

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

balancing, forward partnering, selective engagement or assertive interventionism” as strategic alternatives.⁷⁸ Others argue for regional priorities (Asia-Pacific, the Middle East, Europe), threat-based priorities (weapons of mass destruction [WMD], cyber, insurgency), or capabilities-based strategies (for example, the maritime strategy of the 1980s). Each approach offers useful perspectives, but true grand strategy looks beyond these choices, orienting on American strengths and interests to address the global challenges of the moment in a larger framework of diplomacy, economic strength, military power, and global leadership. Presidents do not really have the choice to embrace isolationism, ignore alliances, eschew engagement, or ignore important regions of the world. The current administration may highlight the Rebalance to Asia as its top priority, but potential conflict in the Arabian Gulf, another WMD attack on the homeland, or Russian military action against the Baltic States would immediately become the pressing, consuming challenge and would remain a critical priority until resolved.

It is also useful to note that the formerly sharp distinction between the military instrument and others has become blurred. The definition of national security is now more expansive, encompassing a great domain of homeland defense, with dozens of civilian agencies and large military organizations (such as U.S. Northern Command) intimately linked with and often working in subordination to other civilian entities. Even in conflict zones, tactical formations engaged in daily combat can find themselves with scores of embedded civilians representing civilian departments.⁷⁹ Informational technologies and a more globalized threat, able to strike from remote and underdeveloped locations with great effect, now force a greater degree of synergy and interoperability between military and nonmilitary organizations than ever before. These trends will continue on a trajectory toward ever-greater civil-military integration, particularly in the intelligence, cyber, acquisition, logistics, and consequence management realms.

Taking the long view, and acknowledging the strong impact of new technologies and threats, the framework of American grand strategy as described here will remain relevant and current for decades to come. The international security environment will remain anarchic and uncertain, with the state mattering more than supranational organizations, even as nonstate actors of many kinds proliferate. Conflict will remain

endemic, and state-on-state conflict will recur. WMD attacks against the homeland will be attempted and may be successful. Pressures to intervene—in the Middle East, in Africa, in Eastern Europe, and perhaps even in East Asia—will persist or surface anew. Strategic “shocks”—unanticipated crises requiring strategic responses—will be more the norm than not.⁸⁰ None of this is new, unique, or even more dangerous than in the past.

Strategists must accordingly consider and refine the ways and means by which our traditional and enduring interests may best be defended. Along the way, a certain humility is helpful; as Henry Kissinger wrote, “The gods are offended by hubris. They resent the presumption that events can be totally predicted and managed.”⁸¹ At its best, grand strategy is not always or fundamentally about fighting or the military application of force, but rather an appreciation of its potential, along with the other instruments of power, in the mind of the adversary. President Ronald Reagan’s role in bringing about an end to the Cold War is the classic example. In this sense, effective grand strategy may often preclude the need to resort to force. To achieve this, the involvement of society in its own national defense, a strong, stable, and globally networked economy, an effective domestic politics that can make rational decisions over time in support of national security, and the promotion of values that invite support and consensus at home and abroad will count for much. So, too, will balanced and capable military forces, sized and able to operate globally and in concert with civilian counterparts, international organizations, allies, and partners. The decision when and if to use force should never be approached casually, emotionally, or halfheartedly, but rather soberly, analytically, and with a whole-of-government and whole-of-society intention to prevail. There should never be doubt that when core interests are engaged, the United States will bring the full weight of its power to bear and will persist until success is achieved. On these foundations will rest an effective U.S. grand strategy far into the future.

Notes

¹Defining *grand strategy* is admittedly onerous. Colin Gray defines it as the “purposeful employment of all instruments of power available to a security community.” Robert J. Art excludes nonmilitary instruments from grand strategy, while Christopher Layne calls it simply “the process by which the state matches ends and means in the pursuit of security.” Sir Hew Strachan sees grand strategy as forward looking, aspirational, and oriented on preventing or managing great power decline. Edward Luttwak is particularly opaque: “Grand strategy may be seen as a confluence of the military interactions that flow up and down level by level . . . with the varied external relations that form strategy’s horizontal dimension at its highest level.” Colin Gray, *War, Peace and International Relations: An Introduction to Strategic History* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 283; Robert J. Art, “A Defensible Defense,” *International Security* 15, no. 4 (Spring 1991), 7; Christopher Layne, “Rethinking American Grand Strategy: Hegemony or Balance of Power in the 21st Century,” *World Policy Journal* 15, no. 2 (November 1998), 8; Hew Strachan, “Strategy and Contingency,” *International Affairs* 87, no. 6 (November 2011), 1281–1296; and Edward Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 179.

²“Strategy” is more properly limited to “the deployment and use of armed forces to attain a given political objective.” See Michael Howard, “The Forgotten Dimensions of Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs* 57, no. 5 (Summer 1979), 975.

³The list includes the Anglo-Dutch Wars (1652–1654, 1665–1667, 1672–1674, 1780–1784), King William’s War (1688–1697), Queen Anne’s War (1702–1713), the War of Jenkins’ Ear (1739–1748), King George’s War (1744–1748), and the French and Indian War (1754–1763). The first clash in North America between European powers was the 1565 Spanish massacre of French Huguenots at Fort Caroline in present-day Florida.

⁴The War of 1812 entangled the United States peripherally in the Napoleonic wars over questions of trade restrictions with France, impressment of U.S. Sailors (many of whom were British born but naturalized American citizens) on the high seas, and British support for Indian tribes resisting expansion into the Northwest territories. Expansion into Crown territories in Canada was also a war aim. Though arguably a victory, the War of 1812, which saw the burning of Washington and numerous other defeats, confirmed the view that military engagement with the great European powers was not in American interests.

⁵Eugene V. Rostow, *A Breakfast for Bonaparte: U.S. National Security Interests from the Heights of Abraham to the Nuclear Age* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 1993), 143.

⁶*Ibid.*, 78.

⁷Described by Seymour Martin Lipset as a new American ideology, based on notions of personal liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, republicanism, populism, and laissez-faire. Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double Edged Sword* (New York: Norton, 1997), 17–19.