

economic well-being. These “vital interests” were secured and enabled in the 1800s through protection of trade and freedom of navigation on the oceans; a prohibition against European military intervention in the Western hemisphere; a capable navy; a small but professional army, capable of rapid expansion in time of crisis; and a readiness to provide support to civil authorities when needed. Protected by two vast oceans, with an industrialized and increasingly global economy and a large and growing population (enabling the raising of a potentially huge land force if threatened), the United States generally enjoyed a stable security environment.

A Century Like No Other

The new century would transform American grand strategy in different but comparable ways. By a wide margin, the 20th century would prove to be the most catastrophic in history. The Spanish-American War, while revealing many shortcomings in organization and supply for the land forces, showcased a powerful and competent Navy with global reach and made the United States an imperial power with newly won possessions in the Caribbean (Puerto Rico) and the Pacific (the Philippines and Guam). America had now moved decisively onto the world stage.

In the second decade of the century, it became clear that war loomed in Europe, as armies assumed massive proportions, professional general staffs perfected the machinery of mobilization, and industrialization and advancing technology equipped armies and navies for large-scale, protracted war. The United States, preoccupied with colonial concerns in the Philippines and protected by an impressive fleet and the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, genuinely pursued a neutrality that would eventually founder on two key strategic dilemmas: the protection of trade and markets, and the potential rise of a hostile power in control of the European landmass. American pride was certainly touched by unrestricted submarine warfare, but what could not be borne was the isolation of U.S. commerce from European markets or the prospect of German control of all of Europe’s economic and demographic resources. If that occurred, Germany could conceivably threaten the continental United States both militarily and by setting the terms of trade. While cultural and ideological affinities with European democracies played important roles and a politically powerful isolationist movement offered

resistance, these life-and-death strategic considerations compelled America's entry as an active belligerent.¹¹

Unlike World War II, America was no "arsenal of democracy" in World War I. Once committed to war, U.S. grand strategy stressed speed over mobilization of the industrial base and a deliberate buildup of troops and material. Getting large field forces to France in time to prevent an Allied collapse was the driving strategic imperative. France, Great Britain, Italy, and Russia supplied their own weapons and equipment. American forces were largely equipped (with the exception of small arms) by the Allies. Still, the introduction of a one-million-man U.S. field army just as Germany's defeat of Russia enabled the transfer of huge forces to the Western Front proved decisive. In only 3 months of large-scale combat, the United States suffered heavy casualties, but the arrival of the Americans proved decisive to victory. By war's end, the United States had moved to the fore as a great power and a guarantor of the international order.¹²

The armistice was followed in the 1920s by massive demobilization and in the 1930s by economic collapse, repeating the familiar pattern of putting the Army in caretaker or cadre status. In contrast, though limited by treaty restrictions, the Navy pursued the development of carrier aviation and long-range submarines, while inside the Army Air Forces, the foundations of a strategic bomber force were laid. A resurgent Germany, well ahead of its rivals with newly developed armored formations and a modern air force, again raised the specter of a nondemocratic power occupying the European continent and directly threatening the continental United States. This time, however, the strategic challenge was far more complex and dangerous. In Asia, a modern and bellicose Japan invaded China and looked ready to challenge American economic and territorial interests in the Pacific, while an ideologically virulent Soviet Union raised huge forces even as it savagely repressed millions of its citizens, killing more than 14 million peasants in the forced collectivization of the 1930s. At the outbreak of war in 1939, America again found itself with a small and unprepared land force and with unready allies.

U.S. grand strategy in World War II aimed at the defeat and destruction of Germany and Japan, not as ends in themselves but as necessary to the reestablishment of a stable international order, a prosperous global economic system, and a

U.S. population free from military threat at home and abroad.¹³ This necessitated strong support for allies—even unsavory ones such as the Soviet Union, which proved essential to victory—massive mobilization, and an economic and industrial effort unparalleled in world history. Even in retrospect, the U.S. effort beggars belief. By war's end, the U.S. Navy was larger than the combined fleets of every other combatant nation, possessing more than 70 percent of the naval strength in the world. The U.S. Army, ranked 17th in size in 1939, grew to more than 8 million soldiers and 90 combat divisions. The Army Air Forces boasted 80,000 aircraft. American ships, planes, and tanks were among the most reliable and effective in the world and were supported by a supply system unrivaled on the planet. Despite beginning slowly, the United States and its Allies advanced progressively throughout the war, gaining the initiative in the Pacific in 1942 and in Europe in 1944.

U.S. grand strategy, as distinct from theater strategies in Europe and Asia, focused first on keeping the British, Russians, and Chinese in the war while the American buildup gathered momentum.¹⁴ Success was far from assured. In 1940, following an embarrassingly inept Allied performance in Norway, France fell and the British were soundly defeated, narrowly escaping annihilation. Further humiliations in Greece, Crete, and North Africa in 1941—while Russian forces were driven back to the gates of Moscow, with millions killed, wounded, and captured—was followed by the near destruction of the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor. In 1942, Singapore surrendered—the largest capitulation in British history.

In retrospect, Allied victory seems to have been inevitable. At the time, it was anything but. Over time, enemy strategic missteps, the accumulation of experience at all levels, and most tellingly, the sheer size and mass of Allied (particularly Russian and American) forces began to turn the tide. It is difficult to argue that, man for man and unit for unit, the Allies eventually became better than our adversaries (at least in Europe).¹⁵ What is incontestable is that American mass in all domains proved decisive. Coalition warfare on a global scale, enabled by the most powerful economy and industrial base in history, proved a war-winning combination.

Any sound analysis of World War II must conclude that in the end, U.S. material superiority proved the decisive factor.¹⁶ America's ability to produce and transport vehicles, ammunition, food, supplies, and fuel kept its key Allies on their feet. U.S.

industry produced more than 370,000 planes, more than 100,000 tanks and armored vehicles, and more than 7,000 warships during the war. The ability to mobilize and organize the economy for global war and to field trained and very strong forces in all domains (sea, air, and land) arguably counted for more than where and how they were used.

American grand strategy in World War II was simple, consistent, and effective. Comprehensive defeat of the enemy was envisioned from the start, with the liberation of Europe as the first priority. Building up its war capacity at speed while sustaining critical Allies (a dual mission that forced hard resource choices, especially early on) constituted the focus of effort.¹⁷ As the United States built strength, President Franklin Roosevelt ruled against dramatic but overly risky suggestions to reinforce General Douglas MacArthur in the Philippines in 1942 and to attempt a cross-Channel invasion of Europe in 1943. Instead, the United States patiently set the conditions for strategic success. In the Atlantic, this meant defeating the submarine threat. In Europe, this meant large-scale strategic bombing to attack German morale, war production, and lines of communication while preparing for and then executing the invasion of the continent. In the Pacific, it meant establishing airfields and naval bases and advancing deliberately across the region in a coordinated campaign to engage and destroy the Imperial Japanese Fleet and commercial shipping preparatory to invasion of the home islands. Overwhelming Allied strength on the ground, in the air, and at sea forced the collapse of Germany and would have done the same to Japan had the advent of nuclear weapons not terminated the conflict.¹⁸

At war's end, the United States stood alone as leader of the victorious coalition, the greatest economic and military power in the world. In the immediate postwar period, U.S. advantages were absolute. A booming economy, a formidable strategic Air Force and Navy, and sole possession of nuclear weapons ensured American supremacy, fitting it uniquely for a role as the world's superpower. American grand strategy at mid-century continued to rest on the foundations described above and could be summarized concisely as monitoring and enforcing a stable international order and economic system that preserved American sovereignty, security, and prosperity; ensuring the security of the homeland through nuclear deterrence, alliances, forward-deployed ground forces, and airpower and seapower; and preventing the rise

of peer competitors that might challenge its economic and military superiority.¹⁹ The isolationism that had always existed as a strain in American foreign policy would not disappear altogether, but it would never again contend for primacy in grand strategy.

America's supreme effort in World War II did not lead to peace, and unchallenged American dominance proved transitory.²⁰ As the United States demobilized its Army, the Soviet Union maintained a powerful and dangerous military establishment that soon gained a nuclear component that could reach U.S. targets. Despite incredible losses during the war, the Soviet Union pursued a ruthlessly disciplined political and military program that soon brought all of Eastern Europe under its sway.²¹ In Asia, the Communist Chinese finally completed their long civil war, driving the Nationalists to Taiwan and solidifying their status as a regional power. Both China and the Soviet Union espoused political doctrines and ideologies profoundly at odds with the values and interests of the West. The stage was thus set for decades of confrontation.

In June 1950, the United States stumbled into an unexpected confrontation with the Communist bloc when the North Korean army invaded South Korea and took Seoul. Unaccountably, North Korea and its Chinese partners seemed not to fear America's nuclear arsenal. At the outset, the lack of strategic warning, poor military preparedness, and uncertainty over U.S. strategic aims muddled the American response, contributing to the indecisive outcome. Although still in possession of a nuclear monopoly (Moscow detonated its first nuclear weapon on August 29, 1949, but did not have a true deployable nuclear capability until several years later), the United States greatly feared a Soviet lunge into central Europe, clearly a more critical strategic priority.²² U.S. strategists could not be sure whether the North Korean invasion was directed by Moscow to distract Washington and its allies. Given the intense ideological perspectives that dominated at the time, a judgment was made that communist states acted more or less monolithically and that an armed response was needed to contain further communist expansion. The Korean conflict ultimately absorbed much of the military capacity available against a peripheral, not central, strategic priority—a huge gamble. Its unsatisfying outcome, a negotiated armistice leading to a frozen conflict, reflected America's unwillingness to mobilize or commit

totally to victory in a war not well understood or supported by the public. This “no win, no lose” approach would be seen again, with similar results.²³

The advent of nuclear weapons, many argued, presaged the dislocation or even negation of grand strategy altogether. Through the 1950s, and despite the example of the Korean war, it was the declared policy of the United States to threaten a nuclear response to any attack. The international system settled into bipolarity, with each armed camp being capable of destroying the other absolutely as nonaligned states struggled to avoid co-option. Direct, armed confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States seemed unthinkable for fear of uncontrolled escalation. Deterrence and containment became the means by which the ends of grand strategy were fulfilled. While powerful conventional forces were maintained, few strategists reckoned that the United States and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies could prevail in a conventional war with the Soviet Union in Central Europe. Instead, nuclear systems at the tactical, theater, and intercontinental levels proliferated on both sides in an arms race only partially limited by arms control treaties. While the willingness of U.S. leaders to use nuclear weapons in Europe—to “trade Washington for Bonn”—was never certain, the consequences of miscalculation for either side were almost unlimited, and deterrence in this sense proved remarkably stable. In only a single instance, the Cuban missile crisis, did the two superpowers approach the abyss, and even then the prospect of mutual destruction induced both to step back.

The long and painful experience of the Vietnam conflict shared almost eerie similarities with the one in Korea. Both featured ethnic populations, artificially partitioned. In both, the aggressor was a communist movement enabled and supported by China and the Soviet Union. Both featured large, conventional forces fighting from protected sanctuaries. In both, the United States fought on the Asian mainland, far from the homeland in a country with weak governance structures and a poorly developed infrastructure. And in both, U.S. airpower and seapower were unable to secure decisive battlefield results, even against a technologically inferior opponent. Like Korea, Vietnam eventually consumed huge military resources at the expense of U.S. forces in Europe, mirroring the United States in a protracted, peripheral war with weak popular support.²⁴ In Vietnam, as in Korea, there were no direct threats to U.S.

vital interests, only vague objectives to “resist communism” and to “maintain U.S. credibility.”

Korea and Vietnam (and, for that matter, smaller interventions such as Lebanon in 1958 and the Dominican Republic in 1965) took place against the backdrop of the Cold War and were clearly viewed in that light. For nearly five decades following World War II, national security concerns dominated the American political landscape as the United States engaged the Soviet Union in a worldwide struggle. For the first time in their history, Americans supported high defense expenditures in order to sustain large military forces in peacetime. Despite the painful experiences of the Korean and Vietnam conflicts, the United States never faltered in its fundamental commitment to opposing Soviet expansion.²⁵ Internally or externally, there was little debate: deterrence, or failing that, fighting and winning our nation’s wars, went unquestioned as the defining task of the U.S. military.

Though far more dangerous, the Cold War was a simpler era in many respects than today. Our national security objectives were clear and unambiguous. Even at the height of the Vietnam conflict, the primary disagreement revolved around the nature of the struggle, not a questioning of the policy of containment. Sovereignty of individual states was paramount, tempered only somewhat by the moral force of international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) or, more concretely, by involvement in traditional security alliances such as NATO. The influence of non-state actors—whether nongovernmental organizations, private voluntary organizations, terrorist groups, drug cartels, international criminal syndicates, or others—was limited. In the main, national security imperatives were likely to prevail over other considerations in the strategic calculus.

All that changed when the Berlin Wall came down. Whereas superpower rivalry had previously inhibited the actions of ambitious regional powers and limited the influence of nonstate actors, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to immediate changes in the system that had governed international relations for over four decades. Overnight, the manifest threat ceased to exist. As a result, the United States and its allies were forced to adjust their strategic focus. At the same time, an increasingly interdependent global economy and emerging revolutions in information and communications eroded the concept of state sovereignty in fundamental

ways. The result was a rise in international organized crime, quantum increases in international and domestic terrorism, ecological deterioration, disease, mass migration and refugee overflows, multiple outbreaks of ethnic and religious conflict, and a proliferation of failed states. These trends culminated in 9/11 and its painful and protracted aftermath.

The architects of the post–Cold War drawdown assumed, quite naturally, that the military would be far less busy in a world that would be more tranquil than before. Military forces were drawn down across the board. In one of the more interesting paradoxes of history, the end of the Cold War was followed not by retrenchment or relaxation but by a rapid increase in conflict and in U.S. military commitments abroad. No longer driven by superpower rivalry, national security policy evolved to advance U.S. interests in a more fragmented, multipolar system largely defined by ethnic, religious, and cultural enmities as old as they were implacable. New challenges—economic, environmental, and factional as well as national, regional, and ideological—now confronted the United States in an international setting of greater complexity and variety.

These trends also fueled the rise of new actors on the international political landscape. The budget, influence, and level of activity of the UN and its many organizations increased substantially in the 1990s. Nongovernmental organizations and private voluntary organizations became increasingly active, pursuing numerous ambitious agendas in many different areas. Traditional national security concerns receded as the United States and other Western powers attempted to reap the dividends of peace. A fundamental shift took place, largely unnoticed, in the way many Americans viewed national security and the role of the armed forces in providing for the common defense.

The drawdown of the 1990s was wrenching. In a single decade, 700,000 U.S. military personnel slots (about one-third of the active force) were eliminated, but the loss of combat forces was even more severe. In combat structure, the Army declined from 18 active divisions to 10, the Navy went from 566 ships to 354, and the Air Force went from 36 to 20 fighter wings, an overall reduction of 45 percent. The defense budget in general terms dropped by 40 percent. In the midst of these changes, the military was asked to shoulder a heavier operational load. Stability

operations in the Balkans, Haiti, and the Sinai in the 1990s stressed a force preoccupied with massive downsizing. Peacekeeping, peace enforcement, and humanitarian assistance operations as well as “theater engagement” missions exploded. While the military had undertaken these types of missions throughout its history, the sheer number of deployments dwarfed those conducted in the past. Examples include refugee assistance in northern Iraq following the Gulf War, security and disaster relief efforts in Somalia, humanitarian aid to refugees in the Rwandan crisis, restoration of democracy in Haiti, stability operations in Macedonia and peace enforcement operations to implement the Dayton Accords in Bosnia, and the Kosovo air campaign and later enforcement of the Military Technical Agreement in Kosovo.²⁶ More traditional combat or rescue missions in Panama, Southwest Asia, Liberia, Albania, and elsewhere in the same time frame also stretched American forces and resources.

This dramatic turnaround in the international security environment could not help but impact the world in profound ways. Several trends have heavily influenced American grand strategy since the Gulf War: the dramatic downsizing of U.S. military forces, their increasing use in nontraditional, noncombat missions and at the lower end of the spectrum of war, an increasingly polarized political environment, and a prolonged period of economic distress and malaise. All are interrelated and all have deeply affected the Armed Forces as instruments of national power, shaping U.S. strategy in important ways.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks struck the heart of grand strategy as they represented the first large-scale, direct attack on the homeland by an outside power since the War of 1812. Political unwillingness to confront the gathering threat and serious intelligence shortcomings represented strategic failures for which the United States paid a high price. Following 9/11, defense spending increased substantially as the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq began and endured. Over several years, the active Army grew from 470,000 to 548,000 and the Marine Corps expanded from 158,000 to 202,000, while Air Force and Navy end strengths remained static or declined slightly. In keeping with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s “transformation” initiatives, significant investments were made in command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance systems and in precision munitions,

as well as in force protection enhancements such as up-armored wheeled vehicles. Nevertheless, legacy combat systems—planes, tanks, and ships—first delivered in the 1970s and early 1980s remained the backbone of the military services (as they do today), while many next-generation programs were canceled or downsized.²⁷

As with Korea and Vietnam, the post-9/11 era of conflict came to absorb much of our military effort and resources at the expense of other, more central security concerns.²⁸ In particular, ground forces were fully committed to the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, leaving minimal Active Duty capacity for other contingencies such as the Korean Peninsula.²⁹ Air and naval forces played much smaller roles. Over time, the Army in particular minimized its readiness for prolonged, state-on-state, high-intensity conflict, shedding much of its armored, mechanized, and field artillery force structure and focusing its combat training centers on counterinsurgency. The special operations community grew dramatically in size and capability in a single generation but could not play a decisive role in the counterterrorism and counterinsurgency campaigns that defined the post-9/11 security landscape. With the U.S. effort in Iraq over and its Afghanistan venture winding down, it seems clear that neither will be seen retroactively as a clear-cut success; nor has the threat to the homeland from international terrorism been destroyed or eliminated.

At the conclusion of more than a decade of counterinsurgency, the United States finds itself repeating a familiar historical pattern. In the fiscal retrenchment that accompanies the end of every conflict (exacerbated by the economic collapse of 2008 and the Budget Control Act of 2011), active Army forces will bear the brunt of defense reductions, while the Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps will be less affected.³⁰ Most U.S. ground and air forces have been redeployed to the continental United States, while defense spending will decline over the next 10 years by approximately 10 percent per year. At the same time, emerging, nontraditional threats such as cyber attacks, weapons of mass destruction (whether chemical, biological, or radiological) wielded by nonstate actors, and international terrorism now crowd the security agenda. Increasingly, other threats such as narcotrafficking, illegal immigration, environmental degradation, demography (for example, “youth bulges”), organized crime, and even climate change are also cast as national security threats. What does this portend for American grand strategy?

The Ends of Grand Strategy

First, it is important not to confuse enduring, core strategic interests with others that are less central. The current security environment, described in the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review as “rapidly changing,” “volatile,” “unpredictable,” and “in some cases more threatening” is certainly all those. Yet addressing this environment in fact aligns comfortably with American grand strategy over time. Broadly speaking, U.S. vital or core interests remain remarkably consistent: the defense of American territory and that of our allies, protecting American citizens at home and abroad, supporting and defending our constitutional values and forms of government, and promoting and securing the U.S. economy and standard of living. These four core interests encompass virtually every strategic dynamic and dimension. Grand strategy is by no means confined to our military forces and institutions but is far broader, encompassing all forms of national power. That said, we must beware of attempts to define everything in terms of national security. Any discussion of grand strategy quickly loses coherence and utility when we do.³¹ Grand strategy is fundamentally about security in its more traditional sense.³²

Any assessment must begin with a look at our security environment and then at threats to our core or vital interests, without either overestimating or undervaluing them. The international security environment is by now well understood and familiar. Raymond Aron’s view of “a multiplicity of autonomous centers of decision and therefore a risk of war” holds true today.³³ The bipolar, traditionally Westphalian state system of the Cold War has given way to a more multipolar system featuring a militarily and economically dominant, but not all-powerful, United States; a rising China and India; a resurgent Russia; an economically potent but militarily declining Europe; an unstable and violence-prone Middle East, wracked by the Sunni-Shia divide, economic and governmental underperformance, and the Arab-Israeli problem; a proliferation of weak and failed states, particularly in Africa, the Middle East, and the Russian periphery; and empowered international and nongovernmental organizations and nonstate actors.³⁴ Terrorist organizations and international organized crime, enabled by global communications and information flows, have become far more significant