



# Grand Strategy: The Fundamental Considerations

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*Abstract: Grand or national strategy has emerged as a critical issue in security studies. Adam Garfinkle recently opined that American grand strategy has died a silent death. Too much attention has been devoted to definitions, or debates over the utility of strategy. Not enough consideration has been given to the complexities of actually building a robust strategy amidst that effectively integrates all elements of national power within a complex bureaucracy. Oddly, the exclusion of politics contradicts our understanding of war and conflict. Likewise, not enough attention has been applied to the fundamental components of building a competitive strategy that can be sustained over time. This essay offers an introductory discussion of the basic considerations or components of national strategy.*

This article deals with grand strategy, a subject that the last decade of conflict suggests remains highly relevant to students of strategic studies. Some have questioned the need for grand strategy at all; others lament the lack of one in America.<sup>1</sup> Other scholars argue that the United States has lost the art of developing grand strategy and needs to regain its strategic competence.<sup>2</sup> A number of books,

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel W. Drezner, "Does Obama Have a Grand Strategy?" *Foreign Affairs*, July/Aug. 2011; Rosa Brooks, "Obama Needs a Grand Strategy," *Foreign Policy*, Jan. 23, 2013,

drawn equally from both sides of the Atlantic, suggest that both the United States and United Kingdom share a common problem with conceptualizing and conducting national strategy.

The recent track record suggests that strategic results have been subpar. Whatever one thinks about the level of success obtained in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is hard to overlook the 6,000 lives lost and the \$2 trillion spent and conclude that good strategies were developed or executed. What national interests were secured and how did Allied actions achieve those desired ends, and at what cost? It brings to mind the comment of General William Howe regarding the pyrrhic British victory at Bunker Hill: “the success is too dearly bought.” So, too, was “success” in the last decade.

Not everyone agrees that sound strategy is a solution. Richard Betts has suggested that grand strategy is an illusion, and another American scholar of government has argued:

Grand strategy has always been seductive because it promises policy coherence in the face of complexity. Yet the sorry truth is that American grand strategies are usually alluring but elusive. Containment during the Cold War, the most often cited example of grand strategy success, is a recent lonely exception that has driven political scientists and policy makers to keep hope alive. That hope is misguided. In the post-9/11 world, forging a successful grand strategy is unlikely and dangerous.<sup>3</sup>

Other scholars suggest we stick to what former State Department planning official Stephen Krasner called “orienting principles” instead of grand visions of how we want to see the future unfold.<sup>4</sup> Professor Amy Zegart of UCLA agrees that while principles are not glamorous, “they hold out the prospect of something better than foreign policy *a la carte* or a grand strategy that mis-estimates the threat environment and misunderstands the organizational requirements for success.”<sup>5</sup>

This is a pessimistic conclusion, and not a very useful prescription. There is nothing wrong with principles, but they have to be applied in context

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[http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/01/23/obama\\_needs\\_a\\_grand\\_strategy?page=0,1](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/01/23/obama_needs_a_grand_strategy?page=0,1).

<sup>2</sup> Aaron L. Friedberg, “Strengthening U.S. Strategic Planning,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Winter 2008, pp. 47–60; Andrew F. Krepinevich and Barry D. Watts, “Lost at the NSC,” *The National Interest*, Jan./Feb. 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Richard K. Betts, “Is Strategy an Illusion?” *International Security*, Fall 2000, p. 3; quote from Amy Zegart, “Time to Give Up on an American Grand Strategy,” *Real Clear World*, Nov. 23, 2013, [http://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2013/11/23/time\\_to\\_give\\_up\\_on\\_an\\_american\\_grand\\_strategy\\_110108.html](http://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2013/11/23/time_to_give_up_on_an_american_grand_strategy_110108.html).

<sup>4</sup> Stephen D. Krasner, “An Orienting Principle for Foreign Policy,” *Policy Review*, Oct. 1, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Zegart, “Time to Give Up on an American Grand Strategy.”

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