

# Strategy Research Project

## Power, Politics, and Process: Issues in U.S. Grand Strategy

by

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United States Army War College  
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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

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## **Abstract**

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## **Power, Politics, and Process: Issues in U.S. Grand Strategy**

America is now at that historical point at which a great nation is in danger of losing its perspective on what exactly is within the realm of its power and what is beyond it.

—Senator J. William Fulbright<sup>1</sup>

When Senator Fulbright wrote those words in 1966, the nation was in the midst of a great debate as to how to strike a balance between foreign and domestic priorities. The Senator's greatest fear was that the nation's habit for foreign intervention was becoming overreaching, and belied what he described as an "arrogance of power." Similar warnings of hubris have sounded over the past decade. These criticisms are a response to what appear to be America's elective wars, fought during periods of great domestic challenge. Senator Fulbright – like many contemporary scholars, politicians, and pundits – called for a different approach, and the need to strike a better balance. This constant tension between foreign and domestic pursuits, challenges, and interests lies at the heart of crafting a balanced grand strategic vision.

This paper examines American grand strategy in the post-Cold War era, both as a term of art and as a guiding principle for great power politics, to answer several questions: Is grand strategy still relevant and necessary, especially for a great power? Is there an 'American way' of grand strategy, and if so, is it unique? Does the United States currently have a grand strategy? Finally, what are the current challenges in grand strategic development, and can the process be better led, informed, communicated, and executed? There is a need for a grand strategy, now and in the future. However, defining and executing grand strategy is problematic. Current requirements must be brought into balance with a vision for the future, as well as with competing domestic and international interests. A specific proposal for U.S. grand

strategy lies outside the scope of this paper, though some suggestions are presented that may help modernize, streamline, and demystify the strategic development process. Lastly, national power and strategy models are presented to help visualize the current strategic calculus, and improve future efforts.

### What is Grand Strategy?

Strategic thought in policy, statecraft and war can be traced through Jomini, Clausewitz, Machiavelli and others as far back as Thucydides. B.H. Liddell Hart is often credited with introducing the phrase 'grand strategy' in the modern era. The essence of grand strategy for Liddell Hart was "to look beyond war to the subsequent peace." He believed this higher form of strategy was necessary to "coordinate and direct the resources of a nation....towards the attainment of the political object of the war."<sup>2</sup> Liddell Hart's definition and interpretation of grand strategy was primarily limited to the conduct of war. He emphasized the need to craft a policy and approach that marshaled a state's energy, will and influence, to not only defeat the enemy but to win a "better peace."

Liddell Hart's development of a grand strategic concept was useful, but limited in scope, reflecting the general thinking of the time. As British historian Michael Howard wrote,

Grand strategy in the first half of the twentieth century consisted basically in the mobilization and deployment of national resources of wealth, manpower and industrial capacity, together with the enlistment of those of allied and, when feasible, of neutral powers, for the purpose of achieving the goals of national policy in wartime.<sup>3</sup>

Hew Strachan critiques these early definitions and descriptions of grand strategy as "a conflation of policy and strategy."<sup>4</sup> He views strategy as linking military aims with political objectives, and to "make war useable by the state, so that it can, if need be, use force to fulfill its political objectives."<sup>5</sup> This clarification is useful, but incomplete, as it

fails to address a higher, unifying purpose of grand strategy short of war. Other modern definitions provide a fuller description. Josef Joffe's succinct realist interpretation is that of a "design that relates means, and not just military ones, to ends, and ambitions to outcomes."<sup>6</sup> This view of grand strategy is essentially about a nation getting what it wants, or keeping what it has. Christopher Layne goes even deeper, seeing grand strategy as "determining a state's vital security interests; identifying the threats to those interests; and deciding how best to employ the state's political, military, and economic resources to protect those interests."<sup>7</sup> Layne's emphasis on identifying vital national interests, and threats to those interests, is an essential point of grand strategy that has been stretched, or in some cases omitted, by U.S. strategists and policy-makers.

A related phenomenon in the identification of interests is in level of specificity. Hew Strachan refers to grand strategy "as much a way of thinking as a way of doing," with "goals which are more visionary and aspirational than pragmatic and immediate."<sup>8</sup> This dichotomy between vision and action is a constant source of tension, and related to an inability or unwillingness to prioritize vital interests once defined. Interest identification and prioritization are critical in order to turn the aspirations of grand strategy into actionable policy. American vision flows through its big three foundational policy documents: the National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, and National Military Strategy. These documents address and balance specific requirements using an ends-ways-means approach underpinned by an ongoing assessment of risk. This process brings together all of the elements of power and considers both internal and external stakeholders so as to, as noted by Paul Kennedy, "preserv[e] and enhance the nation's long-term (that is, in wartime *and* peacetime) best interests."<sup>9</sup>

There are those who believe that grand strategy is only the purview of great powers, and that the United States is in need of such a strategy.<sup>10</sup> Williamson Murray writes that great states must pursue grand strategies in order to balance risks in the areas of resources, will and interests.<sup>11</sup> Colin Dueck refers to grand strategy as “both a conceptual road map....and a set of policy prescriptions [which in] its essence is the attempted reconciliation of ends and means.”<sup>12</sup> In this way grand strategy allows great state leaders to set a course and direction from today’s challenges to a desired future endstate, and disciplines leaders to look beyond the present and take a longer view. Ultimately, a state’s grand strategic vision is informed by and a reflection of its leadership, history, culture, ideology, geography, socio-economic conditions, alliances and global standing.<sup>13</sup>

All states must make choices, and given America’s global reach and unique position of influence and power, these must be both circumspect and informed. The first challenge is to distill broad core national interests into a narrowed set of prioritized and achievable ends (objectives), informed by judiciously applying increasingly-constrained means (resources). The ends-means balance is the critical output from the national strategy planning process, but is wholly reliant upon a detailed strategic vision. Even those leaders who can conceive a grand strategic vision may become reactive as they are consumed by the crisis of the moment. This pull of crisis management diverts resources from achieving “over the horizon” anticipatory ‘ends,’ often leading to ad hoc solutions crafted for near-term problems without properly weighing second and third-order impacts.<sup>14</sup> Grand strategy rises above the challenges of the day by “providing a coherent framework of purpose and direction in which random, and not so random,

events can be interpreted, given meaning, and then responded to as required.”<sup>15</sup> A great power needs a grand strategy if it wants to do big things and achieve larger national purposes in support of its vital, enduring interests. This said, any state actor must ensure that it acts judiciously in pursuit of its interests. Power, and the interrelated strategic reservoirs of influence, can be rapidly depleted.

### U.S. Grand Strategic History

Many writers have invoked the nation’s founders to downplay the early strategic ambitions of the United States. Yet for every reminder that we do not go “abroad in search of monsters to destroy,” or for every caution against forming “entangling alliances,” there are just as many describing the United States in exceptionalist and expansionist terms. These two themes were prevalent in our early history, and represent a state’s “possession and milieu goals,” as described by Arnold Wolfers.<sup>16</sup> ‘Possession goals’ represent physical and economic security interests, while ‘milieu goals’ represent value interests. Expansionist ‘possession goals’ were exemplified in efforts like the Monroe Doctrine, Manifest Destiny, and the Open Door Policy. The United States slowed its expansionism once its geopolitical position stabilized, but Wolfers’ milieu goals continue to be pursued in the spread of American “interest” values, referred to as “democratization” or “exceptionalism.”<sup>17</sup> This one coherent thread throughout the U.S.’s grand strategic journey is described by the writer and scholar Walter Russell Mead as a “quality that a Clausewitz would find disturbing: a messianic dimension.”<sup>18</sup> America has exported its goods and its values, not always in equal measure and often through less than subtle ways.

There is a widespread belief that the Cold War policies of containment, preponderance, and deterrence, reflected continuity in U.S. grand strategy for more

than three decades.<sup>19</sup> This is an overly simplistic interpretation of history, and a misunderstanding of grand strategic thought in application. The Soviet Union and its nuclear arsenal served as the primary threat around which the United States employed elements of power, but it was not the only threat. The policy of containment marked a new era in U.S. national security strategy, blurring the lines between national and global security, a conflation directly attributable to the new nuclear threat and competition.<sup>20</sup> However, each administration had to navigate domestic issues and politics, while confronting unique international crises that arose in each administration. There is much evidence to suggest each administration sought “regular, repeated, and successful efforts to change course” from the one set by the preceding administration, and that containment simply was a thread woven through divergent policies and strategies.<sup>21</sup> George Kennan, reflecting on U.S. 20<sup>th</sup> century foreign policy efforts through the end of Cold War period, summed up U.S. performance as follows:

Perhaps our diplomacy of the first five decades of this century, and our reactions to the very different problems that have assailed us since 1950, both reflect realities much deeper than our specific responses of either period: namely, the lack of any enduring doctrine for relating military strength to political policy, and a persistent tendency to fashion our policy towards others with a view to feeding a pleasing image of ourselves rather than achieving real, and desperately needed, results in our relations with others.<sup>22</sup>

Kennan’s critique supports the view that the Cold War was a period of policy trial and error, not of the application of an overarching vision carried through nine very different administrations. Specific strategies and policies are, by their nature, temporal, formed by the circumstances, declarations, and issues of the day. And, as Raymond Aron wrote, “Strategic thought draws its inspiration each century, or rather at each moment of history, from the problems which events themselves pose.”<sup>23</sup>

The post-Cold War era has presented new challenges to all states, but more so for the United States. This period was described as a “unipolar moment” and an “end of history,” and signaled a new era of U.S. preeminence. The Clinton administration expanded its strategic scope accordingly, seizing an opportunity to expand economic influence and security throughout the world in a hub and spoke fashion. This led to a grand strategy termed “engagement and enlargement,” laid out in the February 1996 National Security Strategy.<sup>24</sup> The U.S. harnessed both soft and hard power in an attempt to reshape the world through economic trade regimes, international institution-building, and increased military intervention.<sup>25</sup> This was reflected in former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright’s assertion that, “We are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future, and we see the danger here to all of us.”<sup>26</sup>

President George W. Bush came into office, like Clinton, promising more emphasis on domestic issues and a less activist foreign policy. This approach quickly changed following the attacks of September 11, 2001. From that point forward the United States entered a long period of unilateralism, influenced by neoconservative and realist policymakers, and embodying the Thucydidean triad of “fear, honor, and interest.” The fear of ideologically-based terrorism, coupled with a desire to regain lost honor and credibility, led to the pursuit of a number of interests, some more peripheral than vital. As troubling, the level of strategic policy planning was turned on its head, and for national security policymakers tactics trumped strategy in terms of thought, practice, and effort.<sup>27</sup> The Clinton and Bush administrations can be viewed along one continuum,

described by Josef Joffe as moving from “intermittent intervention” to “permanent entanglement.”<sup>28</sup>

President Obama arrived in the White House intent on closing out the two wars his administration inherited, rebuild international credibility, and strengthen partnerships with key states and allies. However, these foreign policy concerns ran second to an eroding domestic financial situation with serious, global impacts. His first term was characterized by bargaining and containment, and a rejection of democratization as foreign policy – strategies described as “multilateral retrenchment” and “counter-punching.”<sup>29</sup> He recognized global power shifts were underway, new “centers of influence” were forming, and that only America stood ready to provide essential leadership in the era of globalization.<sup>30</sup> His administration demonstrated a more pragmatic approach, much like the Nixon era, with a shift from the exceptionalism of his predecessors.<sup>31</sup> Obama, Nixon, and Eisenhower have recently been described as “retrenchment” presidents. All were occupied by sweeping up the detritus left by overreaching predecessors, and had to course correct from aggressive and adventurist policies.<sup>32</sup> This cyclic nature of national strategy, moving between the poles of retrenchment and overstretch, will be examined later.

The current administration has balanced pragmatism with a measure of internationalism. The decision to take a back seat in the Libya action, and to table military action in the Syrian civil war and in the Ukrainian crisis (as of this writing), demonstrate the unwillingness or inability to act unilaterally. Some critics have described this approach seeming risk aversion as “leading from behind.” The historian Niall Ferguson believes this administration not only fails to prioritize foreign policy

concerns and approaches, but fails “to recognize the need to do so.”<sup>33</sup> This same critique, that the Obama administration has failed to prioritize objectives along an overarching strategic direction, could be leveled at any of the post-Cold War administrations.<sup>34</sup>

Even so, this critique may be warranted in light of the current so-called “rebalance” to the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>35</sup> The strategy does not present anything substantively new, but reiterates “support for our longstanding principles and values of governance, free and open access to commerce, a just international order that upholds the rule of law, open access to all domains, and the peaceful resolution of disputes,” all essentially restated core national interests.<sup>36</sup> This policy has U.S. friends and allies in other regions, particularly Europe and the Middle East, concerned about security guarantees and future U.S. commitment. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel’s recent remarks at the Munich Security Conference referring to placing “greater strategic emphasis on working with our allies and partners,” and “engag[ing] European allies to collaborate more closely” were part of an increased U.S. dialogue to temper the concerns of allies.<sup>37</sup> There is a risk of words-deeds mismatch at play here, because the continual shift in policy focus from west to east respecting, for example, crises in Syria and Ukraine, telegraphs as incoherent policy in pursuit of undefined interests. However, the actions of the administration do signal a prioritization of sorts. Where and how the United States chooses not to apply its power, if indeed it acts at all, is a strong indicator of the priority of U.S. interests.

America must decide how to employ its great power to address near-term concerns at this point in history when new international power balances are emerging.

As important, the United States has to decide on a vision for the future that both addresses core national interests and adequately shapes the future of great power relationships. The findings of the Hart-Rudman Commission, released months before the events of 9-11, still hold true today:

While the likelihood of major conflicts between powerful states will decrease, conflict itself will likely increase. The world that lies in store for us over the next 25 years will surely challenge our received wisdom about how to protect American interests and advance American values. In such an environment the United States needs a sure understanding of its objectives, and a coherent strategy to deal with both the dangers and the opportunities ahead.<sup>38</sup>

In the end a U.S. grand strategy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century should be balanced, prudent, principled, purposive, and sustainable.<sup>39</sup> Lastly, the United States must dampen the exceptionalist zeal in which overwhelming power has been applied on behalf of a “global democratization project.”<sup>40</sup>

### Grand Strategic Alternatives

There are many options available to U.S. national security strategists, but few are politically feasible, economically sound, adequately leverage all elements of national power, and address the uniquely American need to express its values.<sup>41</sup> These various strategies can be loosely aggregated into three categories: Retrench (Isolationism, Offshore Balancing), Engage (Internationalism, Concert-Balancing), and Entangle (Primacy, Preemption). These are not neat groupings, are likely far too broad for most scholars, and do not fully capture every possible option. However, this provides a useful start point to discuss the variety of approaches and their ability to address and balance three core interest areas, security, economics, and values.<sup>42</sup>

There is a natural, dynamic relationship and tension between the *Innenpolitik* (domestic – “butter”) and *Realpolitik* (geopolitical power – “guns”) aspects of grand strategy.<sup>43</sup> The review of presidential administrations highlighted a tendency for strategic course adjustment, short of full reversal, from one administration to the next. Perhaps this can be explained by three somewhat-related factors. One is that many administrations pursued strategies in an either-or fashion, and gravitated to extremes. Policy extremism, operating on either end of the grand strategic spectrum, erodes strategic reserves of will, credibility, legitimacy, and trust which underpin the entire structure (see Figure 1 below). Correlated to this extremism is that oftentimes a major issue or crisis, sometimes a black swan like 9-11, leads the national security team to tilt the strategic teeter-totter violently in reaction. Lastly, the U.S. public gets a vote, literally. Recent polling data highlights the importance in public perception of, or dissatisfaction for, strategies and policies that swing too far to extremes.<sup>44</sup>

The Obama administration appears to have attempted a more balanced approach to meet the needs of both ‘guns and butter’ camps, but has consistently failed to effectively articulate a strategy on this spectrum, and thus is found wanting. President Obama’s pragmatism reflects the challenges inherent in crafting a grand strategic vision that balances foreign policy aspirations with the very real demands of domestic policy, particularly in a representative democracy. Charles Kupchan recently wrote that “good policy requires good politics,” harkening back to former Secretary of State Dean Acheson’s claim that “80% of the job of foreign policy was management of your domestic ability to have a policy.”<sup>45</sup> The dynamic tensions and interplay between the domestic political requirements of the unique form of American government, and the

international requirements and duties incumbent of a great power, are represented in the strategy model developed for this paper.

In the center of the model is the 'sun' which represents the national vision, or grand strategy. As previously highlighted, grand strategic vision is derived from and informed by the national character and ethos, as well as enduring, core interests. American core values of liberty, democracy, equality, justice, tolerance, humility and faith (Wolfers' "milieu goals") define the nation, its people, and its view of, and in, the world. These values form the basis for a unique American vision or perspective, just as any state forms a unique perspective based on its history, culture, and character.<sup>46</sup> The challenge for any state is in balancing its values with those of other actors to prevent becoming self-righteous. This requires a state to practice "moral modesty" or "strategic humility," tenets of the ethical realism espoused by Kennan, Morgenthau and Neibuhr.<sup>47</sup>

Grand strategy exists in the midst of a symbiotic relationship between domestic and international politics and concerns. A strategy seldom finds a perfect equilibrium in this milieu, but is pulled toward one side or the other based on present realities (ie., shifting geopolitical power relationships, foreign or domestic crises, the sway of vested interests). There are two key points here. The first is that U.S. leaders must remain true to core interests without becoming seduced by the siren's call of American exceptionalism, and acting *in extremis*. Moreover, imparting a more balanced strategy can help mitigate the tendency towards interest creep that accompanies ill-defined priorities. As Gary Hart notes, the United States must be careful to avoid "applying power in opposition of principles," as the nation has demonstrated the tendency to choose interest, vital or not, over principle when the two are in conflict.<sup>48</sup> A state has to

achieve a balanced posture, neither messianic nor Manichean, as a failure to act responsibly depletes all domestic and international strategic reservoirs.

Four levers of national power surround the strategic environment in the model, and represent the means available to national leaders in achieving the ends defined by their strategy[ies]. The material elements of power, to be discussed later, are not represented in this model, yet they underpin all other elements. These power levers are applied in unequal measure to translate interests and ends into specific policies and actions. Moises Naim has recently postulated that traditional forms of power are in decay, leading to an erosion of the state's power, authority and ability to provide stability and security.<sup>49</sup> This author finds Naim's claims compelling, but believes that power has not eroded but has become more diffuse, with power centers and relationships changed in more nuanced ways. For now the elements of national power still hold sway in the state-centric international arena, with the emerging impacts of information and cyber technologies / power (represented as a cloud in the model) to be seen.

The last factors depicted in the model are the four strategic reservoirs of domestic and international influence: legitimacy, credibility, trust, and will. These reservoirs are impacted by the pursuit of a nation's strategy and politics/policy, just as they influence the decisions and abilities of national leaders to act. The immediate aftermath of 9-11 provides an example of an event and time where many of these reservoirs, domestic and international, increased due to mostly positive reactions in the country and around the world. These levels were sustained through the initial invasion into Afghanistan, but began to get depleted, some dramatically and others more slowly, in the wake of the invasion and subsequent long war in Iraq. Seminal trigger events like

9-11, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and the attack on Pearl Harbor provide obvious examples of this dynamic in action. The impacts of longer-term domestic and foreign policies and strategies, and the impacts of other slow boil events at home and around the world, are harder to detect, but must be considered in the development of future strategies.

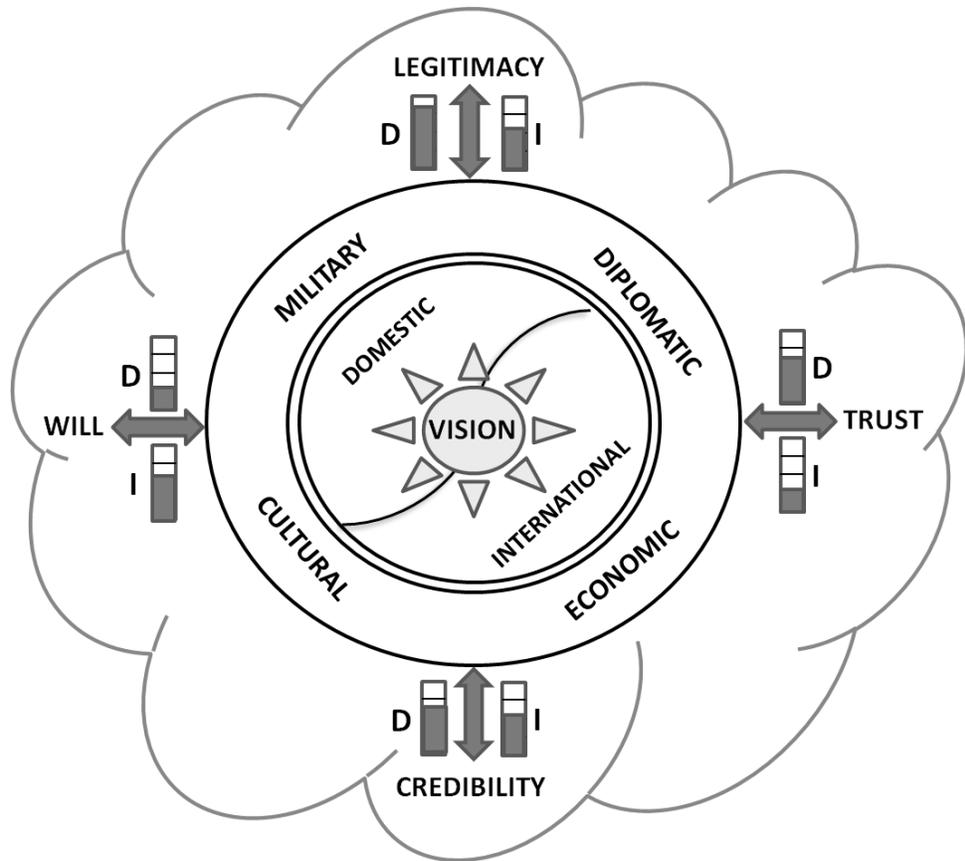


Figure 1: U.S. Strategy Model

The challenge is to craft a strategy that provides an acceptable, realistic vision for the nation without operating at the extremes that often lead to even greater international or domestic challenges downstream.<sup>50</sup> Events beyond the ken of strategic leaders will magnify any inherited issues, as Bismark knew well when he said, “man cannot create the current of events. He can only float with it and steer.”<sup>51</sup> Pursuing a

grand strategy that acknowledges the certainty of uncertainty better enables future administrations to retain greater strategic flexibility to operate in an uncertain, complex, and dangerous world.

## Challenges in Developing U.S. Grand Strategy

### National Power Imbalances

America must build discipline back into its national security system. The framework is there, as are the tools. However, strategy development is increasingly viewed through a military lens. Some of this may be due to larger-than-life military leaders, Geographic Combatant Commanders (GCCs), who apply levers of power and influence across the globe on behalf of the U.S. defense and security establishment. They bring many more resources to bear than can individual ambassadors. These GCCs are seemingly analogous to proconsuls of empires past. Any future strategy must address this State-Defense “global partnership gap” if the United States wants a less militarized foreign policy.<sup>52</sup>

The large standing military, very much a legacy of the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, may also be part of the problem and a source of tension and “strategic indiscipline.”<sup>53</sup> In many ways our current military is a relic of the Cold War, and the requirement for a conventional deterrent to counter that provided by nuclear weapons. A large and exceedingly capable military leads to questions like that posed by former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright (to then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell) when she frustratingly asked, “what’s the point of having this superb military that you’re always talking about if we can’t use it?”<sup>54</sup> America is at a point in history where threats are less existential and resources more constrained. This provides an opportune time to engage in serious debate about the size, scope, and role of a future U.S. military.<sup>55</sup>

This must be part of a larger and even more important debate about all the national elements of power, and how they are applied to address clearly-defined interests and strategic endstate. Hew Strachan has warned of the “danger of militarizing issues that would be best not militarized, of creating wars when there do not need to be wars, and of taking hammers to drive in screws.”<sup>56</sup> This hard power approach to problem-solving lends itself to the convenient solution of employing the U.S. tool of choice, the hammer. The military element of national power has been well exercised in the post-Cold War era. But is this because it’s the right option, to justify its enormous cost and size, or to send a powerful statement to the world? Or does the trend simply reflect a lack of imagination on the part of the U.S. national security leadership? President Dwight Eisenhower warned against the “grave implications” of long-term militarization on American society, a portent that many agree has arrived.<sup>57</sup>

The military-centric power dynamic is firmly embedded in U.S. strategy and policy, though the Obama administration appears to be more judicious in applying that power lever. An alternate way to view national power interrelationships is provided in the model at Figure 2 below. This model is a variation on concepts introduced by Hans Morgenthau over a half-century ago, though still relevant today.<sup>58</sup> At the center of the model are the material power elements, primarily composed of geography and natural resources. These elements define the state geopolitically, and directly inform and influence other power dynamics. America is the prime example of a state blessed with both riches in natural resources, and a strategically-significant geographic position in the world. Where a state sits matters, as does its ability to sustain itself and grow through wide-ranging resource requirements. These core elements of power have been,

and will continue to be, critical sources of strength for the U.S. They are also sources of global tension and state conflict, and leaders must remain mindful that while power is a means to an end, and not an end unto itself, the importance of material factors endures.

The next power cog represents the economic and military elements, directly driven by the core material power elements. These elements translate material power into action, and provide the greatest means for strategic leaders. The last cog is the softer power elements, characterized as human factors. These include a state's population, character, culture, and morale, and are its *raison d'être*. This also includes diplomacy, though this author views diplomacy as less a separate element of national power and more a conduit through which power and influence flows. Lastly, all of these elements of power reside in the cloud of the modern information environment, the global sea in which all else swims. This is the one element or area of national power that will change the dynamic more than any other in the coming decade.

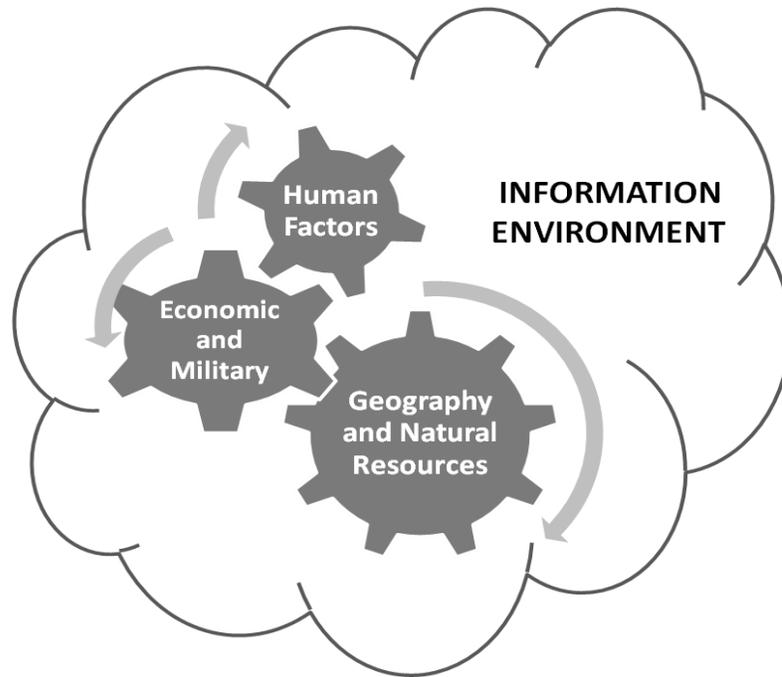


Figure 2: Dynamics of National Power  
Definition and Pursuit of Core and Vital National Interests

In the modern era, should war be viewed as an extension or a failure of policy, especially for the last superpower, the United States? America has no current existential threats, and enjoys a multitude of options short of war.<sup>59</sup> As such, America must stop searching for a state-based enemy to build against, and acknowledge this as a legacy of the past. This quest for an existential threat blinds policymakers to potential opportunities. Leaders must be more discerning in the differentiation of threats, as threats to security interests should trump threats to national values. It is in the pursuit of values-laden interests that the United States sometimes goes astray, and is prone to Paul Kennedy's cautioned "overstretch."<sup>60</sup> Physical and economic security must be the priority, and everything after that should be left open to compromise, not an American strength.<sup>61</sup> Also, leaders must balance their state's liabilities and vulnerabilities with its strengths and assets. As an example, America's debt and ongoing financial crisis can

be counterbalanced by strategies and policies that maximize the overall strength of the U.S. economic 'brand' and potential for innovation.<sup>62</sup> Leaders must distinguish between what is desirable, what is essential, recognize our limitations (on power, capacity, will, credibility) and act accordingly.<sup>63</sup>

A threat-based mindset also informs word choices that can be unhelpful, especially when rivals / competitors are characterized as adversaries / foes. Words mean things, intentionally or otherwise.<sup>64</sup> America must be cognizant of the perception of a mismatch in words and deeds. The United States confuses its citizens, and the global community, by the seemingly contrarian positions taken in the pursuit of foreign policy. One example: While President Obama never claimed Libya was a U.S. strategic interest, he did stress that it threatened "our common humanity and common security" and to work with allies "to see that the principles of justice and human dignity are upheld by all."<sup>65</sup> These types of statements and proclamations highlight the seeming disconnectedness in strategy and policy, and words and deeds. Stephen Biddle adds that this "combination of ambition and ambiguity creates important but unresolved tensions in American strategy."<sup>66</sup> A lack of a grand strategy, combined with vaguely-defined ends and peripheral interests, creates the appearance, real or perceived, of dissonant strategy and policy.

#### U.S. Grand and National Security Strategy Responsibilities and Processes

U.S. grand strategy must exist at a level above the noise and chatter of current events and news (and election) cycles, and beyond the influences of special interests. It must focus less on seeking conflict and more on setting conditions to mitigate the very wellsprings of global conflict. These are very aspirational, some would argue unachievable, conditions on which to construct a national vision. But the world is

transitioning to a new period in history, and as Steven Metz recently wrote, “American political leaders must manage public expectations and help the nation accept that it has less control over the world than it once did.” As such, leaders have to transition from the “old wartime mentality, develop new concepts of statecraft and security, [and prepare for] a world that is neither at peace nor at war.”<sup>67</sup> This new period must be met by a grand strategy that provides a vision for the preferred U.S. role in global leadership.

Changing the old mentality may require a change in the old structure of the national security infrastructure. The establishment of the National Security Council (NSC) in 1947 was part of a significant transition in U.S. national strategic processes, and marked a period of grand, sweeping change in the scope and role of America in the world. The role of the NSC in strategic planning quickly devolved following the Eisenhower administration. Its current role is as the president’s crisis management team, led by the National Security Advisor (NSA). The effectiveness and impact of the NSC and NSA are very dependent on personalities and relationships, particularly between the president and his NSA. There have been a number of reports and studies highlighting the lack strategic planning capability and emphasis in the NSC, and the need for reform and refocus.<sup>68</sup> Little has been done, and it is unlikely that new structures alone will engender new thinking and refreshed perspectives. What is required, according to the 9/11 Commission, is to “routiniz[e], even bureaucratiz[e], the exercise of imagination” in strategic planning processes.<sup>69</sup>

The lack of an “integrated planning process from which to derive vital strategic guidance” is a significant part of the current challenge, but so too is the lack of a strategic roadmap.<sup>70</sup> A balanced approach to grand strategy and its outflows focuses on

basic ordering principles meant to increase dialogue, stimulate growth and economic activity, enhance the security of states and the global commons, and respect the very basic rights and dignities of all peoples. As recently described by U.S. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, it is an approach “to strengthen alliances, build new partnerships, and forge coalitions of common interest that help resolve problems and, hopefully, prevent conflict.”<sup>71</sup> In short, it is a strategy of ‘management by walking around’ writ large, with a renewed emphasis and focus on the ordering principles and mechanisms that America helped forge following WWII.

### Conclusion

Any future strategy must be based on a realistic assessment of future threats and requirements. Political rhetoric and policies that alienate other mid- and great powers (like China and Russia) erode consensus on shared state threats. Therefore, U.S. leaders must first focus on areas of wide agreement: WMD proliferation, free and open access to the global commons, conflict reduction/avoidance, economic prosperity, and reduction of disease and pandemic threats. Key threat areas that are more contentious include: environmental stewardship and climate change, resource issues (energy, water, rare earth elements), human rights, rule of law, and open and transparent government.<sup>72</sup> This must be the start point as national security strategists begin ends-means analysis. A U.S.-led international effort to mitigate threats and increase opportunities, all while focused on “providing global public goods,” will ease the natural tensions and frictions involved in achieving domestic and international consensus.<sup>73</sup>

For a new U.S. grand strategy to take hold certain conditions must be met. Colin Dueck has outlined four such conditions, all of which have been discussed earlier in this paper. First there must be an event or shock that triggers a change in grand strategic

course. This could be a national election, or an event even more significant, like 9-11. Second, the strategy must be internationally feasible, so as not to deplete U.S. credibility and legitimacy. Third, and somewhat obviously, the strategy must have “influential advocates,” starting with the president. Lastly, the strategy must be “culturally resonant,” a point related to the earlier discussion of U.S. exceptionalism.<sup>74</sup>

In summary, the question is not if America needs a grand strategy, but what should that strategy entail. Also, how must the processes and politics respond and evolve so as to develop a coherent strategy based on agreed interests, risks, threats, and opportunities. The paper has provided some points to consider for current and future strategists and policymakers. Crafting the next U.S. grand strategy will be a challenging task, and one that cannot be tackled in half-measures. The key is to take a balanced approach. There must be a better balance in the application of the national elements of power, with a reduced dependency on military hard power. Domestic realities and geopolitical power dynamics must be balanced and informed by political pragmatism. Strategies that exist at ideological extremes cannot survive long in domestic and global environments that require both strategic flexibility and strategic humility. Lastly, strategic leaders must not be consumed by the “tyranny of the immediate commitment,”<sup>75</sup> and retain a focus on the future which informs and addresses the needs of the present.

## Endnotes

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Howard, *Grand Strategy* 4 (London: Cabinet Office, 1972), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Hew Strachan, "The Lost Meaning of Strategy," in *Strategic Studies: A Reader*, ed. Thomas G. Mahnken and Joseph A. Mailo (New York: Routledge, 2008), 426.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 432.

<sup>6</sup> Josef Joffe, *Überpower: The Imperial Temptation of America* (New York: Norton, 2006), 128.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Layne, "From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America's Future Grand Strategy," *International Security* 22, no. 1 (Summer 1997): 88.

<sup>8</sup> Hew Strachan, "Strategy and Contingency," *International Affairs* 87, no. 6 (2011): 1281.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Kennedy, ed., *Grand Strategies in war and peace* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 5.

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<sup>12</sup> Colin Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders: Power, Culture, and Change in American Grand Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 11.

<sup>13</sup> Murray, "Thoughts on Grand Strategy," 10-27.

<sup>14</sup> Clark Murdoch and Kevin Kallmyer, "Applied Grand Strategy: Making Tough Choices in an Era of Limits and Constraint," *Orbis*, Fall 2011, 545-6.

<sup>15</sup> Gary Hart, *The Fourth Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 33.

<sup>16</sup> Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1962), 67-80.

<sup>17</sup> Roger S. Whitcomb, *The American Approach to Foreign Affairs* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001), 9-10, 23.

<sup>18</sup> Walter Russell Mead, *Power, Terror, War, and Peace* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 17.

<sup>19</sup> The historian John Lewis Gaddis has termed NSC 68 poor strategy and “cheap hawkery,” that severely limited strategy and policy options. See Ernest R. May, ed., *American Cold War Strategy: Interpreting NSC 68* (Boston: St. Martin’s, 1993), 146.

<sup>20</sup> Edward A. Olsen, *U.S. National Defense for the Twenty-First Century: The Grand Exit Strategy* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2002), 12.

<sup>21</sup> Stephan Sestanovitch, *Maximalist: America in the World from Truman to Obama* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 7.

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<sup>25</sup> Laura Neack, *The New Foreign Policy: Complex Interactions, Competing Interests*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 159-160. These activities describe a strategy referred to as “liberal internationalism,” or more critically as “liberal interventionism.”

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<sup>28</sup> Josef Joffe, “How America Does It,” *Foreign Affairs* 75, no. 5 (1997): 16

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<sup>33</sup> Niall Ferguson, "Wanted: A Grand Strategy for America," *Newsweek*, February 14, 2011.

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<sup>38</sup> U.S. Commission on National Security/21<sup>st</sup> Century, *New World Coming* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1999), 8.

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<sup>40</sup> Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 127.

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