the policies of the first term, describing the need for enhanced partnership between the U.S. and the world. More than previously, however, the President focused on the economic element of US foreign policy, noting the need for European growth, free trade, and bilateral ties that mutually benefit all countries. The speech noted that the 'outstretched hand' of the United States still exists, emphasizing that those countries improving democracy and human rights will receive U.S. assistance, while those persisting in authoritarian policies will continue to face sanctions.

PERTINENT ISSUES

Defense

The United States military, already committed to shrinking since the 2012 US Defense Strategic
Guidance, felt a significant portion of the budget cuts associated with the 2013 sequestration, and saw only a portion of those cuts renewed in the 2014 budget. Reductions in naval, troop, and air deployments have occurred globally, particularly in Europe and on routine patrols and exercises. Combined with the rebalancing towards Asia and the conclusion of military operations in Afghanistan, the U.S. is on a trajectory to cut overseas troops and equipment by 15% overall in the next 10 years. Many in the Pentagon view the cuts as excessive and argue this will result in a hollowing out of U.S. force projection capabilities across the globe, although others argue that this will allow an economic rebalancing to further develop key U.S. technological advantages, but in the early stages of the reductions the implications for security operations are still unclear. One area that has benefited from the new priority on conflict avoidance and addressing threats at as low a scale as possible has been the U.S. intelligence and homeland security communities, both public and supporting private sector institutions and efforts. They have continued to grow exponentially and largely missed the budget cuts of other agencies. As a result, the ability of the various intelligence branches and their coordinating capacity for information collection and analysis is unprecedented in 2014.

**Diplomatic and Economic**

Despite the impact of the sequester budget cuts on U.S. foreign aid, military, and diplomatic services, the U.S. continues to operate embassies in almost every country in the world. Still, the ongoing domestic budget crisis means the U.S. must balance its foreign policy priorities with the realism of what is financially possible. Most U.S. overseas operations are experiencing budget cuts or the continuation of the status quo into the foreseeable future. The economic setbacks from 2008 onwards have reduced the logistical capacity and avenues for the U.S. to respond to any point in the world at speed. Nevertheless, the U.S. remains the world’s largest economy with the resultant spending on diplomacy, intelligence and military capabilities that make it a critical pillar of the international system.

In Europe, the U.S. has underscored its position that the EU and NATO will be the essential security and stability arrangements in the area into the future. Drawing from the Libya (and partly, the Mali) intervention, the U.S. has noted in post conflict talks and interviews that it views these types of operations as the new role for NATO, pronouncing the organization as the principal agent of security from the Atlantic to the Black Sea. The emphasis on NATO coordinates with the Obama administration's pressure to shift the cost burdens of security in the region to other NATO members so the U.S. can move the Europe resources to East Asian affairs. In the Pacific, the cornerstone of Obama’s policy continues to be the military, economic, and diplomatic pivot to the region. The repositioning of naval forces, bilateral alliances, free trade agreements, and joint military exercises have all signaled the administration’s close cooperation with Pacific allies.

**DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS**

**Georgia**

The United States is deeply committed to the sovereignty, democracy, and economic advancement of Georgia. The U.S. has been the largest bilateral donor to Georgia for the past decade, and Georgia
has received major assistance through programs such as $295 million from the Millennium Challenge Account program. The U.S. also stepped in quickly to aid Georgia after the conflict with Russia in 2008 and created a multi-year, $1 billion program of support. Security assistance to Georgia is provided through military training and joint operations. After much lobbying by members of Congress and Georgian leaders, the U.S. initiated its first round of weapons sales to Georgia in 2013, including advanced radar arrays.

The U.S. commitment to Georgia stems from the complementary interests of each country. Georgia's troubled relationship with Russia pushed it towards the United States, and the U.S. search for partners in the global war on terror, a democratic government in the Caucasus, and a counterpoint to Russia led to a strong collaboration. Georgia continues to support the U.S. in Afghanistan with the largest non-NATO force. During a visit to Georgia in early 2014, the U.S. Secretary of State reaffirmed U.S. support for Georgia's territorial integrity. Marines and sailors from the U.S. military have continued to train Georgian forces through a number of ad-hoc forces up to the present day. Nevertheless, the U.S. has made clear that U.S. collaboration with Georgia is not a defense commitment in case of further aggression on Georgian territory.

The U.S. Ambassador to Georgia has publicly stated that Abkhazia and South Ossetia are sovereign territories of Georgia and are under “military occupation” by Russia.

Russia

After the much publicized ‘reset’ in relations initiated by the Obama administration, U.S.-Russia relations have deteriorated significantly since 2009 and into 2014. On almost all fronts except nuclear weapons, the U.S. position on Russia is tense, if not openly hostile. Disagreements over policy on Georgia, Syria, Iran, energy resources, and missile defense have all contributed to the drastic decline in the Russia-U.S. relationship. As relations have soured, Russia has banished a number of NGOs from operating within Russian territory, mostly targeting American groups. Prior to Assad’s fall, the Russian veto of a Security Council Resolutions authorizing a no-fly zone over Syria sparked the President to summon the Russian ambassador to the White House for a highly publicized rebuke of Russian tactics. Internally the Obama administration blames Russia for the humanitarian nightmare that resulted from the prolonged Syrian civil war and the messy takeover by the interim government. In public, the U.S. has admonished Russia as “irresponsible” and “negligent in its humanitarian obligations.” Though stopping short of directly blaming Russia for Syria war, the U.S. noted in the Security Council that intervention earlier in the conflict would have prevented more thousands of deaths and created a less fragile replacement government.

In what is viewed as an indirect response to Russia’s intractability on Syria, the U.S. has moved forward with programs unpopular to the Russian government. Part of the U.S. ‘ally support’ in the Black Sea region has included the first arms sales approved for Georgia in October 2013 and public affirmations of their territorial integrity by the State Department and in Congress – several Senators demanded that Russia withdraw its troops from South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Furthermore, the U.S. agreed to establish ABM systems in Romania and established a naval presence (transport
logistics) on the Black Sea.

**Germany**

The United States and Germany have historically close ties. The U.S. is Germany’s strongest ally outside of the Eurozone and the largest recipient of German foreign direct investment. The U.S. maintains one of its largest military installations in Stuttgart, Germany and operates both Eucom and Africom from the location. Germany is also home to one of the largest U.S. expatriate populations, with over 100,000 Americans as permanent residents.

The U.S., along with the Germany and the EU, has maintained similar policies in regards to the Russian invasion of Georgia and the Syria crisis. Both countries signed onto sanctions against the Assad regime prior to its fall, and neither country has recognized the SIF regime as the main governing body of Syria.

**Turkey**

United States foreign relations with Turkey are close, although almost never smooth. The U.S. views Turkey as a linchpin of stability in the Middle East, and a conduit of U.S. interests to other countries in the region. Still, the U.S. is wary of the growing popular hostility towards America in Turkey. U.S. and Turkey relations have been strained recently over issues such as Iran, Israel, religion in politics, democracy and human rights, and the Kurdish question. The U.S. is an important supporter of greater economic liberalization in the region, and has encouraged Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey oil and gas pipeline cooperation. The U.S. views transborder pipeline construction as both a method of economic growth and a physical connection of friendship between its major allies in the region.

After the SIF gained nominal control in Syria, Turkey was one of the few NATO states to recognize the government. Turkey has publicly criticized their political philosophy, but is also desperate to establish stability across its border. To that end, the U.S. is attempting to balance its desire to see a more moderate coalition rise to power in Syria while assuring Turkey that it is not inciting further civil war. Crucially, covert support from the U.S. during the civil war for the Kurdish region of Syria has ended at the private insistence of the Turkey government.

**Syria**

The U.S. hesitated in its early dealings with the Syrian civil war and was unwilling to take sides during the early phases of the conflict. Over the course of late 2011 and early 2012, the U.S. gradually embraced the rebel cause and took more active diplomatic measures for intervention. The U.S. also recognized the Syrian Opposition Council as the official government of Syria in December of 2012, and viewed them as the transitional government if Assad should fall. However, the U.S. never militarily intervened in the conflict, as the stated U.S. position during the Assad regime was always that UN authorization was required for military force.
Since the fall of Assad and the takeover of government by the SIF, the U.S. has condemned the new government’s tactics and called for an inclusive process of transition. It has insisted that the diplomatically recognized Syrian Opposition Council be part of negotiations in the coalition government. As it has become clear in the last 3 months that the SIF is intent on establishing government without including other stakeholders, the U.S. has escalated pressure in the UN and through allies for a return to democracy, warning that sanctions are a possibility. Since the U.S. maintains no diplomatic relations with the SIF currently and has not re-introduced staff at its embassy in Damascus, it must work through backchannel messages to the regime.

**IGO/NGO**

The U.S. maintains significant influence in the IGO/NGO world through its large staff resources and financial backing. For example, the U.S support of the UNHCR consists of donating almost three times the amount of the next largest backer, Japan, and the $700 million accounts for nearly a fifth of their budget. Similarly, the U.S. is a core donor for the WHO, UN and other intergovernmental groups. While domestically IGO groups are not popular in the United States, the Obama administration has pledged to cooperate with the UN and other partners when possible.

The U.S. government relationship with NGOs is one of a contract-services provider. However, beginning in the late 90s during the Kosovo conflict, the U.S. has exerted more pressure on NGOs to operate in support of its missions abroad, especially in the security field. Although the U.S. government does not typically actively seek to interfere with the stated neutrality of NGOs, those with financial ties to federal government work are not independent from its influence.