

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.⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷

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.⁴⁸

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;⁴⁹ maintaining a strong and survivable nuclear deterrent; fielding balanced, powerful,

and capable military forces, dominant in each warfighting domain, that can project and sustain military power globally and prevail in armed conflict; and providing intelligence services that can ensure global situational awareness and provide strategic early warning. These components are intrinsically linked to a powerful economy and industrial base, advanced technology, an extensive military reserve component, an educated and technically skilled population fit for military service,⁵⁰ and a political system that is based on classically liberal democratic values and able to make clear and sustainable policy and resource decisions.⁵¹

In important ways these tools and capabilities are, or are perceived to be, eroding. The U.S. economy, still the largest in the world, has not fully recovered from the 2008 crisis. Mounting alarm over record deficits and an inability to control spending resulted in the 2011 Budget Control Act, approved against all expectations and mandating a 10 percent cut in defense spending over the next 10 years, triggering sequestration and a succession of budget crises. Confidence in America's economic and fiscal future has been shaken.

America's traditional reliance on forward presence and forward-deployed forces, another strategic linchpin, has also declined since the end of the Cold War. Few combat forces remain in Europe (the last tank was removed in 2012), only a single ground combat brigade is based in Korea, and there are no ground combat troops based in the Middle East. Naval forward presence has also been scaled back in the post-Cold War era as the size of the fleet has declined.⁵² On the Alliance front, relations with NATO allies have been damaged by the Rebalance to Asia, widely perceived as a devaluation of Europe by U.S. leaders, and by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates's stern speech in June of 2011, which castigated European allies for failing to meet targets for defense spending.⁵³ President Barack Obama's "leading from behind" stance in Libya, the pullout from Iraq, the pending withdrawal from Afghanistan, and inaction in Syria are interpreted by some as evidence of a disinclination to engage globally in the interests of international stability, though others see it as prudent and measured restraint.

The use of "soft power" also deserves consideration in this discussion.⁵⁴ Described by Joseph Nye, the term's progenitor, as "the ability to influence the behavior of others to get the outcomes you want,"⁵⁵ soft power is concerned with development

aid, cultural influence, the power of example, and others forms of suasion that are not coercive or easily directed. Theorists disagree on whether soft power should be considered as part of the strategist's arsenal. Diplomacy, for instance, may lack utility when divorced from the military and economic power of the state; the artfulness of the discussion may be useful but will not be decisive absent hard power. On balance, although the ability of soft power to influence adversary behavior for good or ill is probably incontrovertible, it is not easily deployable or even controllable.⁵⁶ To that extent, it is an important factor that nevertheless falls outside the realm of grand strategy as traditionally understood and practiced.

While U.S. determination to act forcefully in support of the international order may be more open to question and U.S. economic and military power may not be as dominant as it has been in the past, in absolute terms the United States remains by far the preponderant power in the world. Possessed of great actual and potential strengths, the United States is unequalled in hard power. Nevertheless, coherent and effective political direction is the essential precondition to strategic success. Since the end of the Vietnam War, mounting conflict between the legislative and executive branches, spurred by a fractious polarization of American politics, has reached alarming proportions. Repeated wars have led to a concentration of the war power in the executive branch, arguably resulting in more frequent uses of force that may not command public support. Unquestionably, a healthy and stable set of political arrangements that provides for effective sharing of power, while ensuring popular backing, is essential.⁵⁷ When this element is lacking, successful strategic execution is at risk.

The Ways of Grand Strategy

How the United States addresses direct threats to its core or vital interests over time is the essence of grand strategy. Typically, America's solutions are not new, although the technologies employed often are. The first principle is to meet the threat as far from the homeland as possible. Thus, since the end of World War II, the United States has established bases, positioned forces, and stockpiled weapons and munitions around the globe, buttressed by economic and development assistance, exercises, formal treaties, coalitions of the willing, and alliances.⁵⁸ (Counterproliferation may also be