

Debating American Grand Strategy

¹I will begin with an intentionally provocative statement of the thesis I intend to defend. The debate over American grand strategy we have been hearing in recent years is a debate over the wrong things. The reason for this is that it has remained largely a debate within the academic community, and worse than that, one dominated by the academic community of international relations (henceforth IR) theorists. That community in turn is dominated largely by the school of theorists calling themselves Realists. My thesis is that we must look elsewhere for a grand strategy reflecting lower case or true realism, which is another word for common sense.

The canonical grand strategy options for the United States are generally reckoned to be four in number: primacy, cooperative security, off-shore balancing, and selective engagement or restraint. There are many obvious problems here. First, they aren't mutually exclusive. A primacy strategy is fatally self-limiting if it fails to make ample room for cooperative security, for example. Second, they're all too general. They fail to differentiate between regions of interest and between overall strategic environments. Cooperative security and restraint are perfectly adequate to describe U.S. grand strategy toward Latin America. Off-shore balancing may be

perfectly reasonable in benign strategic environments—for an arguable example, the 1990s. Third, they don't take sufficient account of the specific character of friends or adversaries. U.S. grand strategy in the 1930s grossly underestimated the nascent threat from Germany and Japan because it failed to understand their regimes, nor did it grasp the weakness of the European democracies; hence the implicit U.S. grand strategy of restraint and off-shore balancing was entirely ineffective. Fourth, they don't take sufficient account of the specific characteristics of geography as well as the nature of the threat.

As to the latter, the U.S. has historically had a virtually unique position among great powers because of its insular situation. But military technology can potentially have large effects in overcoming such advantages. Recently emerging vulnerabilities in the space and cyberspace domains have significant implications for U.S. grand strategy that have been mostly ignored. Then, there is the emergence in recent years of transnational terrorism with global reach. The event of 9/11 demonstrated a new and unexpected vulnerability of the American homeland to terrorist-type attack by jihadis of various Islamist persuasions. This vulnerability has had a significant effect on American grand strategy by making off-shore balancing less of an option than it may have been in the past, certainly with respect to the Middle East.

Not a recent phenomenon but extremely important—more so than many analysts these days seem to acknowledge—is the role of nuclear weapons in the grand strategy equation. The Eisenhower administration used nuclear weapons as the centerpiece of a grand strategy that sought to control military expenditures in the name of national fiscal health and economic prosperity. Contrary to the common narrative that “containment” of the USSR so-called *was* U.S. grand strategy in the Cold War, the U.S. over many decades also pursued a parallel grand strategy aimed at preventing nuclear proliferation—often in cooperation with its Soviet rival. The true significance of the Iran nuclear deal recently sealed by the current administration is that it signals nothing less than the abandonment of the nuclear non-proliferation strand of American grand strategy—with potentially catastrophic consequences for the Middle East and beyond.

Even less recent is the vital role navies have played in grand strategy. Many analysts seem to have little awareness of the extent to which the U.S. position in today’s strategic environment is enabled by the American Navy, which over the last decade has led a quiet revolution in international maritime security cooperation. I will return to this issue in a moment.

Finally, they—the four canonical options—are too narrowly focused on the diplomatic and military dimensions of grand strategy. Domestic political and economic factors are often acknowledged as highly relevant to grand strategy, if not

in fact integral to it. This was the fundamental thesis of Paul Kennedy's classic Rise and Fall of the Great Powers. Yet in practice they seem to be rarely given their due weight. Economically-induced "imperial overstretch" (Kennedy's term) is an undeniable historical reality. Kennedy was certainly alarmist in his analysis of the U.S. in the 1980s; but the current state of the U.S. economy gives much greater cause for worry. A recent chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff called the nation's inordinate debt his chief national security concern. Of course, this is at bottom a political rather than a narrowly economic problem—an expression of the American public's growing addiction to entitlement spending.

Yet more neglected is the international economic dimension. David Baldwin's 1985 book Economic Statecraft is one of the few systematic explorations of this issue and remains highly valuable, particularly his questioning of the conventional wisdom that economic sanctions never "work." In the intervening years, much evidence has accumulated that economic sanctions intelligently and selectively implemented can be more effective than ever before in today's globalized world. The implications of this for U.S. grand strategy have not been widely appreciated. The chief implication is that the nation can today arguably afford to rely less on the military instrument than has been the case throughout the postwar era.

In this connection, mention should also be made of energy and resource questions. The revolution of recent years in U.S. oil and natural gas production has

monumental significance for U.S. grand strategy, including lessened dependence on Middle Eastern producers and lessened European dependence on Russia. Rare earth minerals are a vital commodity in the high tech industry, yet the Chinese have been allowed to corner the market on them (though this situation is now changing). The U.S. has yet to come to grips with the mercantilist approach in these matters that governs the behavior of other major players today.

Finally, there is the role of ideological and cultural factors in grand strategy. The manifest inadequacy of mainstream Realism in this area has given rise in recent years to a new school of IR theory known as Constructivism, which holds that ideas can mold the behavior of states as much or sometimes more than concrete factors such as power and wealth. Together, Constructivism and the other leading IR school, so-called Liberal Internationalism, hold that American grand strategic behavior is conditioned at a fundamental level by liberal, democratic, and internationalist values that are frequently at odds with its national interests as understood by Realists. By the same token, these values are by no means universally shared by other societies, and are often perceived by our adversaries as existential threats to their own political orders. The U.S. tends to be largely oblivious to the perceptions others hold of it and does not take them into account in devising national policies.

There is another key issue that is rarely faced: how should a putative American grand strategy be formulated and presented? This is the issue raised in an amusing

but trenchant essay by Edward Luttwak, “Why We Need an Incoherent Foreign Policy” (2009). The U.S. has a great many strategic interests that frequently conflict with one another; clarity about an American grand strategy is bound to highlight these conflicts (human rights versus economic or military relationships is an obvious example). Luttwak argued that it is better to have a “muddled and prudent moderation” in the way we pursue such contradictory policies. There is much to be said for this in crafting U.S. policy toward China, as he also points out. Within the U.S. government as well as in academic circles, there is a tendency to assume that fundamental aspects of U.S. grand strategy should be clearly spelled out in unclassified documents, of the kind that have proliferated to an almost ridiculous extent in recent years. It is well to remember the mistake Secretary of State Dean Acheson made in the 1950 speech in which he declared Korea beyond the perimeter of U.S. defense interests in East Asia. In many parts of the world, even senior officials are prone to wild conspiracy theories about U.S. activities and intentions; it is not necessarily to our disadvantage that they continue to harbor these theories. In short, as Jacques Chirac once memorably put it, we should not miss an opportunity to shut up.

Is there any reason for the U.S. government to declare itself in favor of any of the four canonical grand strategy options of IR theory? The question virtually answers itself. It would be foolish for it to embrace openly the primacy option—in

effect a euphemism for American unilateralism or empire; the only effect of this would be to encourage resistance to American policies. At the same time, embracing openly an option of retreat or disengagement would repeat Acheson's error and risk the consequences we see before us in the case of the current administration. The correct answer to the question instead is, "it all depends."

Where does all this leave us? First, it has to be recognized that there is no chance of the U.S. developing a viable grand strategy as long as the Democratic Party retains the presidency. Eight years of the Obama administration have destroyed whatever consensus was forged among Democrats in the Clinton years on foreign policy issues, and have burned all bridges to the Republican opposition. In addition, the national security bureaucracy has become deeply dysfunctional and is altogether incapable of crafting or implementing such a strategy.

Second, for this but also for other reasons, it is pointless to continue to consider the primacy option a meaningful one, or to argue that we remain in an American "unipolar moment" or should continue to function as the world's policeman. In September 2002, the Bush post-9/11 "National Security Strategy of the United States of America," a document widely regarded as the clearest embrace of primacy by any American administration, has this to say: "Our forces will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States." China and Russia

today have shown by the extent of their ongoing military build-ups that they are committed to seeing an end to any such American “moment.” By that very fact, primacy has failed.

Third, it is impossible to choose or promote any grand strategy option abstractly, without a thorough assessment of the fast-moving developments involving all of our current adversaries and the contemporary security environment generally. It has to be understood that the world situation today is “dark and full of danger,” as George Kennan remarked at the time of the Berlin crisis of 1948. There is an unmistakable breakdown of the liberal international order underway, reminiscent in some ways of the 1930s. Part of our grand strategy going forward should be to devise a comprehensive plan for shoring up this order, including long-stalled efforts, for example, to ratify the Law of the Sea Treaty, to strengthen the Law of Armed Conflict in areas such as cyberspace, and to enhance international legal, political, and financial cooperation against terrorism and other transnational threats. Realist in the true sense needs to acknowledge that liberal internationalism is a vital component of American grand strategy—and is in particular need of reinforcement at the present time.

Fourth, grand strategy is to a great extent about allies. The American alliance system is at present in a state of existential crisis. The Obama administration has systematically courted our enemies and neglected our friends, with consequences

that are now only too apparent. We need to do a complete reassessment of our alliances, beginning with NATO, but including also our formal (and informal) friends in Asia, Israel, and among the Sunni Arabs.

This brings us around again to the point made earlier about the role of navies in grand strategy. In 2007, the U.S. Navy took it upon itself to redefine its role in a new era of globalization and global terror. In a document entitled “A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower,” it laid out a vision of expanded interaction between all navies of the Free World to sustain the international system of free trade and free navigation through enhanced maritime security cooperation. This document laid the groundwork and created an impetus for what in the intervening years has been a remarkable if quiet revolution in the Navy’s relationship with its counterparts and the security establishments of which they are a part. To mention only one development, the Navy-initiated Proliferation Security Initiative has led to an unprecedented level of international cooperation in monitoring and preventing maritime transport of materials and weapons of mass destruction. More broadly, at a time when the U.S. has been subject to much criticism for an overly unilateral approach to the use of military force, it has lent substantial credibility to America’s stated commitment to upholding the international legal order (in spite of our strategically obtuse failure to ratify the Law of the Sea Treaty—something the Navy itself has supported).

With these general points made, let me draw some rough and ready conclusions about how American grand strategy should address the leading geopolitical threats and challenges of the coming decade.

China. It is essential to recognize that the single most serious threat to the United States and its position in the world is the People's Republic of China. Like it or not, we are in an arms race with the Chinese that we are not winning and that has no end in sight. We must reconfigure our military in significant ways to be better able to wage high-end warfare in the Western Pacific. We also need to recognize that China right now is waging what are essentially hostilities against us in the economic, psychological-political, and cyber domains; we must respond accordingly. Finally, it is time for a serious strategic assessment of the spread of Chinese influence in the less developed world, in the Indian Ocean littorals and the Pacific islands as well as Africa and Latin America. None of this is to suggest that we have to declare "cold war" against the PRC, or even that we need to stop "engaging" with them. We will continue to have some common interests with them, as we did with the Soviets for that matter, for example in countering terrorism. But we need to send signals of our seriousness.

Russia. Several high-ranking U.S. military figures have recently spoken of Russia as the greatest threat to our security, and this may well be true in the short term. Russia's occupation of the Crimea is the single grossest violation of

international norms since Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. Not only Russia's ongoing military modernization but its saber-rattling military demonstrations in the Baltic, the Arctic, and even the North Atlantic should be deeply alarming. In the longer term, Russia will face a growing array of internal problems, and even the viability of the country as it currently exists cannot be taken for granted. In the meantime, it is essential that the West as a whole move beyond the complacency and confusion that has marked its response to events in the Ukraine (and now Syria). In addition to beefing up NATO's military presence in Eastern Europe and giving Ukraine some serious weaponry, we should initiate a crash effort to bring Sweden and Finland into the alliance. Nothing short of this, in my view, can stop the hemorrhaging of NATO's political credibility in the wake of its inaction in the current crisis or its military credibility in defending the Baltics against further Russian irredentism.

The Middle East. Unholy mess is the appropriate technical term here. A few random suggestions: 1) make Russia's life miserable in Syria and the wider region, making clear there will be serious repercussions for attacks on U.S.-aligned and armed Syrian rebels; 2) delay lifting sanctions on Iran and walk back (as far as politically possible until January 2017) the nuclear deal; 3) encourage a Sunni Arab coalition of boots on the ground supported by U.S. intelligence and material aid to combat ISIS in Syria and Iraq; 4) take more vigorous steps to stamp out would-be

ISIS offshoots outside the Middle East; 5) leave Israel alone; 6) cultivate Sisi in Egypt, rolling back his opening to Russia, possibly engaging him in the anti-ISIS coalition, and possibly working with him to stabilize Libya; 7) in the longer run (politics again permitting), roll back the Iran nuclear deal, renew the pledge to prevent the Iranians from acquiring nuclear weapons, and organize a global front against radical Islamism.

Latin America. Anyone who has played the board game *Risk* knows that the player controlling North America has to keep an eye on South America. Unfortunately, this is not happening in the real world today, and the stealthy accumulation of hostile counters goes on. The “Bolivarian” bloc, supported ever more brazenly by China, Russia, and Iran (along with the ever useful Hezbollah), is busy creating strategic positions in expensive infrastructure (notably at the ends of the Panama Canal), resource extraction, and host security establishments, where a systematic effort is underway to eradicate traditional U.S. influence with Latin American militaries. Monroe Doctrine, anyone?

Europe. We aren’t accustomed to considering Europe a grand strategic *problem* for the United States, but perhaps we should get used to it. Europe is today in the throes of multiple intersecting crises which raise the gravest concerns about the future of the European project and the Atlantic Alliance. The submergence of national identities in the European Union has had the unanticipated result of

encouraging regional separatism, notably in Scotland and Catalonia, with significant implications for NATO. The combination of economic stagnation and massive immigration is rapidly destabilizing domestic politics throughout the continent, and right-wing populist parties seem certain to come to power in some countries in the fairly near future. Internal security in major countries is likely to deteriorate, with the growth of the Muslim population and the continuing appeal of Islamism. It is not far-fetched to speculate that many European militaries will be reoriented at some point into gendarmeries focused on suppressing unrest in Muslim-controlled urban enclaves, thereby completing the hollowing out of NATO's military structure that has been going on over many decades. What the United States does in such a situation is anyone's guess.

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