The United States is entering a key moment in its history. As the nation grapples with the collateral damage of the 2008 financial crisis, slowly emerges from over a decade of two simultaneous conflicts in the Middle East, and confronts a world in transition, a period of strategic reappraisal is necessary. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall on 11/9, to the Al Qaeda attacks of 9/11 and the wars that followed, and through the ongoing debates of the “pivot and rebalance” to Asia, many have charged that the United States suffers from the lack of a coherent strategy for the post-Cold War world.\(^1\) Others have countered that U.S. strategic interests have remained fixed for decades, and what is needed is not necessarily new strategic objectives, but new mechanisms by which to achieve them. While an examination of the debate as to whether or not the United States has a grand strategy is useful, it ignores a broader, more pressing question: What should the grand strategy of the United States be for the twenty-first century and how can it be achieved?

**What is Grand Strategy?**

In order to craft an achievable grand strategic framework for the future of the United States, we must first consider what grand strategy means in the present, what its enduring features are, and why the creation of grand strategy is difficult. First, strategy, in its most basic form, can be viewed as a plan to achieve a desired outcome. A well known variant of this definition views strategy as the utilization of an organization’s means, embodied and structured through various ways, for the achievement of desired ends. While strategy as a concept can be analyzed in its most basic form, the strategy which is of most concern to the United States, its citizens, and its government is of a much larger, comprehensive, indeed epic scale – that of grand strategy.

What, then, is grand strategy? The historian John Lewis Gaddis asserts that “grand strategy is the calculated relationship of means to large ends. It’s about how one uses whatever one has to get to wherever it is one wants to go.” Gaddis notes also that grand strategy is linked particularly to war and statecraft, “because the fighting of wars and the management of states have demanded the calculation of relationships between means and ends for a longer stretch of time than any other documented area of collective human activity.”\(^2\) As Gaddis suggests, much of our modern understanding of grand strategy has its intellectual and philosophical roots in

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\(^1\) The NY Times columnist Thomas Friedman was the first to examine the problems and opportunities of the post-Cold War era through the use of the “11/9 and 9/11” framework. See “The Power of 11/9”, [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/18/opinion/18friedman.html?_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/18/opinion/18friedman.html?_r=0).

works that viewed strategy principally through this military and diplomatic lens, as evidenced by the writings of Sun Tzu, Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Von Clausewitz.

By focusing solely on the diplomatic and military instruments of state power, however, exclusively military conceptions of strategy do not take fully into account another major dimension of a state’s power: its resource base and economic productivity. In a classic treatise written between the world wars, the British strategist B.H. Liddell Hart highlighted both the economic and the moral dimensions of grand strategy:

The role of grand strategy – higher strategy – is to coordinate and direct all the resources of a nation, or a band of nations, towards the attainment of the political object of the war – the goal defined by fundamental policy. Grand strategy should both calculate and develop the economic manpower and resources of nations in order to sustain the fighting services. Also the moral resources – for to foster the people’s willing spirit is often as important as to possess the more concrete forms of power. Grand strategy, too, should regulate the distribution of power between the several services, and between the services and industry. Moreover, fighting power is but one of the instruments of grand strategy – which should take into account and apply the power of financial pressure, of diplomatic pressure, of commercial pressure, and, not least of ethical pressure, to weaken the opponent’s will. A good cause is a sword as well as armour. Likewise, chivalry in war can be a most effective weapon in weakening the opponent’s will to resist, as well as augmenting moral strength. Furthermore, while the horizon of strategy is bounded by the war, grand strategy looks beyond the war to the subsequent peace. It should not only combine the various instruments, but so regulate their use as to avoid damage to the future state of peace – for its security and prosperity. The sorry state of peace, for both sides, that has followed most wars can be traced to the fact that, unlike strategy, the realm of grand strategy is for the most part terra incognita – still awaiting exploration, and understanding.3

Hart’s definition touches on many of the enduring characteristics of grand strategy. First, grand strategy is comprehensive in nature, including not just the military but all dimensions of national power. Second, there is a strong correlation between the manifestation of a nation’s power and its resource and economic determinants: since strategic ends are bounded by the means available, economic strength is coterminous with national strength. Third, grand strategy is not only a matter of soldiers, civil servants, politicians, and industrialists; it must also account for its polity’s domestic support. Grand strategy emanates from the confluence of polity and policy. Fourth, coordination and control of the instruments of national power are necessary, as is cognizance that grand strategy includes a multiplicity of institutional arrangements. Fifth, grand strategy is applicable not only in times of war, but in times of peace; any strategy that fails to plan for the peace that follows a conflict is a failed strategy in its own right. The United States learned this lesson at great cost in blood and treasure after the toppling of the Hussein regime in Iraq. Finally, grand strategy as an intellectual pursuit is one that has yet to be mastered and internalized.

Hart’s contribution to the study of grand strategy serves as a useful framework to guide the strategic reappraisal that the United States must now undertake.

What are America’s Strategic Interests?

American interests are enduring. They are:

The security of the United States, its citizens, and U.S. allies and partners;

A strong, innovative, and growing U.S. economy in an open international economic system that promotes opportunity and prosperity;

Respect for universal values at home and around the world; and

An international order advanced by U.S. leadership that promotes peace, security, and opportunity through stronger cooperation to meet global challenges.


All major conceptions of strategy focus on the attainment of goals and the manner in which these goals can be achieved. The selection of the ends of grand strategy becomes the orienting compass for the major interests of a nation-state, yet the very selection of a strategic end is a function of domestic political calculation, both prisoner to and benefactor of the domestic political institutions from whence it arises. The strategic environment that shapes and influences strategic direction has complex interwoven connections in both the international and domestic realms. The selection and identification of strategic ends are heavily dependent upon the assumptions of threat and opportunity that the greater geostrategic environment provides. This process of strategic appraisal serves both as an assessment function of the state of the world, as well as an identification of the means and ways by which to pursue grand strategic interests.4

A recent report by prominent thinkers on American grand strategy notes that for the past few decades there has been a core set of enduring strategic U.S. interests. These interests include:

- Preventing and deterring attacks on the homeland
- Preventing war among great powers
- Maintaining the security of allies and key partners
- Containing the spread of weapons of mass destruction
- Managing the rise of peer competitors such as China
- Ensuring an open international economic system5

Are the aforementioned interests comprehensive and suitable for the American people? Are America’s efforts to pursue these interests sustainable?

While these interests may be enduring, the manner in which these (and other) interests are pursued, prioritized, and resourced is definitely not. At present, there are numerous competing visions of how the United States should pursue these goals. A recent survey of America’s grand strategy options charts the most important differences:

The most active fault line in debates over grand strategy separates two main camps. On one side are those who favor an expansive strategy whereby the United States promotes democracy, human rights, and free markets in all regions of the world. On the other side are those who would limit U.S. foreign policy to maintaining balances of power in a select number of strategically vital regions. Within each camp, there are further differences over the optimal ways and means to these ends. Among those who favor an expansive strategy, some prefer to utilize institutions and soft power rather than military force, while others insist that one cannot walk softly without a big stick. Among those who favor more limited ends, some would deploy U.S. troops only when a rival threatened to dominate a vital region, while others would station U.S. troops in vital regions proactively to preempt the rise of regional hegemons. From these disputes over ends and means, therefore, four major contenders for U.S. grand strategy emerge: among those who favor expansive ends there are (1) institutionalists and (2) military interventionists; among those who favor limited ends there are (3) offshore balancers and (4) selective engagers6.

Given these four grand strategies, which is best suited for the interests of the United States? Do these options represent the bulk of the strategic options from which the United States government can select, or are there strategic options for the United States that have yet to be developed and articulated?

The debate between those who argue for a more active role for the United States and those who favor a less active role focuses increasingly on the fiscal sustainability of American strategic interests. Even when limited resources do not seem to constrain U.S. strategic interests themselves, limited resources necessarily limit the ways through which these interests are pursued. The actors, agencies, and institutions that influence and shape grand strategy must therefore ensure that the interests identified are attainable with the resources at hand.

History is replete with examples of great powers overreaching and suffering the loss of prestige, empire, and, in some cases, existence as a result. How can the United States ensure that it does not follow in these same steps? Are the “enduring interests” of the United States truly enduring, or does the country need to reassess its role and its priorities? How do we identify both the capabilities and limitations of our power, and how can that analysis help articulate not only what the United States desires to achieve, but what it can achieve?

What Are Our Means and Ways?

Policymakers tasked to discover the ways and means of American grand strategy face a daunting challenge. Following a decade of war, the 2012 Department of Defense Strategic Planning Guidance, issued by the President of the United States and the Secretary of Defense,

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called for $487 billion in defense budget cuts over the next decade. America’s economy is still struggling to return to the levels of employment and economic productivity seen prior to the financial crisis of 2008. Health care costs, rising debt, and sharp partisan divides impede necessary reforms. At the time of this writing, the United States Congress was inching increasingly closer to the automatic federal budgetary cuts of “sequestration,” as applied to the interpretation of the Budget Control Act of 2011. Global markets continue to behave erratically, and in some cases poorly, with negative effects for an American economy that is firmly enmeshed in an increasingly globalized world. The European economic crisis is still unfolding, and the prospects of a conflict between Iran and the West have negatively impacted petroleum markets and slowed foreign direct investment in key markets. Some openly question the long term resiliency of the market capitalism model, and instead champion the “state capitalism” model utilized by rising powers. Given these fiscal and economic uncertainties, how can the United States decide how best to resource the pursuit of our interests?

After considering the challenges faced when examining Grand Strategy purely through a “resource-constrained” lens, it may appear that U.S. interests abroad should be curtailed, a move which some would identify as a diminishment in American prestige and influence. However, “fiscal austerity” may actually be beneficial, if policymakers can utilize this time of difficult choices to prioritize efforts, clearly articulate how ends will be pursued, and, most importantly, use the reality of budgetary restraint to enable and champion innovative solutions. If the instruments of national power continue to see decreases in their operating budgets, how can this period of fiscal and strategic “introspection” be used to reform, and modify our national security architecture? How should the Departments of Defense and State be reorganized to adapt to the new realities of fiscal austerity? What processes, policies, and programs within our instruments of national power should be reviewed, changed, or removed altogether? What kind of military, diplomatic corps, and development force do we need in the twenty-first century, and how can they be both “fiscally sustainable” and “strategically relevant”? How can we reshape our thinking of what strategic power truly is?

The manner in which we approach and attempt to answer these challenging questions will shape the magnitude and direction of American Grand Strategy in the twenty-first century. We must not only identify the “right answers,” but ensure that we ask the “right questions.” The future power and prosperity of our nation depends upon it.
Recommended Readings


Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, tr. Ralph D. Sawyer (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994);


Basil H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy: The Indirect Approach* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), and *The Revolution in Warfare* (London: Faber and Faber, 1946);


Additional Readings


