

## 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.<sup>31</sup> Grand strategy is fundamentally about security in its more traditional sense.<sup>32</sup>

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.<sup>33</sup> 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.<sup>34</sup> Terrorist organizations and international organized crime, enabled by global communications and information flows, have become far more significant

than they previously had been. In absolute terms, the world is safer, as the prospect of nuclear mutually assured destruction and world war costing millions of lives seems relegated to the past. Yet most societies feel threatened and insecure, while conflict, if more low level, remains endemic.

In this regard, we often see references to “asymmetric” threats posed to “thwart U.S. conventional military advantages.”<sup>35</sup> While factually true—weaker states find it largely impossible to match U.S. power symmetrically—this characterization can be misleading. It is just as accurate to cast asymmetric threats as less capable offsets employed by weaker powers who cannot match American preponderance. A persistent tendency to inflate the dangers of insurgency, terrorism, “niche” technologies, and so on can distort threat assessments in unhelpful ways. Asymmetric threats deserve careful consideration, but they should not be exaggerated.

The broad threats that face us have deep roots but have also evolved over time. In order of importance, they can be summarized as:

- ◆ Use of weapons of mass destruction against the homeland. These could be nuclear, chemical, biological, cyber, or explosive/kinetic in nature (such as the 9/11 attacks) delivered by either state or nonstate actors. Single or multiple attacks causing huge mass casualties could lead to partial or complete economic collapse and loss of confidence in our governance structures, imperiling our standard of living and way of life in addition to causing loss of life.<sup>36</sup>

- ◆ Economic disruption from without. The crash of 2008 was largely self-induced, but the health and stability of the U.S. economy can also be affected by the actions of foreign powers. Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990, which jeopardized the international economic order by threatening the free flow of oil from the Persian Gulf, is an example. A major cyber attack against the financial sector or the closure of the Straits of Tiran or the Straits of Malacca by a hostile power could be another.<sup>37</sup> Any major disruption to the global economy, which depends upon investor confidence as much as the free flow of goods and energy, can have catastrophic consequences for the United States, and American presidents have repeatedly shown a willingness to use force to ensure access to markets, free trade, and economic stability.

◆ The rise of a hostile peer competitor. For centuries, Great Britain aligned against the rise of any power able to dominate the European landmass and upset the balance of power. The United States did the same in opposing Germany in World War I, Germany and Japan in World War II, and the Soviet Union in the Cold War. The U.S. “Rebalance to Asia” and opposition to Chinese territorial moves in the East and South China Seas can be seen as an attempt to counter the rise of China in a manner consistent with longstanding U.S. grand strategy. A peaceful, nonhostile peer nation or grouping of nations (such as the European Union) poses no strategic threat to the United States. An authoritarian great power, possessed of both military and economic means and an apparent desire to enlarge and expand them, could in time pose a direct, existential threat to American national security. American grand strategy has traditionally opposed such powers and would in all likelihood do so again.<sup>38</sup>

◆ Direct challenges to key allies. Alliances like NATO and bilateral security arrangements with close allies like Japan and South Korea constitute solemn commitments that extend American power and influence globally. Cooperation with allies adds their military forces to ours and secures forward basing and other rights we need to secure U.S. interests around the world. We do not enter into arrangements altruistically, but rather because they serve U.S. interests. To preserve international stability and deter conflict, they must be honored. Failure to do so in one case, such as an attack on Japan or South Korea, would call into question our commitment to all such commitments and would compromise, perhaps fatally, our system of alliances and treaties worldwide.<sup>39</sup> U.S. leaders can be expected to act decisively when close allies are directly threatened.

There are, of course, other threats of concern to national security practitioners that fall below this threshold. An attack on a U.S. Embassy, the kidnapping of U.S. citizens abroad, or the pirating of U.S.-flagged vessels on the high seas would be examples. U.S. political leaders might also contemplate the use of military force under the evolving doctrine of “responsibility to protect” as in the cases of Somalia in 1991 and Libya in 2011, or when national pride has been touched (as in the *Mayaguez* or *Pueblo* incidents). However, these by definition do not engage grand strategic objectives, and

statesmen assume risk when treating them as though they do, primarily because strong and sustained public support is less assured.<sup>40</sup>

Similarly, promoting democracy and human rights abroad is often touted as a national security or foreign policy “imperative.”<sup>41</sup> While consistent with American political culture and ideology, in practice, these instances are highly case specific. When consonant with the framework and principles of U.S. grand strategy, the United States may act, but more often, a pragmatic realism governs.<sup>42</sup> The long nightmare in Syria, with its tragic loss of life, accelerating regional instability, mounting extremism and terrorist involvement, and massive human rights violations on all sides, would seem to be a classic case calling for military intervention. Yet there is no UN or NATO mandate, no strong reservoir of public support for military action, no appetite for intervention among our allies and partners, and no desire to dispute the agendas of Russia, China, and Iran in Syria, at least for the time being. With no direct threat to the homeland, U.S. citizens or allies, or the economy, the prospects for large-scale military intervention at present seem low, despite the humanitarian tragedy unfolding.

The crisis in Ukraine presents a different case study. While the likelihood of committing U.S. forces to defend Ukraine following the seizure of Crimea is low, the postwar security architecture in the Euro-Russian space, so carefully constructed for a generation, has been thrown over. The North Atlantic Council voted to defer NATO membership to Georgia and Ukraine and did not station NATO troops in the new member states, largely out of deference to Russian security concerns. These confidence-building measures notwithstanding, Russia sent troops into Georgia in 2008, where they remain today.<sup>43</sup> In particular, the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, under which Ukraine agreed to surrender its nuclear weapons in exchange for Russian guarantees of its territorial integrity, has been seriously compromised, along with the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe and, apparently, the NATO-Russia Council. Large Russian forces, having seized Crimea, are massed on the eastern and southern borders of Ukraine. Concerns by NATO members, especially the newer ones in Eastern Europe and the Baltic States, are mounting as Russian leaders assert the right to “protect” ethnic Russian minorities in neighboring countries.

This scenario presents a different challenge to American grand strategy. Should Russia seize more Ukrainian territory, NATO's Baltic members could very possibly come under threat, an altogether different matter.<sup>44</sup> Russian subversion or military action in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia may be deterred by NATO's Article 5 guarantee, and U.S. leaders and their Allied and partner counterparts will work hard through energetic diplomacy and severe economic sanctions to dissuade any thought of further aggression. Still, should Russia reprise its Crimea land-grab in the Baltic states, it is more likely than not that the United States will respond militarily under the Washington Treaty and encourage its NATO allies to do the same. Direct confrontation with Russia, still a major nuclear and conventional power, may seem unthinkable. Yet failure to honor our treaty obligations to NATO would mean the virtual collapse not only of the Alliance, but also of our security relationships around the world. Such a loss of global reach and influence would negate U.S. grand strategy altogether. For that reason, however much against its will, the United States will in all likelihood confront Russia should a NATO member be attacked or directly threatened.

The unfolding collapse of the Iraqi state may fall somewhere in between. Across the American public and in both political parties, there remains a strong aversion to reintroducing a large ground presence into Iraq. A direct threat to the homeland has not yet emerged, and the prospect of lending military and material aid to the Shia regime in Baghdad, itself both supported and at least partially controlled by Tehran, is unpalatable. On the other hand, major human rights violations and the prospect of spillover and accelerating destabilization of the region could compel strong action against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and its Sunni confederates. Should ISIS successfully establish a safe haven and launch attacks against Europe and the United States, decisive U.S. and coalition military action would almost certainly follow. Major disruption to the free flow of oil through the Arabian Gulf and attendant economic shocks would also compel a powerful military response.

These and similar examples raise the question of whether the United States consciously pursues an imperial or hegemonic grand strategy. Many scholars, both domestic and foreign, explicitly or implicitly assert that it does.<sup>45</sup> On the one hand, the United States, along with other great powers, seeks to provide for its own security by maximizing its power relative to that of potential and actual adversaries, within limits

imposed by its domestic politics. Its political and military leaders are constrained in attempting to balance what Raymond Aron called an ethics of responsibility—the pragmatic reality of an international politics that cannot and does not ignore the role of force—and an ethics of conviction, which is normative and classically liberal in seeking accommodation and an absence of conflict where possible.<sup>46</sup> It is thus true that American power, and particularly military power, is often employed to secure and advance American interests. On the other hand, U.S. interventions are marked by an absence of territorial aggrandizement or forced extraction of natural resources. Typically, huge sums are spent on development and infrastructural improvements. On its own or when asked (as in the Balkans, Somalia, Haiti, Panama, and Iraq), the United States usually withdraws and goes home. Even close allies remain free to opt out of military ventures, as seen in the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and in Libya in 2011.

The net effect has been to bring into being, largely if not entirely through America's own efforts, a rules-based international and economic order that has widely benefited much of the world:

*It falls to the dominant state to create the conditions under which economic interdependence can take hold (by providing security, rules of the game, and a reserve currency, and by acting as the global economy's banker and lender of last resort). Without a dominant power to perform these tasks, economic interdependence does not happen. Indeed, free trade and interdependence have occurred in the modern international system only during the hegemonies of Victorian Britain and postwar America.<sup>47</sup>*

These are the actions of a preponderant power but hardly of a classically imperialist one. If the United States is imperialist, it appears to be so in a historically benign way; if hegemonic, in a heavily qualified one.<sup>48</sup>

## The Means of Grand Strategy

The “means” of grand strategy are similarly enduring over time. Its basic components include fostering strong alliances and bilateral security arrangements;<sup>49</sup> maintaining a strong and survivable nuclear deterrent; fielding balanced, powerful,