



Grand Strategy and American Foreign Policy

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A “grand strategy” can help America meet the challenges of a changing world – such as international terrorism, global environmental and economic instability, and the rise of new national powers. To approach foreign policy strategically requires defining America’s most important goals and then lining up available resources – money, military forces, diplomats, and expertise – to work consistently toward achieving those goals, through the twists and turns of daily events and unpredictable crises. Grand strategy is a conceptual framework that helps us use our power wisely by connecting day-to-day initiatives to our highest and most enduring national ends.

The idea of grand strategy is very much in vogue. Since the end of the Cold War, politicians and pundits alike have proclaimed the need for a fresh, comprehensive approach to America’s relationships with other nations. But important as grand strategy may be, it is also difficult. My research studies the past to illuminate challenges and possibilities for today.

A Good Idea, but Difficult

Even for superpowers like the United States, resources are never sufficient to accomplish every goal and protect against every threat, so it is imperative that policymakers have a clear understanding of which goals and threats are most important. Foreign policy often requires U.S. officials to address crises before the nature and implications of each emergency can be fully understood. No grand strategy can provide ready-made advance solutions to every happenstance. But performing the intellectual tasks associated with grand strategy – defining and prioritizing interests and threats, understanding the extent and limits of a state’s capabilities – can provide American leaders with the necessary conceptual tools to formulate an appropriate response quickly when a given type of challenge appears. Grand strategy does not obviate the need for improvisation, but it can help our leaders improvise intelligently.

Yet doing grand strategy is also difficult. The world is complicated, crises are not easy to foresee, and human wisdom is limited. In the best of circumstances, it is no easy task to weave U.S. policies into a unified whole. Political pressures, bureaucratic resistance, and the fact that the world is constantly changing make the task even harder. Many academics and some former officials argue that grand strategy is illusory, that the best one can do is roll with the punches.

Lessons from the Past

I have looked at the experiences of four presidencies – the Truman administration during the early Cold War; the Nixon/Ford administration during the era of détente; the Reagan administration during the 1980s; and the George W. Bush administration after 9/11. Each administration took grand strategy seriously and tried to devise long-term plans for advancing U.S. interests. My work examines what they sought to do and considers what their successes and shortfalls can help us learn today. Past experiences offer cause for both optimism and pessimism.

- On the plus side, three of the four administrations clearly benefitted from their efforts to plan ahead and coordinate all aspects of national power. Grand strategy helped Truman contain the Soviet Union and stabilize the global balance of power; it helped Nixon and Henry Kissinger construct détente and reach out to China; and it helped Reagan to reverse Soviet momentum and wind down the Cold War.
- But each administration also ran into strategic troubles. The Truman administration struggled to place some limits on foreign commitments and find the right level of military spending without overtaxing the U.S. economy. Nixon and Kissinger’s strategy paid off for a time but it ultimately required a greater centralization of power than the U.S. system allows. Reagan’s foreign strategy was quite successful overall, but it also led to an unsustainable level of defense spending and pernicious consequences in

places like Afghanistan. Bush's post-9/11 strategy was bold and ambitious, but it overtaxed U.S. military resources and was not executed well in practice.

Can America Meet New Strategic Challenges?

Today, good grand strategy is as imperative as it ever has been. In an increasingly fluid international environment, the United States faces a variety of new challenges – including international terrorism, the rise of China, nuclear proliferation, and climate change. Yet resource constraints are tight, so U.S. policymakers must use their power purposefully, intelligently, and above all efficiently. Here are ways to do grand strategy well:

- **Start with first principles.** Even superpowers have to deal with resource constraints and make painful choices. To make intelligent decisions, U.S. officials will need to ask fundamental questions: How much influence can we afford? Which interests are truly vital and which threats demand the most attention? Which geographical regions and issues should take priority; and which preexisting commitments can be liquidated or scaled back?
- **Take planning seriously.** There has been an unfortunate turn away from long-term national security planning in recent years. As a result, policymakers often confront fundamental questions only when they are already in the heat of crisis. A model worth emulating is “Operation Solarium,” an Eisenhower-era exercise in which key advisers grappled with the major principles and ideas that would shape U.S. policy throughout Eisenhower’s time in office.
- **Think of grand strategy as a process, not a blueprint.** Planning ahead will only get you so far. The world is continually evolving, and while the basic goals and priorities can remain constant, the tactics must inevitably change. Grand strategy cannot be a blueprint from which one never deviates; it is a process that requires keeping core objectives in view, even as unfolding events lead to regular reconsiderations and course corrections.

Read more in Hal Brands, *Thinking about Grand Strategy* (U.S. Army War College Monograph Series, forthcoming 2012); and *From Berlin to Baghdad: America’s Search for Purpose in the Post-Cold War World* (University Press of Kentucky, 2008).

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