

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

seen in this light.) While U.S. ground forces have largely come home, and key installations such as Torrejon Air Base in Spain and Clark Air Base and Naval Base Subic Bay in the Philippines were closed after the Cold War, America's network of overseas bases, airfields, and alliances as well as forward-deployed air and naval forces is still extensive. America's ability to project power globally and sustain its forces almost indefinitely remains unmatched. U.S. satellites survey the globe and monitor adversary communications continuously. Though smaller than during the Cold War, the U.S. strategic nuclear arsenal is survivable, redundant, and accurate, providing an absolute nuclear deterrent against any adversary.⁵⁹

Next, the United States prefers to meet serious threats using different tools at once, relying on intelligence, diplomacy, forward presence, and economic power to forestall, deflect, or defuse security challenges and reserving military force as a last resort.⁶⁰ Still, U.S. military power is awesome. Its strength across the warfighting domains, supported by an unmatched ability to project and sustain military forces far from the homeland, remains far ahead of the rest of the world.⁶¹ Whenever possible, the United States will address threats in tandem with allies, partners, or like-minded states, working through international organizations like the UN or NATO and conducting preconflict engagement and "shaping" operations on a large scale. Yet when vital interests are at stake, the United States will act unilaterally if necessary.⁶² Preemption to disrupt or prevent imminent threats falls well within America's grand strategic calculus.⁶³ Prevention—the use of force to defeat threats before they become imminent—has, on the other hand, far less provenance.

As the preponderant global power, the United States attempts to shape the international security environment to prevent or ward off security challenges where it can.⁶⁴ When it cannot, and when significant or vital interests are engaged, military force often comes into play. Since the end of World War II, the United States has used military force many times, with varying success, to protect, secure, or advance its security interests.⁶⁵ When military force was used, the record of success or failure is illustrative when viewed in light of the grand strategic framework described above. In the 20th century, the United States experienced clear success when the threats to vital interests were unambiguous; when the response enjoyed strong support from the public and Congress; when

overwhelming force was applied; when strong allies participated; and when the strategic objective was well understood.⁶⁶ Both World Wars, the Cold War, and the Gulf War are examples. In cases where the direct threat to U.S. vital interests was less clear, overwhelming force was not applied, public and congressional support was not strong or sustained, and the strategic objective was unclear, defeat or stalemate ensued. Korea, Vietnam, Beirut, Somalia, Iraq, and Afghanistan are of course the relevant examples here. In some cases (the Dominican Republic, Grenada, Panama, Haiti, and Kosovo), the desiderata listed above did not fully apply, but weak opposition and overmatching force led to early success, forestalling loss of public support or stagnation of the conflict.⁶⁷

These historical lessons are compelling and deserve careful and objective study. American political leaders have not always recognized these principles and have certainly not always applied them. Their apparent jettisoning by both Republican and Democratic administrations following the Gulf War has come with a heavy price. America's successes in both fighting and deterring have resulted at least as much from an industrial and technological superiority, employed en masse by competent political and military institutions, as from any other factor.⁶⁸ This superiority is best translated into battlefield and campaign success by synergistically applying air, space, sea, cyber, and land power in time and space to achieve decisive objectives that see through and beyond the end of combat operations. Single-service or one-dimensional applications of force have repeatedly failed of their promise to deliver strategic victory.

Likewise, political leaders and strategists should be mindful of *strategic culture*, that mélange of history, tradition, custom, worldview, economy, sociology, and political systems and mores that largely shapes how nations fight and for what causes. There may be no agreed upon American theory of war, but an "American way of war" surely obtains, based on concepts of joint and combined warfare, mass, firepower, technology, strong popular support, and a focus on decisive and clear-cut outcomes.⁶⁹ "Good wars" have historically followed this pattern. "Bad wars" have not. While the analogy can be taken too far, it captures central truths that should inform our strategic calculations.⁷⁰ Strategic culture is real and powerful, whether acknowledged or not.⁷¹

The Way Ahead

As we assess a complex security environment, our historical experience provides useful context and guideposts to understanding the present, even when security threats are harder to define and address, as in the case of cyber attacks.⁷² U.S. forces are also held to standards increasingly difficult to guarantee; the prospect of even minimal casualties to our own forces or to civilians (however unintentional) or unintended environmental damage now colors every decision in the age of the 24-hour news cycle. On balance, traditional military security concerns often seem less paramount. Absent a clear and present danger, humanitarian considerations, environmental issues, and resource impacts and scarcities compete strongly with military factors in policy deliberations. In the meantime, nonstate actors are increasing their power and influence to bring about policy changes across a wide spectrum of issues, many of which directly affect the ability of U.S. military forces to carry out their missions.⁷³

In the last generation, we often saw the face of the future reflected in the bitter divisions of the past, in failed states, in emerging democracies, and in nations stuck in transition between authoritarian and democratic systems. A persistently uncertain and unstable international security environment places a premium on U.S. leadership. As the only remaining global power and as a coalition leader in organizations like NATO, the United States is uniquely positioned to influence world affairs in ways that benefit not only it, but also the international community as a whole.⁷⁴ The prudent use of American military power, in concert with the economic, political, and diplomatic instruments of national power, remains central to attempts to shape the international environment and encourage peace and stability wherever important U.S. interests are at stake.⁷⁵ As George Kennan put it, “We have learned not to recoil from the struggle for power as something shocking or abnormal. It is the medium in which we work . . . and we will not improve our performance by trying to dress it up as something else.”⁷⁶

Much of the prevailing academic discussion, on the other hand, distracts or frustrates practitioners. One leading theorist offered Presidents a choice from among strategies of “neo-isolationism, selective engagement, cooperative security, primacy, or enlargement and engagement.”⁷⁷ Another proposed “strategic restraint, offshore