



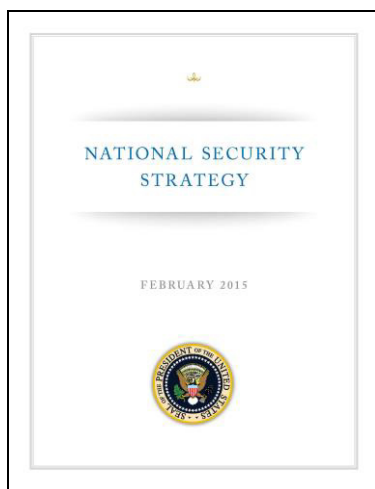
On Strategy, Grand and Mundane

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By Paul D. Miller

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Abstract: Is “grand strategy” a useful concept? What is it, and how is it different from “strategy”? Some definitions of grand strategy—as an all-encompassing idea for coordinating the resources of an entire nation to achieve its ultimate goals—are unachievable, overly focused on strategy as a master concept, could unintentionally militarize domestic policy, and blur the lines between strategy and policy. The concept is salvageable. Grand strategy is best thought of as both the intellectual framework or master concept that ties together whole-of-government (but not whole-of-nation) planning, and the long-term pattern of behavior that reveals states’ behaviors and priorities in action.



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Every few years, the White House releases a National Security Strategy, as required by Congress since 1987. Critics immediately pounce: the document, they declare, lacks priorities, is unfocused, is too idealistic or too cynical, too specific or too general. The document describes goals, but not how to achieve them. It describes laudable goals that no one could object to, with little sense of how the various goals (President Obama's 2010 strategy had 18 of them) were to be achieved, with what means, and under what scheme of prioritization. Above all, they say, the document simply is not a strategy—proof that the president (whoever he or she is) does not know how to think strategically and that U.S. foreign policy is in the hands of amateurs. In its defense, advocates may cite some key phrase—"strategic patience" or "democratic expansion and enlargement"—that, they claim, captures the conceptual center of gravity for the president's foreign policy and defines the president's eponymous doctrine and grand strategy.

Despite its repetition, the venerable Washington parlor game of sniping at the president's national security strategy has not, as yet, resolved the broader question that it implies: what is strategy? What is the difference between *strategy*, *policy*, and *grand strategy*? Does grand strategy need a pithy catchphrase to exist? What is the difference between not having a strategy, having a poor strategy, and having a strategy poorly executed? Lawrence Freedman opens his magisterial history of the concept of strategy by noting "There is no agreed-upon definition of *strategy* that describes the field and limits its boundaries."¹ Hew Strachan wrote in 2005 that "The word 'strategy' has acquired a universality which has robbed it of meaning, and left it only with banalities."² In some corners, the debate has come to resemble Socrates' practice of examining the meaning of words, only to conclude with his confession of ignorance. In others, the debate resembles the Medieval Scholastics' careful parsing of abstract concepts—security studies having become the theology of "policy," "strategy," "statecraft," "planning," and "ends, ways, and means." The confusion is damaging to public debate because it breeds skepticism about the possibility of grand strategy and the very meaning of words. When Ike Skelton, then Chairman of the U.S. House Armed Services Committee, held hearings on American grand strategy in 2008, several witnesses expressed skepticism that the United States had a grand strategy, or that having one was even possible, and one member suggested the United States give up on "fuzzy Grand Strategy stuff."³

However abstruse they seem, these questions are important. As President Obama has said, words must have meaning. We cannot have a conversation about U.S. strategy—or grand strategy—if we cannot first agree on what those words mean. Nor can we judge if U.S. grand strategy is effective or ineffective, or propose alternatives. Conceptual clarity is a fundamental prerequisite of clear thinking—the absence of which has been much on display in U.S. foreign policy in recent history. Grand strategy is possible, even necessary—at least, some versions of it. Rescuing the idea of grand strategy also requires paring it down to something less fuzzy but more useable. One of the simplest improvements the U.S. national security

¹ Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford University Press, 2013), pg. xi.

² Hew Strachan, "The Lost Meaning of Strategy," *Survival* 47, no. 3 (2005), p. 34.

³ House Armed Services Committee, *Considerations for an American Grand Strategy*, 2008.

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