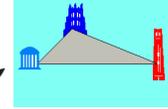




# Colloquium Brief

Strategic Studies Institute

U.S. Army War College,  
Triangle Institute for Security Studies,  
and  
Duke University



## AMERICAN GRAND STRATEGY AFTER WAR

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### KEY INSIGHTS:

- Since World War II, each American war has been followed by a period of grand strategy reassessment.
- The degree to which the Nation's leaders have felt the need to revise grand strategy has depended in part upon the degree to which the preceding conflict led to adverse consequences and in part upon the level of perceived danger in the new strategic environment.
- The locus for grand strategy reassessment is the U.S. President; presidents have varied in their perception of the need for reassessment and in their effectiveness in conducting and implementing reassessments.
- It is difficult to apply lessons gained from previous reassessments to the post-Iraq period without knowing the strategic environment of that future period.
- President Obama has not previously been involved in the formulation of grand strategy, making it difficult to predict either what his grand strategy will be or the likelihood of its success; we get some hints of its content from campaign statements and subsequent policies.

The Triangle Institute for Security Studies (TISS), the Duke University Program in American Grand Strategy, and the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College (USAWC) conducted a colloquium and recognition of TISS's 50th anniversary at the Duke University and University of North Carolina campuses on February 26-28, 2009. The colloquium, entitled "American Grand Strategy after War," was attended by over 130 government officials, academic experts, think-tank members, U.S. military, and U.S. and international students and faculty. Dr. John Gaddis of Yale University gave the keynote talk at Duke University. Five historians and political scientists presented summaries of their papers at the University of North Carolina and ten academicians responded. Revised papers are to be published as articles in *Orbis* (Fall 2009).

The conference examined debates over grand strategy after World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and the Cold War, and grand strategies likely to follow U.S. involvement in Iraq. A panel was devoted to each period and consisted of summarization of a draft paper by its author and a critique by two panelists who had received the paper at an earlier date.

## Panel I: Post-World II.

The first panel examined the period after World War II. The author's paper, entitled "Franklin Roosevelt's [Partially] Flawed Paradigm: Postwar Planning During World War II," concluded that American grand strategy towards the end of the war was characterized by a certain utopian quality. FDR's vision for the postwar period was based on close cooperation with Stalin and the USSR; he hoped that by building a strong personal relationship with the Soviet leader he would be able to "domesticate" the USSR and integrate it into his plans for a global liberal world order. The speaker argued that Harry Truman was the one who had to face the unpleasant reality of the emerging global ideological conflict with Moscow. Consequently, Truman shifted American grand strategy significantly by assuming international commitments far beyond what Roosevelt would have considered, and by adopting a more realistic understanding of the nature of the international system. The main lessons for current strategists are that wartime planning and grand strategy formulation for the postwar world need to be constantly reassessed to make certain they are still appropriate for the real-world circumstances present at the end of a conflict.

The first commentator on the panel argued that after World War II the United States pursued a grand strategy characterized by incrementalism and "lock-in." There was no clear ex-ante plan, but instead a process of formulating and reformulating strategy based on new developments; once the Marshall Plan and NATO were created, however, a "lock-in" phenomenon occurred and the grand strategy of containment became adopted for the long term. The second panelist partially disagreed with the author on the role of Churchill: he argued that Churchill offered Stalin more concessions, particularly in Eastern Europe, than Roosevelt did; therefore it would be incorrect to portray FDR as too soft on Stalin. Both reviewers agreed that there are some very important differences between the post-World War II strategic environment and that of today. For example, they mentioned the emergence of nonstate actors intent on acquiring WMDs, and the challenge of finding ways to assist weak and failed states in their transition to a more stable and prosperous future.

## Panel II: Post-Korean War.

The second panel addressed the post-Korean War period. The author concluded from his paper, "Reassessing U.S. Strategy in the Aftermath of the Korean War," that the grand strategy reassessment conducted by the Eisenhower administration had limited impact, and that its outcome was not much different from the containment strategy formulated during the Truman administration. The more significant shift was at the level of military strategy: a growing emphasis on nuclear weapons led to a decrease in the level of resources allocated to the conventional force. The presenter also offered some possible parallels between the Eisenhower administration and the Obama administration. Both came into office facing the need to put defense spending on a more sustainable path for the long run, and Obama, like Eisenhower, is a vocal proponent of American "soft power" as a crucial element of grand strategy.

The responses from the panelists and several of the questions from the audience addressed the importance of process in strategic planning. Eisenhower's *Project Solarium* is currently considered one of the most successful exercises of its kind by the Washington think-tank community, and the presenter of this panel also implied that the Obama administration should pay particular attention to this aspect of grand strategy development. One controversial issue remained unresolved: whether successful changes in grand strategy are helped or hindered by an elaborate planning process. A few questioners argued that formal bureaucratic processes could stifle innovation or that these formal processes often come to resemble Kabuki Theater in that they merely serve to provide support for the preferred strategy of the president; other participants considered that a disciplined formal planning process is key to a solid strategic performance.

## Panel III: Post-Vietnam War.

The third panel examined the period following the Vietnam War. In his paper, "American Grand Strategy after Vietnam," the author concluded that the debate over the appropriate grand strategy hinged on the "intent" of the Soviets and the perception of

intent was highly correlated with the very polarized political ideology of the period. The two ideological camps, conservatives and neoconservatives against liberals and leftists, favored containment versus détente, respectively. Today there is a similar polarization that threatens, as it did after Vietnam, to make the debate over grand strategy less logical and the resulting reassessment less pragmatic. The panelists responded by highlighting the difficulty of achieving consensus on American grand strategy other than at the “bumper sticker” level. The policy fights and the competition over scarce resources often involve parochial political interests and are thus detrimental to the pursuit of a coherent grand strategy, but they are nevertheless an essential element of the American system of government. One panelist called U.S. democracy “anti-strategic” for this particular reason. Another important issue, according to one of the panelists, is the prevalent notion that external constraints are competing against domestic political interests in the formulation of grand strategy. These two factors should not be viewed as separate influences. Rather, almost all policymakers believe that they act in such a way as to advance the U.S. national interest; their divergent conceptions of these interests and of the proper ways to achieve them lie at the heart of the debate on which grand strategic course to follow.

#### **Panel IV: Post-Cold War.**

The fourth panel addressed the period following the end of the Cold War. The paper presented was entitled “Clear Skies over the Hudson: The Promise and Failure of American Grand Strategy from the End of the Cold War to the September 11 Terrorist Attacks.” The author argued that neither George H. W. Bush nor William Jefferson Clinton succeeded in formulating a new grand strategy for the post-Cold War era, despite their conscious efforts to do so. Bush and his national security team proved competent in dealing with tactical decisions and managing the end of the Cold War, but they failed in their effort to move to a new paradigm. They showed an inability to organize U.S. priorities and to decide what U.S. interests should be in the new strategic environment. Clinton came into office determined to implement a vision of “enlargement.” His strategy argued for the spread

of democracy and of free markets everywhere, but he failed to prioritize among various objectives. Furthermore, little serious discussion occurred about the capabilities needed to implement such a strategy. Clinton’s uneasy relation with the military may have contributed to a lack of understanding of how best to use military force. The author concluded that Bush had process without purpose, while Clinton had purpose without process; both of these combinations hurt America’s strategic performance over this era.

The first panelist pointed out that it is not clear how a better grand strategic performance on the part of either Bush or Clinton could have prevented 9/11. He also discussed an issue that plagued both administrations, i.e., the lack of strategic integration between grand strategy, operational art, and military tactics. The new allegedly “low-cost” military means made available by the Revolution in Military Affairs were mainly related to stand-off precision warfare, and they could not bear the costs that the grand strategy put on them in places like Kosovo. One needs to understand in detail the workings of the military instrument to be able to talk meaningfully about grand strategy, and the academic world should do more to educate policymakers on what our military forces can and cannot do. The second commentator agreed with the author’s conclusion that the lack of a grand strategy caused “indiscipline” in the way policymakers thought about the U.S. role in the world, but he perceived a stronger difference between the quality of the strategic thinking of Bush and Clinton. The Bush national security team was well on its way to develop a new U.S. grand strategy of primacy, as evidenced by the Pentagon’s 1992 *Defense Planning Guidance*. This strategy would have focused on the prevention of the rise of a peer competitor, and on the provision of global public goods to make the role of hegemon more acceptable to others. The Clinton team, on the other hand, believed that the process of globalization was fairly self-sustaining and thought that not much effort was needed on the part of the United States to maintain the current liberal world order. The questions addressed to the panelists from the audience raised a couple of important issues: first, the difficulty of achieving objective measures of evaluating success in grand strategy, and, second, the need to better integrate the effects of domestic politics in the study of U.S. foreign policy.

## Panel V: Post Iraq.

The final panel addressed the period from 2003 to the present. In “American Grand Strategy after Iraq,” the author concluded that the United States pursued a strategy of primacy before 2006, and then switched to a “liberal internationalist” grand strategy which is likely to be continued by the Obama administration. The author showed that despite the perception of decline, the United States continues to remain the number one military and economic power in the world. She also examined how the possible “strategic constraints” of the international distribution of power, of bureaucratic friction within the government, and of U.S. public opinion could limit the range of possible grand strategies for current policymakers. The first commentator argued that in the current environment it is hard to maintain any coherent grand strategy for three reasons. First, there is no major threat to U.S. national security; terrorism could only qualify if it were combined with nuclear weapons, which is unlikely. Second, the roots of the current security problems lie in the domestic politics of other states, and the United States does not know how to effectively promote “democratization.” Third, the present status of American politics is one of intense ideological and partisan polarization; such a political environment is inauspicious to the conduct of a coherent bipartisan grand strategy. The second commentator argued that the biggest threat to U.S. power in the medium term is the economic debt to China and the threats of rising federal and current account deficits. Therefore, policymakers should focus on managing China’s rise more so than on any other grand strategic problem.

## Conclusion: The Way Ahead.

This colloquium demonstrated that academic grand strategists are very much aware of the importance of, the need for, and situational determinants of grand strategy after a change in the strategic environment, typified by a hot or cold war. It also demonstrated the difficulty of predicting the time, importance, or response to the next “significant” period requiring a substantial change in American grand strategy.

The Obama administration will surely attempt to answer the keynote speaker’s call for a remedy to the

“grand strategic deficit” that has plagued U.S. foreign policy for the past 20 years. The participants generally agreed that a solid grand strategy needs to articulate U.S. national interests and threats to those interests, prioritize among threats and opportunities, and address much more seriously the connection between “ends” and “means.” A sophisticated discussion of capabilities and available resources unfortunately has been lacking in recent debates on American grand strategy. The present economic environment and the challenges facing the federal budget over the next couple of decades make it all the more important to better integrate economic considerations into grand strategic planning.

Even if the war in Iraq continues on a favorable trajectory and the U.S. military proves able to disengage in a successful manner, the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan will force the Obama administration to forge a new grand strategy in a wartime environment. It is important to remember, as one participant noted, that the most crucial grand strategic priority in wartime is to win the war you’re currently fighting. Hence, the adoption of a new grand strategy needs to account for this fact and ensure the necessary resources are allocated to defeat the threat most immediate to American national interest. One of the most important challenges for the Obama administration will be to achieve this delicate balance between the short-term requirements of present conflicts and the medium- and long-term demands of any new grand strategy they may adopt.

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