
Corporate elite networks and US post-Cold War grand strategy from Clinton to Obama

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Abstract

This article seeks to explain both the continuity and the changes in US grand strategy since the end of the Cold War by adopting a critical political economy approach that focuses on the social origins of grand strategy-making. Systematically seeking to link agency and structure, we analyse how grand strategy-makers operate within given social contexts, which we define in terms of, on the one hand, elite networks within which these actors are embedded, and, on the other hand, the international structural context in which the US is positioned. After reviewing the grand strategies as pursued by the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations, and relating them to the structural context in which they evolved, we proceed by offering a Social Network Analysis in which we compare the networks of key officials of the three administrations in terms of: (1) their corporate affiliations, and (2) their affiliations to so-called policy-planning institutions. On this basis we argue that the continuities of post-Cold War US grand strategy — which we interpret as reproducing America's long-standing 'Open Door' imperialism — can be explained in terms of the continuing dominance of the most transnationally oriented sections of US capital. Second, we show that, this continuity notwithstanding, there is significant variation in terms of the means by which this grand strategy is reproduced, and argue that we must explain these variations not only in terms of the continuously changing global context, but also as related to some significant differences in affiliation with the policy-planning network.

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Introduction

In spite of renewed signs of hegemonic decline (Arrighi, 2005; Layne, 2009), the US for now remains not only the largest economy but also the only military superpower, spending about as much as the rest of the world put together. Within the changing world order, then, the US remains key, and the geopolitical strategy that it pursues will not only reflect the changing structural context but also continue to shape its future. The study of US foreign policy, or more specifically what is called *grand strategy*, thus remains critical to an understanding of the current and future world order. Grand strategy here can be seen as the 'highest' level of foreign policy representing a comprehensive vision of the state's critical 'interests' and how best to promote them, and thus about the state's role and position in the world (Layne, 2006: 13). As US grand strategy during the Cold War was supposedly driven by the desire to contain communism, the end of that conflict appeared to open the prospect of a new strategy under Clinton. Subsequently, the policies adopted by the Bush administration in the wake of the 9/11 attacks seemed to reveal a more radical shift in US grand strategy, while President Obama's election on a platform of 'change' raised expectations regarding a new post-Bush foreign policy. This article examines to what extent such changes in US grand strategy since the end of the Cold War have indeed taken place and seeks to contribute to a better understanding of these changes as well as of what we will argue to be strong underlying continuities.

Although these questions are much debated in the literature, there is in fact little in the way of comprehensive explanations of either the observed variations of US grand strategy or of its continuities. Whereas the predictions of the parsimonious theories of neorealism and neoliberalism do not match the observed behaviour, most analysts do not go beyond constructing ad hoc hypotheses to explain these 'deviations'. Explaining US grand strategy requires us to break with the realist abstraction of the state from society, and analyse the social content and social sources of geopolitical strategy. To this end we adopt a critical political economy approach that seeks to uncover these sources by analysing to what extent and how those actors that formulate and implement US grand strategy are related to dominant social forces within US civil society. More precisely, if we want to make sense of both the continuities of and variations within US grand strategy, we have to go beyond the 'systemic' level and focus on the actual grand strategy-makers (foreign policy officials, strategists and intellectuals) and the social context in which they operate and to which their agency responds. Social position, in our view, is embedded in a network of relations linking grand strategy-makers to particular social groups and classes. This analysis leads to a twofold claim:

1. *Continuities* of post-Cold War US grand strategy can be explained in terms of the overall worldview of US grand strategy-makers, which we in turn see as shaped by the ideology and interests of the leading sections of the US corporate community to which US grand strategy-makers are closely linked. Following William

Appleman Williams (2009 [1959/1972]) we call this worldview that of the ‘Open Door’, resulting in a particular American brand of imperialism that is oriented towards establishing global hegemony through creating and maintaining an ‘open’ liberal world order.

2. In spite of this continuity there is limited but nevertheless significant *variation* in terms of the ways and means by which this ‘Open Door imperialism’ is reproduced. Explaining these variations requires that we take into account the changing global structural context but also the actors and the ideas through which they interpret these changes and respond accordingly.

It is important to stress at the outset that the variations that we observe do not necessarily represent sharp breaks but rather differences of degree and emphasis, while the particular strategy followed always stays within the same basic parameters, serving the same ultimate purpose of creating and maintaining an Open Door to US capital around the globe. What we seek to explain are changes within strong continuities; a dynamic process in which structure and agency interact. The continuity has to be actively reproduced, and in this reproduction some change (transformation) may also take place. In order to examine these post-Cold War continuities and changes within US grand strategy this article offers a comparative analysis of the Clinton, Bush and the current Obama administrations, their grand strategies, and the social networks of their key foreign policy makers. The article is organized as follows. In the first section we review some of the dominant conventional approaches to US grand strategy and lay out our critical political economy perspective. In the second section we analyse both the continuities and the changes in US grand strategy in the post-Cold War era through the framework of the Open Door and relate them to the changing global structural context. The third section analyses how the grand strategy-makers of the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations are embedded in specific social networks — in particular those relating them to the US corporate community and the policy-planning community — that shape their grand strategy-making.

Theorizing grand strategy: A critical political economy analytical framework

Change within US grand strategy has become the object of much academic debate, especially since what has been viewed as a significant shift under the Bush administration. Conspicuously absent from this debate has been any attempt to explain this turn from the perspective of conventional ‘systemic’ IR theories. By their own admission both neorealists and neoliberals are unable to explain this shift of US grand strategy since the end of the Cold War (cf. Dueck, 2004; Skidmore, 2005). Thus, while among realists there is a strong consensus that the rational strategy for the US would be that of ‘offshore balancing’ (Layne, 2006; Mearsheimer, 2001, 2011), with both the defensive and offensive varieties of neorealism predicting this to be the policy outcome (see Layne, 2006: 19), prominent neorealists such as Walt and Mearsheimer see the US as in fact pursuing an opposite (and irrational) strategy of what Layne (2006) calls extra-regional hegemony, and have ‘united’ with others (mainly conservatives and libertarians) ‘in our opposition

to American empire' (Coalition for a Realistic Foreign Policy, 2010; see also Mearsheimer, 2011).¹ From a neoliberal perspective, focusing on the systemic effects of globalization and interdependence, the 'neoconservative moment' under Bush has similarly been treated as an anomaly (e.g. Ikenberry, 2004).

The only explicit attempt to explain variations in post-Cold War US strategy on the basis of systemic factors is provided by Miller, who argues that the variables 'distribution of power' and 'degree of external threat' act as 'the selector' of pre-existing sets of ideas or ideal-typical grand strategies (Miller, 2010: 29). The problem with this variety of systemic theory is that it takes as given that which needs to be explained in any comprehensive account of US grand strategy-making. Thus Miller distinguishes four main US grand strategies, which according to him are present in the US foreign policy community (Miller, 2010: 29), but fails to explain the origins of any of these four types.

Non-systemic accounts: Constructivism and neoclassical realism

One attempt to move beyond 'systemic variables', and thus break open the proverbial black box of the US state to account for variations in post-Cold War US grand strategy, is provided by constructivist explanations. Dueck, for instance, has argued that the post-9/11 shift towards a US grand strategy of 'primacy' has to be explained in terms of the '[p]romotion and selection of particular [neoconservative] ideas ... on the part of leading defense and foreign policy officials' (Dueck 2004: 535; see also Flibbert, 2006). We fully concur that ideas have to play a central role in any account of the neoconservative shift but the problem with reducing it to the realm of ideas is that how and why *certain* ideas rather than others were 'promoted' and 'selected' remains opaque.

Within the literature, neoclassical realism stands out as the most elaborate attempt to introduce so-called unit-level variables, while also holding on to the importance of the international system (Rathbun, 2008). One of the most insightful analyses of US grand strategy from this perspective is that of Christopher Layne (2006) who forcefully argues that US grand strategy since 1940 and up to the present period has been driven by the aforementioned ideology of the Open Door, which has made the US pursue global hegemony. Although sharing much of Layne's characterization of the fundamental and unchanging overarching objectives of US grand strategy (see below), we maintain that because of his continuing commitment to a realist state-centric paradigm in which the state is abstracted from society, Layne fails to explain *why* and how the Open Door worldview has become so dominant amongst US policy makers, thus leading them to adopt an 'irrational' strategy undermining US national security (Layne, 2006: 134–158).

Layne does suggest that policy makers stayed the course of global hegemony 'because that grand strategy has served the interests of the dominant elites that have formed the core of the US foreign policy establishment since at least the 1930s' (Layne, 2006: 200–201), and that at the core of this elite coalition we find 'large capital-intensive corporations that looked to overseas markets and outward-looking investment banks' (Layne, 2006: 201). This conclusion, however, does not as such follow from Layne's own analysis, which until the very end is silent on the role of

these corporate elites and ultimately stays at the surface of the US state and its ‘managers’, without probing any deeper into US state–society relations.² We thus elaborate below our own critical political economy approach to US grand strategy formation.

The social sources of grand strategy

In contrast to both neorealism and neoclassical realism, in which state power is narrowly conceived as the accumulated material capabilities of the ‘state-as-actor’, the critical political economy perspective adopted here seeks to examine the social sources of that power, shaping its social purpose. Before elaborating this we should make a more general point on how we view the relationship between structure and agency. Following Bhaskar (1979) and Archer (1995), we: (i) see agents as operating within pre-existing social structures that form the (unacknowledged) conditions of their actions, and (ii) see these agents as reproducing or transforming these structures over time.³ In order to link structure to agency we will understand structure as referring to: (i) the social *position* an agent occupies, that is, within a set of social relations, and (ii) the wider context in which she operates and to which her strategic action may be oriented (cf. Archer, 1995: 153; Bhaskar, 1979: 51). Furthermore, *how* structure conditions agency is often mediated by the ideas and beliefs that the agent holds (see Hay, 2002: 209–213). Ideas cannot be reduced to the social position an agent occupies, yet neither can they be understood as existing independently from that position, that is, from the social structure in which any ideational practice is embedded (Van Apeldoorn, 2002: 19).

Applying this perspective to US grand strategy, and given that ‘state activity is always the activity of particular individuals acting within particular social contexts’ (Wight, 2004: 279), we take the grand strategy-makers themselves as the point of departure for our analysis, seeking to relate their agency to the social positions that they occupy as well as to the wider structural context in which they operate. Although the role of officials responsible for a state’s foreign policy strategy is to define and propagate the state’s critical interests, this does not say anything about what those interests are. Rather than assuming, as in neorealism, that the national interest can be derived from a state’s objective need for survival within an anarchic system, our point of departure is that national interests are political constructs.

The state as a structure forms, on the one hand, an arena in which social forces pursue rival strategies and political projects. On the other hand, this arena is structurally biased, that is, the state tends to be more open to some social classes and groups than to others and tends to select or favour their strategies over others (Jessop, 1990: 26). Here we must recognize in particular the structurally determined openness of the US political system to the ‘corporate community’ and its interests, and hence the particular form of the US state in which these interests are secured through their dominant influence over the so-called policy-planning process. This influence takes place through several channels such as shaping public and elite opinion/discourse and setting the policy agenda through the media and through more specialized reports and advice, as well as through regular personal contacts between state officials and key business associations and other forms of corporate lobbying (for an overview, see Domhoff, 2009: ch. 7). In this article, however, we focus on the personal ties between state managers and the corporate community, ties

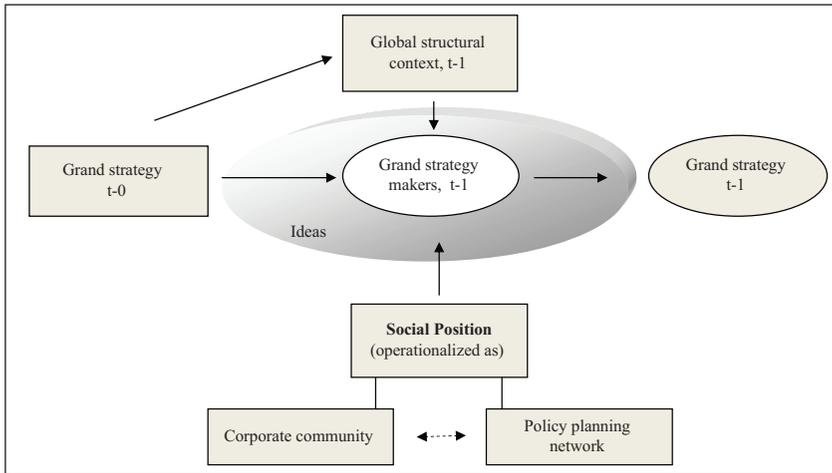


Figure 1. Structure and agency in the transformation of US grand strategy.

that we argue are particularly relevant to understanding the social sources of US grand strategy-making.

On this basis we distinguish two structural dimensions that shape the agency of US grand strategy-makers. First, their social position, which we operationalize as their personal links to corporate interests — through having held management or board positions within firms before their appointment — on the one hand, and their personal ties to what with Domhoff (2009) we call the policy-planning network of think tanks, foundations and so on, on the other — a network in turn strongly interlocked with the corporate elite (Domhoff, 2009). At a higher level of abstraction we can interpret this elite in terms of representing a particular social class. Although potentially divided along structural lines, in constituting themselves as social and political actors, members of the corporate capitalist class will seek to transcend these differences and formulate a more general business (class) interest (Van Apeldoorn, 2002).⁴

The second structural dimension to which we link the agency of grand strategy-makers is the wider structural context in which they operate as policy makers and to which their strategies are oriented. Here we distinguish two elements. First, as nothing is ever created *de novo*, but always fashioned out of pre-existing materials (Bhaskar, 1979), for any incoming administration the grand strategy of the preceding period forms a necessary starting point. Policy makers can seek to change this strategy but cannot ignore what the previous government has set in motion. Second, and partly as the intended or unintended outcome of the preceding grand strategy, US grand strategy-makers are faced with a given global context, or more broadly the global political economy (seen as comprising both the interstate system and the capitalist world economy) and the position of the US within it. We are here referring to the environment that US state officials through their grand strategy seek to shape in order to serve perceived US interests.⁵ It is this structural context within which and because of which certain contradictions and limits inherent in the preceding grand strategy may have become revealed, possibly necessitating a revision in the perception of the current grand strategy-makers. Critically though, this adaptation is mediated by the ideas actors hold, which in turn must be seen in relation to — though not reducible to — their social position.

We have thus, in a more comprehensive and theoretically grounded way than neoclassical realism, opened the black box of the state-as-actor by situating grand strategy in the context of state–society relations in which state power is linked to social power. Following our perspective on the dialectical interplay of structure and agency over time, we see grand strategy formation as a dynamic process that takes place through cycles of structural reproduction and transformation (see Archer, 1995). Our analytical framework is summarized and illustrated in Figure 1.

On the basis of this framework we will now first describe and interpret the continuities and changes in US grand strategy since the end of the Cold War and place these developments in their changing structural context. Second, we will move to the responsible policy makers involved in formulating US grand strategy within this context and their social positions as transpiring through their social networks.

The imperialism of the Open Door and its post-Cold War variations

The weight of historical evidence clearly shows that US hegemony has not been restricted to the Western hemisphere but has from the end of the 19th century expanded outwards to move from regional to global hegemony (LaFeber, 1994, 1998 [1963]; Layne, 2006; Williams, 2009 [1959/1972]). We argue that this expansion is inextricably bound up with the expansion of US capital and a concomitant promotion of a liberal capitalist world order. It is this which is the essence of what following Williams (2009 [1959/1972]) we call the imperialism of the Open Door, or the ‘non-colonial imperial’ policy first explicitly formulated in 1899 (in the so-called Open Door notes concerning the opening up of the Chinese market to US capital) regarding the ‘conditions under which America’s preponderant economic power would extend the American system throughout the world without the embarrassment and inefficiency of traditional colonialism’ (Williams, 2009 [1959/1972]: 50). Indeed, such an extension of the American system as a corollary of the expansion of American capital can be seen as the overarching goal of America’s Open Door imperialism as both an ideology and a practice (see also Colás, 2008).

As an ideology or worldview the Open Door may be seen as consisting of the following five key interrelated and partly overlapping elements (cf. Bacevich, 2009: 319–320; Layne, 2006: 29–36):

- *Economic expansionism*: From the end of the 19th century US foreign policy has been premised on the ‘firm conviction, even dogmatic belief, that America’s domestic well being depends upon such sustained, ever increasing overseas economic expansion’ (Williams, 2009 [1959/1972]: 15; see also LaFeber, 1994, 1998 [1963]).
- *Promotion of ‘free markets’ and a liberal world order (economic openness)*: In order to enable economic expansionism, foreign markets need to be opened up to US capital: any protective barriers are thus to be broken down and ‘free markets’ and ‘freedom of enterprise’ and their concomitant institutions spread around the globe. As Layne, following Williams, writes: ‘[t]he US thus has a vested interest in other countries be run by the “right” kind of government, that is, those that eschew mercantilistic or autarkic economic policies and embrace

the incorporation ... into an open-American-dominated international economy' (Layne, 2006: 34). Any state that would thus challenge this order and adopt the wrong kind of policies, limiting US expansion, is hence seen as a danger (Layne, 2006; Williams, 2009 [1959/1972]), while at the level of world order the US acts as guarantor of the liberal world economy and its institutions.

- *'Democracy' promotion (political openness)*: This has been a key aspect of the ideology underpinning US grand strategy since Wilson's call to make the world 'safe for democracy'. For US grand strategy-makers democracy means not any kind of democracy but *US-style* liberal democracy, that is, as 'inextricably connected with individualism, private property, and a capitalist economy' (Williams, 2009 [1959/1972]: 9). 'Democracy promotion' is thus defined in such a way that it is fully compatible with and indeed promotes US notions of economic freedom (and, if not, the US has never shown much restraint in either supporting the most brutal dictatorships or opposing real democratic advancement).
- *The externalization of 'evil'*: According to Williams (2009 [1959/1972]: 15), the flip-side of the belief that America's prosperity is dependent upon the outside world is that that same world also tends to be blamed for any 'lack of the good life'. Indeed, 'evil' becomes externalized and, as Layne (2006: ch. 6) argues, globalized and deterritorialized. As a corollary of its global 'promotion' of a liberal world order, the US tends to define any state, group, movement or ideology around the globe that does not accept this order as a security threat.
- *US exceptionalism*: The notion that the US is somehow exceptional compared to other great powers in that it is not merely driven by power interests but equally by morality, or indeed by a unique 'divine mission' 'to remake the world' in its own image, has been part of 'its' identity and outlook since the nation's founding (Heiss, 2002: 520; Williams, 2009 [1959/1972]).

Whereas the first three elements constitute the policy core of the Open Door, the final two are part of a wider discourse deeply ingrained in US popular culture and common sense in which these policies are embedded while at the same time serving to legitimize them and the means with which they are achieved (Rupert, 2011).

Taking these five elements together it becomes clear how this ideology of the Open Door has made *global* hegemony a strategic requirement, necessitating the creation of a huge military machine — superior to that of any rival — 'to create a stable international order that is safe for the economic Open Door' (Layne, 2006: 125). While the worldview of the Open Door has provided the overall ideological framework of US capitalist imperialism since the turn of the last century, the concrete grand strategy pursued also shows variation within this overarching framework. We will now analyse these variations since the end of the Cold War by comparing the grand strategies of the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations.⁶ For each one we will first describe the wider structural context in which this strategy was formulated, referring both to the global context and the preceding strategy, and then argue how in this context a particular variety of the Open Door imperialism has been produced, identifying elements of both continuity and change.

US grand strategy under Clinton: Neoliberal globalization

The end of the Cold War came unexpectedly, not least for George H.W. Bush, whose presidency represented an 'interregnum' in which US foreign policy was more confused than following any clear grand strategy — being in particular at a loss vis-a-vis the collapse of the Soviet Union (LaFeber, 1994: 752). For his Democratic successor Clinton (1993–2001), the end of the Cold War formed a major change in the *global structural context*, presenting a historic opportunity to achieve what had been the overarching goal of US grand strategy since 1940, that is, *global* hegemony within a liberal capitalist world order. The Clinton administration pro actively seized this opportunity and formulated a new mission for the new unipole: a US-centred and US-led 'globalization' offensive premised on an agenda of opening and expanding markets (Bacevich, 2002: ch. 4; Clinton, 1999; Van der Pijl, 2006: ch. 8; cf. Dumbrell, 2002: 50).

This agenda in itself was very much in line with the principles and aims of the Open Door. Reproducing this worldview, Clinton's National Security Strategy (NSS)⁷ of 1995 defined 'promoting prosperity at home' in terms of a policy of 'free trade and to press for open and equal US access to foreign markets' — furthermore viewing this goal as inextricably linked to the US's other two primary foreign policy objectives: 'promoting democracy' and 'enhancing our security' (White House, 1995: 7. i). The US, 'called upon to lead — to organize the forces of freedom and progress' (White House, 1998: 1), must thus, as the 1998 NSS put it, promote 'democracy and free markets' with the two equated even to the extent that Clinton's two NSS documents consistently refer not to democracies but to *market* democracies (White House, 1995, 1998). Although thus reproducing the Open Door worldview, what was distinctive about the grand strategy of Clinton was the way its particular form came to reflect the neoliberal ideology that in the 1980s and 1990s came to inform public policy making both nationally and transnationally under American leadership. As a political programme closely linked to the interests and growth strategies of the most globalized transnational corporations, the neoliberal project, while starting its ascent under the Reagan administration, was consolidated, deepened and, indeed, globalized under Clinton. It was thus that under Clinton a neoliberal globalization strategy was pursued in which not only free trade but also the freedom of (US) capital were pursued with renewed vigour within an overall global marketization project that critically included the liberalization of financial markets.

Although this globalization agenda was ideologically premised on the notion of liberal democratic states realizing mutual gains through peaceful cooperation, Clinton was well aware that his liberal internationalist policy of promoting market democracies still had to be backed up by US military might (Bacevich, 2002: ch. 4; Clinton, 1999; LaFeber, 1994: 767). Although the mere power and global presence of the US military was in itself seen as crucial to promoting openness to US investment (Bacevich, 2002: 128–129), the Clinton administration concluded that force actually had to be used as well in what became an 'unprecedented display of military activism' (Bacevich, 2002: 142) with military interventions in or against Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Iraq, Sudan, Afghanistan and, most massively, Serbia. Furthermore, Clinton's alleged foreign policy doctrine of 'democratic enlargement' (Brinkley, 1997) also implied a more coercive stance against 'rogue states' (Dumbrell, 2002); the Clinton administration's

version of the 'externalization of evil' that became increasingly dominant in its foreign policy discourse towards the end of the 1990s.

Nevertheless, the Clinton presidency was not always decisive in its use of force (Dumbrell, 2002: 52), which was moreover mostly restricted to airstrikes. As Andrew Bacevich writes, keen on avoiding any American casualties, under the Clinton administration 'military power was not to be unleashed, it was doled out in precisely measured increments' (Bacevich, 2002: 48–49). Moreover, in spite of the frequent use of force in order to back up its 'strategy of openness' (Bacevich, 2002), as indicated, at the heart of Clinton's neoliberal globalization strategy we find what Clinton (1999) called the 'inexorable logic of globalization' itself, letting it, helped along by US-dominated institutions of global governance (such as the IMF and the World Bank), do its 'beneficial' work. Although unilateralist tendencies were growing especially in Clinton's second term, 'multilateralism' was still a favoured concept and foreign policy instrument — especially in the economic area (Dumbrell, 2002: 49, 53; Skidmore, 2005) with, for example, the creation of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995 celebrated as a major foreign policy success (e.g. White House, 1998: 34).⁸

US grand strategy under Bush: The neoconservative shift

At end of the 20th century the contradictions and limits of Clinton's neoliberal globalization strategy became increasingly manifest (for a more elaborate discussion, see De Graaff and Van Apeldoorn, 2011). Social forces around the world came to resist and challenge both neoliberalism and the US power buttressing it. Most critically, the grand strategy of Clinton aimed at promoting neoliberal globalization was reaching its geopolitical limits as the dynamics of global capital accumulation were increasingly shifting the centre of gravity of the global economy away from the Atlantic and towards East Asia (and especially China), threatening the geopolitical and geo-economic pre-eminence of the US (Arrighi, 2005). It was in the context of, and in responding to, these rising contradictions engendered by the changing global context, *and* after the window of opportunity offered by 9/11, that a new grand strategy came to be pursued by the administration of George W. Bush (2001–2009), marking again both a continuation of Open Door imperialism and a shift with respect to the Clinton strategy in terms of the *means* through which the Open Door is to be realized. Whereas both Clinton and his successor pursued a grand strategy aimed at consolidating and preserving US primacy after emerging victoriously from the Cold War, *and* whereas in both cases the underlying social purpose of that primacy was to expand and maintain a liberal world order in which US transnational capital could move freely, the emphasis under Bush shifted from promoting the 'benign' logic of globalization to a more bellicose stance to both defend America's (perceived) unipolar position in light of the above challenges as well as to make use of it in seeking to 'remake' the world by force if necessary.

Underlining the continuity, and reflecting the discourse of American exceptionalism, the notorious NSS of 2002, presents its strategy as 'based on a distinctly American internationalism ... to help make the world not just safer but better' (White House, 2002: 1). Clearly reproducing the ideology of the Open Door, it then invokes the goals of 'political

and economic freedom' to 'ignite a new era of global economic growth through free markets and free trade' and 'expand the circle of development by opening societies and building the infrastructure of democracy' (White House, 2002: 1–2). Here the opening of societies above all means to 'open [them] to commerce and investment' (White House, 2002: 22). As the NSS summarizes: '[f]ree markets and free trade are key priorities of our national security strategy' (White House, 2002: 23). Next to continuing the US's long-standing policies in this respect, the specific policies advocated in this realm, policies such as lowering taxation of business and creating efficient capital markets, and generally to 'strengthen market incentives and market institutions', also reflect a continuation of the Clintonite neoliberal agenda, including a continuing strong commitment to institutions such as the WTO (White House, 2006: 25–27).

Although Bush's foreign policy has often been singled out for its 'idealistic' democracy promotion and 'freedom agenda', this as such was no more than a vigorous reaffirmation of the Open Door (cf. Flibbert, 2006; Monten, 2005). What made the US grand strategy of the George W. Bush administration distinctive was the extent to which it emphasized and openly promoted *coercion over consent* (Harvey, 2003) to achieve Open Door aims. This, as we have argued in more detail elsewhere (De Graaff and Van Apeldoorn, 2011), was a shift reflecting the rise of a *neoconservative* project seeking to offer a response to the contradictions and limits of neoliberalism, not by breaking with the maxims of the free market or the policy to seek to expand and deepen markets for US capital globally, but by employing — more forcefully and on a larger scale than before — the coercive power of the state, both domestically and internationally, to compensate for the loss of consent and to confront the new 'enemies' of America's (neoliberal) empire head on (for more on neoconservative thinking, see, e.g., Kagan and Kristol, 2000; Stelzer, 2004).

The following four elements of what we thus call the neoconservative grand strategy of the Bush administration can be distinguished. First, while the US has always implicitly reserved the right to strike 'pre-emptively' — and indeed has done so repeatedly, especially within its 'own' hemisphere — the way this was elevated to a new foreign policy doctrine was novel (White House, 2002: 5, 15–16), as well as, of course, the way it was swiftly 'applied' with the large-scale invasion of Iraq. Second, while global hegemony has been a long-standing goal of US grand strategy, *maintaining* US — above all military — primacy 'beyond challenge' (White House, 2002: 29) became an explicit commitment now that a unipolar position had effectively been achieved (White House, 2002: 1). Third, accelerating and deepening a trend that started under Clinton's second term, the Bush administration embraced a much more blatant unilateralism in defence of US primacy (see Skidmore, 2005). Finally, although for more than a century the US has applied military force in the name of 'democracy' (Kinzer, 2006), this now gained a new emphasis, such that 'democracy promotion' through forced regime change became a central plank of the neoconservative grand strategy (Monten, 2005). While regime change through war (and the attempt to thus impose 'democracy') was not practised as such under Clinton, and during the Cold War most often took the form of CIA-supported coups rather than overt military campaigns, the Iraq war — a massive invasion of a sovereign state against the explicit wishes of three out of five of the

permanent members of the Security Council— became the main legacy of the Bush administration.⁹

Although none of these elements was thus entirely new either in the theory or in the practice of US foreign policy, it was the particular emphasis they gained in the geopolitical strategy shaped by the neoconservatives during the 1990s that marked the shift away from the neoliberal globalization strategy of Clinton. Moreover, we should not view these elements in isolation but see how they were discursively articulated, and legitimated, by the concept of the *war on terror*, that is, what has been defined as ‘the struggle against militant Islamic radicalism’ (White House, 2006: 36) in what can be regarded as the clearest example of the Open Door’s ‘externalization of evil’ since the defeat of what Reagan called ‘the evil empire’. It enabled the construction of a new and ubiquitous enemy of ‘global reach’ (White House, 2002: 5), and turned the war on terror into a ‘global enterprise of uncertain duration’ (White House, 2002: unnumbered page). This effective redefinition of the US security environment legitimated a further militarization of US foreign policy, with the US defence budget doubling under Bush to over US\$600 billion. Above all, it was under the banner of the war on terror that a coercive geopolitical strategy that continued to be aimed at the overall objective of the expansion of US capital — that is, at the opening of previously closed areas by removing any protective barriers, and indeed in this case the removal of a whole regime standing in the way of a US-dominated Open Door world — could be presented as in the general interest of ‘ultimately fighting for our democratic values and way of life’ (White House, 2002: 31).

US grand strategy under Obama: Yet another transformation?

Bush’s strategy ran into its own set of limits and contradictions. First, although the ‘war on terror’ was initially supported by a broad international coalition, the Bush administration’s explicit disregard of multilateral institutions and of international law did exactly what both realist and liberal critics warned of, namely further erode the waning legitimacy of US hegemony and encourage new rising powers to become more assertive. Second, the global financial and economic crisis that erupted towards the end of the Bush presidency demonstrated the limits of the neoliberal growth model to which the neoconservatives had remained committed, with the crisis both economically and politically further weakening US power and discrediting its global policies. In addition, Bush had started two unwinnable wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that continue to drain American resources.

To some extent these contradictions were already recognized during Bush’s second term, marking a limited reorientation in the final years of his administration — as reflected in Bush’s second NSS of 2006, which, although still having a clear neoconservative imprint, moderated the aggressive unilateralism for which the Bush administration had become notorious (White House, 2006). The core of Bush’s foreign policies (including Iraq, where Bush proclaimed to ‘stay the course’ in spite of growing criticisms, while for instance also taking a more confrontational stance vis-a-vis Iran), however, remained firmly in place. It was thus up to his successor to make further adjustments of US grand strategy to the changing global structural context within which the contradictions and limits of the neoconservative strategy had come to the surface.

Although some commentators have characterized Obama's foreign policy as 'realist' (Zakaria, 2009), a closer analysis of the unfolding geopolitical strategy of the current administration shows that it continues in the tradition of America's Open Door imperialism. Already as a presidential candidate Obama in traditional 'exceptionalist' rhetoric warned that 'to see American power in terminal decline is to ignore America's great promise and historic purpose in the world' to lead 'not only for ourselves but also for the common good' (2007: 3, 15), adding that '[a] strong military is, more than anything, necessary to sustain peace' (Obama, 2007: 5). Peace here still means a *Pax Americana*, a global capitalist empire of which the US, with its overwhelming military superiority, continues to act as the enforcer. As Obama's NSS of 2010 unequivocally states: 'there should be no doubt: the United States of America will continue to underwrite global security' (White House, 2010: 1). So the hegemonic ambition remains a global one: 'to shape an international order that promotes a just peace' with an 'open international economic system' defined as an 'enduring' American interest (White House, 2010: 5, 7). The US, 'uniquely suited to seize' the promise of globalization, and having in part produced it (White House, 2010: 5), remains committed to 'opening markets around the globe [that] will promote global competition ... crucial to our prosperity' (White House, 2010: 32).

Obama's unfolding grand strategy not only reproduces the Open Door, but also continues the relative emphasis on coercion of his immediate predecessor. Far from repudiating the Bush doctrine, Obama, while also emphasizing the need for international support, has made it clear from the outset that 'I will 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, 2007: 6; see also White House, 2010: 22). These threats are seen as coming from 'rogue states allied to terrorists and from rising powers that could challenge both America and the international foundation of liberal democracy' (Obama, 2007: 2). Indeed, the 'war on terror' — though the phrase is no longer used — has only been intensifying under Obama. While withdrawing (though not completely) from Iraq, the effort has switched to Afghanistan and Pakistan to 'disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qa'ida and its violent extremist affiliates ... around the world' (White House, 2010: 19) remains a key plank of America's security strategy. Within the first two years of Obama's presidency, the number of US troops in Afghanistan almost trebled. Moreover, the theatre of war has been quietly expanded, with a steep rise especially in the number of drone strikes into Pakistani territory (New America Foundation, 2010), as well as an expansion of covert warfare, with 'Special Forces' now secretly operating in 75 countries (DeYoung and Jaffe, 2010).

Nevertheless, there are at least two significant differences with Bush's grand strategy that may point to yet a new variety, and both these elements can be read as a response to the limits and contradictions of the neoconservative grand strategy that became manifest in the final Bush years. First, the Obama administration arguably better recognizes the limits of US power in a world that may be shifting towards multipolarity. In this context, Obama's NSS repeatedly calls for 'deeper and more effective partnerships with other key centers of influence — including China, India, and Russia' as well as for more diplomacy and *engagement* with both allies and hostile powers (White House, 2010: 3, 43–50). This renewed emphasis on diplomacy does signal a partial return to at least the *rhetoric* (if not

always the practice) of multilateralism, with the US seeking to '[galvanize] the collective action that can serve common interests' (White House, 2010: 3).

The second and arguably more important new element is the recognition of the importance of the economy and the need for a renewed long-term growth strategy to sustain the recovery from the 2008–2009 deep recession: 'At the center of our efforts is a commitment to renew our economy, which serves as the wellspring of American power' (White House, 2010: 2). Although, the link between 'prosperity' — seen as dependent upon an open global economy — and 'security' has always been at the heart of the Open Door, this has now gained renewed attention in the context of the crisis. However, thus far there is no indication whatsoever that this should also entail a new growth model — breaking with the neoliberal strategy of past decades.

The current administration's awareness of the negative impact of the financial crisis on US power feeds into the concern on the limits of US power. Not only has the financial crisis strengthened the earlier noted power shift towards East Asia, but America's soaring debt (financed by the Chinese) also directly tightens the budgetary constraints under which US grand strategy must operate — which has been a major reason behind the recently announced drawdown of one-third of the troops in Afghanistan by 2012. However, awareness of the limits of America's resources does not change the overall ambition of maintaining a US-dominated liberal capitalist world order. It is thus that shortly after promising an exit from Afghanistan, Obama has engaged in another military campaign to remove Libyan leader Gaddafi, further intensified efforts to combat 'terrorism' in Pakistan, while after completing the announced withdrawal (undoing only the latest surge) 68,000 troops will still remain in Afghanistan (with further reductions not yet concretized). At the same time, in as far as the US is ending the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (the latter still only a promise), the Obama administration is also reorienting its strategic focus to the Asia-Pacific region where it increasingly sees the rise of China as at least a potential threat to the Open Door. As such it is for instance — going beyond merely seeking to reinforce 'partnerships' — increasing its military commitment to the region in order to, in the words of Obama's new national security adviser, amongst other objectives, 'contribute to the security of sea lines that are vital to the global economy' (Donilon, 2011). In sum, Obama's grand strategy is characterized by an ambivalence regarding the means (and regarding specific commitments such as Afghanistan) but not the ends of American grand strategy — that of the global Open Door.¹⁰

Yet to fully understand where the key tenets of Open Door imperialism originate and how and why they are continuously being reproduced and reshaped, we must see how actors, in this case grand strategy-makers, not only respond to a changing global structural context but also in their agency are shaped by their social position, linking them to certain social forces and concomitant interests and ideas.

The social sources of US post-Cold War grand strategies: A network analysis

In this section we will examine and compare the social positions of relevant members of the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations — which we, following our theoretical framework, operationalize as links to, on the one hand, the *corporate community* and,

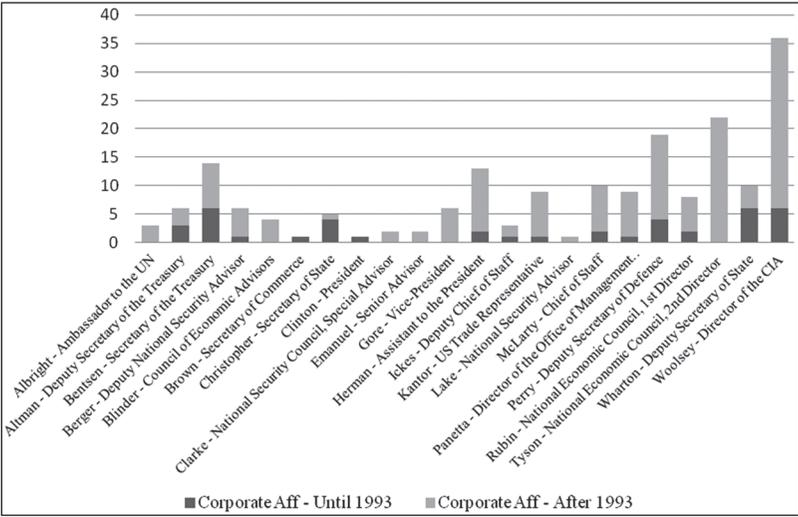


Figure 2a. Corporate affiliations grand strategy-makers, Clinton 1993.

Sources: Data collection by authors.

on the other hand, the *policy-planning network*. For this purpose we have undertaken a network analysis for which we selected for each administration at the time it assumed office (i.e. in 1993, 2001 and 2009), next to the President and his staff, those key cabinet members that one can regard as involved in US foreign policy making broadly understood (i.e. all policies through which the US exercises its global power, crucially,

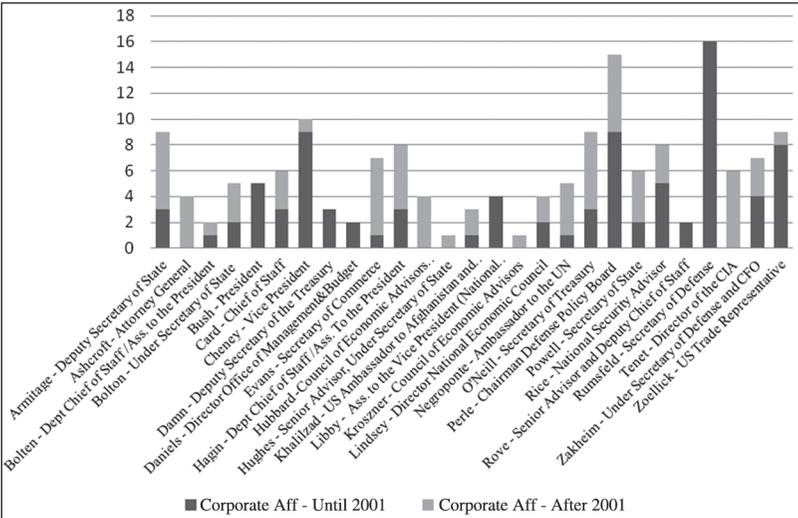


Figure 2b. Corporate affiliations grand strategy-makers, Bush 2001.

Sources: Data collection by authors.

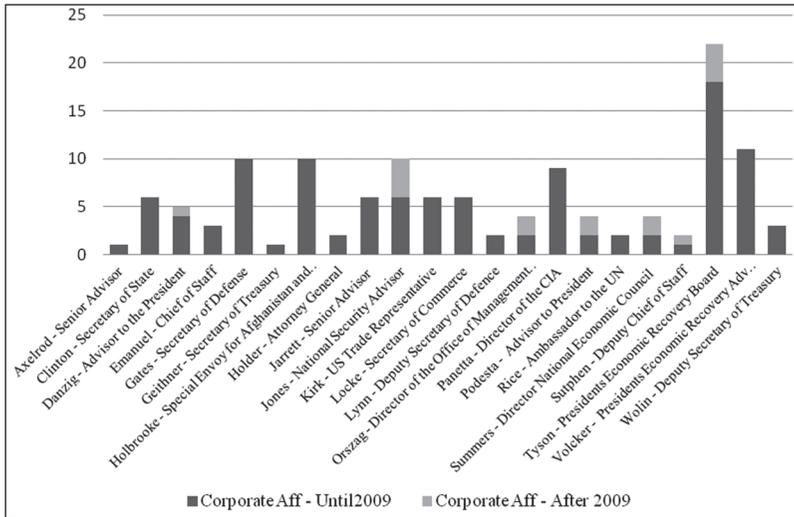


Figure 2c. Corporate affiliations grand strategy-makers, Obama 2009.

Sources: Data collection by authors.

including foreign economic policy) and thus in shaping US grand strategy.¹¹ This has generated a total N of 30 per administration. For each of these individual actors biographical data were collected from *inter alia*: US governmental websites, websites of the individuals affiliations (e.g. company, university and think tank websites), annual reports of affiliated companies, *Business Week*, *Forbes*, *Who's Who*, and the Right Web-Institute for Policy Studies (<http://www.rightweb.irc-online.org/>). We then employed Social Network Analysis to map these affiliations (on this methodology, see, e.g., Wasserman and Faust, 1994).

US grand strategy-makers and the corporate community

For the analysis of the composition of the corporate links of each administration's 'grand strategy-makers' we included all formal top-level positions within a company, that is, executive, (founding) owner/partner, non-executive board and advisory board positions.¹² Here we distinguish between those positions occupied at some time in the period until and including the year in which a person entered the respective administration, and those after. The results are shown in Figure 2.¹³

The data show that in each administration many key grand strategy-makers had (often several, up to 16 in the case of Bush's Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld!) corporate affiliations *before* entering that particular administration: 15 with a total of 41 corporate affiliations in the case of Clinton 1993, 22 holding 89 corporate affiliations in the case of Bush 2001, and again 22 with altogether 113 corporate affiliations in the case of Obama 2009. Furthermore, we find that many key grand strategy-makers gain corporate affiliations *after* their time in government within the respective administration (or in some

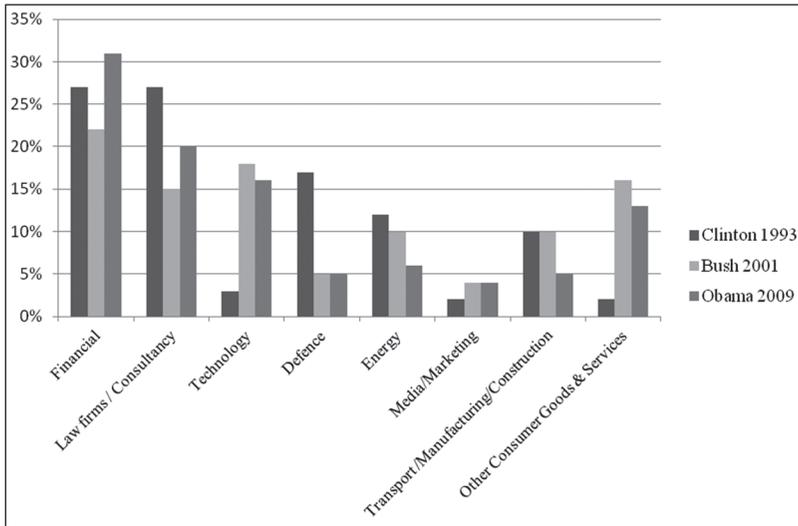


Figure 3. Sectoral distribution corporate affiliations Clinton (1993), Bush (2001), Obama (2009). Sources: Data collection by authors.

cases in between those of Clinton and Obama): in the case of Clinton this applies to 20 and in the case of Bush to 21 out of the 30 grand strategy-makers with, respectively, a total of 149 and 89 corporate affiliations (in the case of Obama it applies as of yet only to a few). Importantly, we find that in many cases — 13 and 16 in the Clinton and Bush administrations, respectively — these are the same persons, indicating an extensive revolving door pattern.

Furthermore the corporate affiliations held before serving the respective administration were categorized into broad sectors.¹⁴ Sectoral differences are important in so far as the corporate community is not a homogeneous whole. Potentially important dividing lines here are between nationally oriented and transnationally oriented capital, and between financial capital (banks, insurance companies and other financial institutions) and non-financial capital (industry and services). These distinctions partly overlap in as much as financial capital is generally very transnationally oriented, and both financial capital and (large-scale) industrial transnational capital tend to have an ideological outlook that in recent decades is closely associated with neoliberalism (Van Apeldoorn, 2002: 27–30). Together these ‘fractions’ can be seen as making up the core of the US corporate community (cf. Domhoff, 2009), that is, those sections of US capital that historically have had a dominant position within the US political economy, and have also in conformity with their interests consistently propagated an internationalist foreign policy aimed at the opening up and penetration of foreign markets, that is, the imperialism of the Open Door.¹⁵ Figure 3 shows the sectoral divisions for each administration in percentages.

Two main conclusions can be drawn from our sectoral analysis. The first is that we find a relative dominance of the ‘financial’ and ‘law firms/consultancy’ sectors in all three administrations, and more generally a dominance of transnational capital. The

affiliations to the financial sector include links to America's (and the world's) leading *transnational* financial giants such as Goldman Sachs, Morgan Stanley and Merrill Lynch. Moreover, the 'law firms/consultancy' sector involves an overrepresentation of global business consultancy and international law firms that sell their services predominantly to big transnational corporations and the financial sector. In addition, it turned out that a high proportion — respectively, 35% (Clinton), 46% (Bush) and 37% (Obama) — of the connected corporations have a Fortune 500 notation, including (in the non-financial sector) global giants such as Boeing, Chevron, Coca-Cola, Ford, IBM, Lockheed Martin, Hewlett Packard and Wal-Mart.¹⁶

A second important finding from the data is that notwithstanding the relative dominance of 'finance' and the 'law firms/consultancy' sector, there is still a diversity of sectors, with all major industries represented — indicating a broad social base in terms of the links between the grand strategy-making core of US government and US capital. If the two best represented sectors are taken together, this still leaves around 50% distributed among the remaining sectors. Noteworthy in this respect is also that contrary to what one would expect on the basis of some popular (and also academically widely iterated) perceptions, the defence sector in terms of direct corporate affiliations does not figure more prominently in the network of the Bush administration than in the others. What our data thus show is that when it comes to the social position of US grand strategy-makers the links to America's corporate community are much broader than a capture by special sectoral interests, including the defence industry.

In sum, our analysis shows that a large majority of grand strategy-makers in all three administrations have had many high-level positions with often large transnational corporations from a diversity of sectors, though with a relative dominance of (transnational) finance. As indicated, our argument in this respect is that this does shape their particular worldview and how they tend to construct the interests of the US, especially because these affiliations in many cases display a revolving door pattern indicating that the actors concerned are not just closely tied to but actually are *themselves members of the corporate elite*. These findings, although showing some variation, above all reveal much continuity in terms of the high degree of connectedness to the corporate elite, the sectoral composition of these corporate affiliations and overall the transnational orientation of the capital thus represented. These continuities we suggest go a long way in explaining why also after the end of the Cold War the main tenets of America's Open Door imperialism continued to be reproduced.

However, as indicated, we observe variation in grand strategy as well. Precisely since the 'right strategy' — in conformity with corporate elite interests — always has to be reproduced and renewed, it will also tend to vary over time depending not only on the wider structural global context (which we analysed above), but also how, in light of this context, the actors concerned interpret 'their' interests, and how to serve them. Next, we therefore analyse the affiliations of the grand strategy-makers with the policy-planning network and the politico-ideological orientations that go with them, which we argue produce varying *interpretations* of this changing structural context and how best to respond to it.

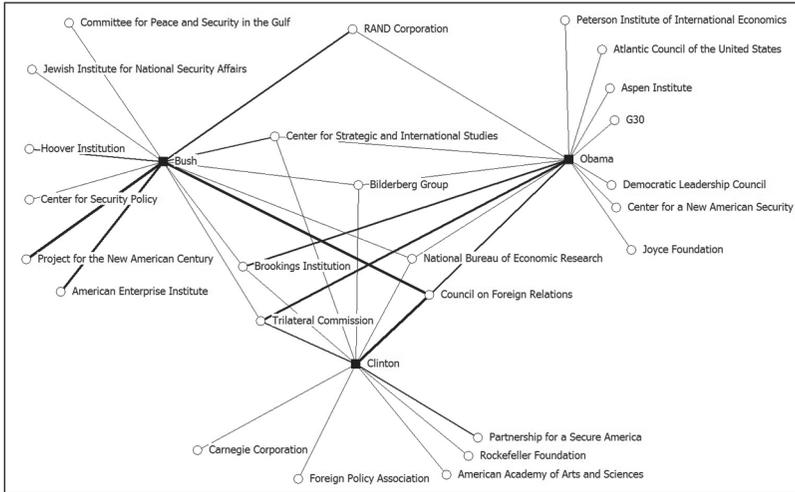


Figure 4. Policy-planning network — Clinton, Bush, Obama.
 Source: Data Collection by authors.

Policy-planning networks of US grand strategy-makers

For this analysis the affiliations with policy-planning institutes, think tanks, policy advocacy groups and research institutes were mapped and translated — using the software UCINET (Borgatti et al., 2002) — into a social network graph. Figure 4 below shows the policy-planning network of all three administrations in a two-mode network; that is, including both actors and their affiliations. The results were clustered per administration in order to render the graph readable. The individual actors here make up the ties (lines) between the administrations and the policy-planning institutes. This network only includes the affiliations that are connected by at least two actors; the strength of the tie expresses the number of affiliations, that is, the thicker the line, the more affiliations with this particular policy-planning institute. This network hence shows only the most prominent policy-planning affiliations.

In analysing the graph in Figure 4 we should be aware that although representing different civil society networks they are also strongly affiliated with the corporate networks identified above. First of all because we are here dealing with the same people with ties to both communities. Second, because these policy-planning bodies are themselves both at the level of governance and in terms of their funding strongly linked to the same dominant sections of US capital (as documented by extensive sociological research; for an overview, see Domhoff, 2009). In this respect, then, differences within these policy-planning networks have to be seen as *intra-elite* differences, that is, within the same corporate elite.

As the graph shows, there is substantive overlap in terms of policy-planning network affiliation between the three administrations. They all had (extensive) affiliations with

the *Council on Foreign Relations* (CFR), the *Trilateral Commission*, the *Bilderberg Group*,¹⁷ the *Brookings Institution*, the *Center for Strategic and International Studies* (CSIS), and the *National Bureau of Economic Research*. The *national* policy-planning bodies of this network (e.g. CFR, Brookings, CSIS) are — as confirmed by our data — all quite central and bipartisan. The largest and most central think tank here is the CFR, which has been at the heart of the US foreign policy establishment since the 1920s. The CFR is closely connected to the corporate elite, and can be seen as a constant in shaping and propagating an internationalist consensus forming the ideational underpinning of what we have here called America's Open Door imperialism (Parmar, 2004; Shoup and Minter, 2004 [1977]).¹⁸

Next, the Bilderberg Group and the Trilateral Commission can be regarded as key *transnational* planning bodies (e.g. Gill, 1991) with in recent decades a predominantly neoliberal outlook.¹⁹ We also find an overlap between Bush and Obama officials with respect to the RAND Corporation, a major policy institute and 'government contractor' (Abelson, 2006: 18) focused on national security and defence (technology). Beyond these significant overlaps, the three administrations, however, render quite distinct networks.

The most distinctive of the three networks is that of the Bush administration, which is characterized by the prominence of two explicitly neoconservative think tanks (see, e.g., Parmar, 2005): the American Enterprise Institute and the *Project for the New American Century*, which have respectively eight and 10 grand strategy-makers connected to them. Other neoconservative think tanks/advocacy groups connected to the Bush network are: the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs (two), a very influential hawkish pro-Israel lobby group with many neoconservatives connected to it; the Center for Peace and Security in the Gulf (two), a group that lobbied for the removal of Saddam Hussein; and the hawkish and highly influential foreign policy think tank Center for Security Policy (two). Furthermore, there are four affiliations with the Hoover Institution (four), characterized by Domhoff as one of the core ultraconservative think tanks (2009: 103). The prominence of many outspoken neoconservative think tanks in the Bush network must be seen as a key factor in the administration's grand strategy-making. Although the global structural changes we identified earlier, as well as the 9/11 attacks (on the latter, see Parmar, 2005), acted as a catalyst for the changes implemented by Bush, they offer only an incomplete explanation as in fact the 'war on terror' — especially as it was waged above all against Iraq — cannot be seen as the only logical response available within those circumstances, not even within the bounds of the Open Door. As such we should not underestimate the role played by so-called neoconservative intellectuals constructing this particular policy alternative long before 9/11 and implementing it once that window had opened and many of them had become officials in the new administration (De Graaff and Van Apeldoorn, 2011).

The 'Obama network', on the one hand, appears to share some characteristics with the Bush network in its connection to the national security and defence-oriented RAND Corporation (three, Bush five), but, on the other hand, it has ties with the Aspen Institute (two), the Atlantic Council of America (two), the Peterson Institute for International Economics (two) and the G30 (two), which are all more neoliberal (internationalist) oriented organizations, with a transnational and transatlantic focus. In that respect it shows similarity with the Clinton network in which — apart from the

Partnership for a Secure America, which is a nationally oriented (self-proclaimed bipartisan) think tank for US national security and foreign policy (with as many as four affiliations) — most affiliations can be said to have a strong transnational orientation in line with a neoliberal perspective. The Democratic Leadership Council and the Center for a New American Security, which each have two connections to the Obama network, have, however, been characterized as more hawkish with a focus on national security and a strong leading role for the US in the world (e.g. Heilbrun, 2006). In general, the Obama network, while less extensive and with fewer strong ties than the Bush network in particular, combines some more hawkish and militaristic elements that are very characteristic of the latter, and some of the more neoliberal internationalist features that predominate in the Clinton network. Next to the failures of the aggressive unilateralism of the preceding administration, the latter features may also help to account for the renewed emphasis on cooperation and global governance by the Obama administration that we observed in the previous section, while the hawkish elements are in line with the continued emphasis on the use of force.

In sum, whereas our analysis of the corporate affiliations of our grand strategy-makers of the current and past two administrations shows above all continuity — in part helping to account for the continuity in terms of the Open Door worldview underlying US grand strategy even after the end of the Cold War — the analysis of the network of policy-planning affiliations shows both continuity and change between the three administrations. There is continuity with regard to a strong core within the (foreign) policy-planning network constituted above all by the CFR and transnational bodies such as the Trilateral Commission. These can be seen as promulgating ideas and advocating policies that largely fall within the mainstream of the Open Door ideology. Yet we have also found significant differences between the three administrations, with in particular the Bush network showing a high degree of distinctiveness due to close links to neoconservative institutes. These differences, we contend, offer part of the explanation of the shifts in grand strategy analysed in the preceding section.

Conclusion

Our analysis has shown that in order to understand both the continuity and the changes in US grand strategy since the end of the Cold War we need to go beyond conventional theories of foreign policy which, even if they break open the proverbial black box of the national state, pay insufficient attention to social forces within civil society. We have thus advanced an analytical framework in which variations in grand strategy are viewed as the product of the agency of grand strategy-makers (state officials) acting in specific social contexts, defined as: (a) the wider structural context in which they operate formed by the current world order and the grand strategy of the preceding administration, and (b) their social position in terms of the corporate and policy-planning networks in which these actors are embedded.

From this perspective we have argued that US grand strategy since the end of the Cold War has continued to reproduce the basic tenets of Open Door imperialism. This continuity has been underpinned by and can be explained in terms of the dominant position of those sections of US capital that are global in their outlook and have thus favoured a 'liberal' expansionist foreign policy. We have seen how, with regard to the two past

administrations as well as the current one, these sections of the US corporate community have — through a persistent and extensive revolving door pattern at high-level corporate positions — continued to have close ties to the US government. The common core that we found in the policy-planning network, closely connected to the same corporate elite, also helps to account for the continuity in US grand strategy in this respect.

At the same time, we have seen how, within the (narrow) bands of Open Door imperialism, US grand strategy has been undergoing some significant shifts from Clinton to Bush, and to Obama. These changes too have been interpreted as related to agency as placed within its social context. However, as our social network analysis shows, these variations appear to be less the result of changes in the basic configuration of links to the corporate community and interests, which has remained pretty much the same, and more as a result of differences in affiliation with the policy-planning network in relation to a changing global context, and mediated by the legacies of the preceding grand strategy. Whereas the latter initially has to be taken as a given by any incoming administration, the policy-planning affiliations give us an indication of how different groups of actors — which are all firmly embedded in similarly configured corporate networks — have differently interpreted a changing structural context.

Let us finally, and by way of outlining an agenda for further research, note some limitations of our research. First, the network analysis counts the number of ties but does not necessarily tell us everything about their significance (some ties might be more important than others). More qualitative research in addition to the social network analysis could therefore lead to firmer conclusions. Second, a detailed process-tracing regarding the formulation of grand strategy within each administration could give us a better understanding of how these networks — and hence the social position of actors — interact with the other (structural) factors that we identified, and how they together shape grand strategy-making. This would also allow us to come yet closer empirically to the causal mechanisms that we identify theoretically in our model (as represented in Figure 1). Third, and related to the previous two points, in particular regarding the policy-planning affiliations, more qualitative research is needed to identify more precisely the ideas emanating from the different think tanks and policy institutes — as well their interlocks with the corporate world — and how they feed into the policy making process.

In spite of these limitations our findings do show that examining the social sources of US grand strategy by analysing the social relations of the grand strategy-makers involved can provide us with a deeper understanding of both the continuities and the variations of US imperialism and thus of the conditions under which it may change in the future.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. While the strategy of global hegemony may seem to fit the predictions of offensive realism, the main proponent of that theory, Mearsheimer (2001: 114–28), stresses that such a strategy

- in the end is not feasible because of what he calls the ‘stopping power of water’, so that rational states settle for regional hegemony. Even if some type of offensive liberalism predicted the same outcome that we observe in terms of striving for global hegemony, it cannot explain the social content and purpose of that hegemony.
2. For another neoclassical realist account of US grand strategy (and one that also seeks to explain some variation), see Monten (2005).
 3. For a discussion of this as well as other approaches to the structure–agency problem in the context of International Relations, see Wight (2006).
 4. Although structural power is a fundamental aspect of the power of capital, class hegemony cannot be taken as a given but has to be proactively secured and reproduced. In this respect we ought to move beyond what in many ways is a false dichotomy as presented in the famous Milliband–Poulantzas debate (see Jessop, 2008).
 5. Of course, the structural context of any state official also includes the domestic political context. But although variables such as public opinion, electoral pressures or social movements may act as a break on certain elite projects, we do not see them as directly shaping the formulation of grand strategy.
 6. While the Cold War ended *during* the presidency of Bush, Clinton can be regarded as the first post-Cold War president in the sense that this was the context in which his administration came to power and had to formulate a new strategy.
 7. Arguably the National Security Strategies as formulated by successive administrations are the most comprehensive public statements of US grand strategy, hence this key foreign policy document will serve as our point of departure in the following analyses.
 8. As in the past, US multilateralism above all meant designing — rather than complying with — the rules and holding others to account (Skidmore, 2005: 208–299).
 9. For the centrality of Iraq within the thinking of (neoconservative) intellectuals in the Bush administration, that is, how it was viewed as the number one rogue state to which the new recipe of regime change had to be applied, see Flibbert (2006), see also Woodward (2004).
 10. We are grateful to one of the reviewers of this article for helping us to clarify this point. On the ambivalence, especially with respect to the Afghanistan war, within the Obama administration and also of Obama himself, see also Woodward (2010).
 11. This is composed as follows: the President, the Vice-President; the Secretaries and Deputy Secretaries of State, Defense and the Treasury; the Attorney General; the Secretary of Commerce; the US Trade Representative, the Chief of Staff of the White House and his two deputies; the (three) Senior Advisors to the President; the National Security Advisor (all formal White House Staff); the Director of the CIA; the Director of the National Economic Council; the Ambassador to the UN; the Director of the Office of Management and Budget, and the three members of the Council of Economic Advisors. This gives an *N* of 25 for each administration. In addition we have selected five influential policy makers at crucial (mostly formal, but below cabinet-level, rank) foreign-policy positions within that particular administration (for instance, for the Obama administration this includes the late Richard Holbrooke, Special Envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, whereas in the case of Bush the selected equivalent is Zalmay Khalilzad who was at first Counsellor to Secretary of Defense, and was appointed Special Presidential Envoy for Afghanistan after the US November 2001 invasion).
 12. All corporate affiliations that we were able to find were in fact top-level positions thus defined, that is to say, that the numbers reported do not include anything below board level or equivalent (including advisory boards).
 13. Although we consulted many different sources it is still likely that the figures presented are somewhat of an underestimation, especially the more one goes back in time (i.e. for the Clinton administration).

14. The exact categories are: Financial (banks, insurance, real estate, diversified); Law firms, Consultancy and Lobbyists; Technology (information technology, telecommunication, electronics); Defence (including aerospace companies with a significant defence division); Energy (extractive industries/natural resources); Media and Marketing; Transportation, Manufacturing and Construction; and finally Other Consumer Goods & Services (pharmaceuticals, food, retail, miscellaneous).
15. Though the evidence on this regarding the era preceding the one we are analysing is far from systematic, the analyses of *inter alia* LaFeber (1998), Van der Pijl (1984), Shoup and Minter (2004) and Williams (2009) do suggest that the pattern we observe for the period after the end of the Cold War in fact extends much further back.
16. Measured as a Fortune 500 notation in that respective year or previously (http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune500_archive/full/1955/).
17. Here we did not include all the attendees of these meetings, but only members of the steering committee, which in our view is more representative of a policy-planning function.
18. Regarding CFR's embeddedness in the corporate community, it can be noted that currently about half of the Council's Board of Directors are (top-level) business executives (of companies like the Caterpillar, Carlyle Group, Federal Express PepsiCo and several Wall Street firms, see http://www.cfr.org/about/people/board_of_directors.html). It also has a corporate membership that includes dozens of the US's leading transnational corporations (from all sectors) as well as a number of foreign (mainly European) firms.
19. Both the Trilateral Commission and the Bilderberg Group have always been heavily dominated by CEOs and Chairmen of the world's largest and leading transnational corporations. For their representation amongst the current membership of the Trilateral Commission, see: [http://www.trilateral.org/download/file/TC%20list%206-11%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.trilateral.org/download/file/TC%20list%206-11%20(2).pdf); for their dominance within the Steering Committee of Bilderberg, see: <http://www.bilderbergmeetings.org/governance.html>.

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