Defining American Power & Liberal Order

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IN REVIEW

Paul D. Miller, *American Power & Liberal Order: A Conservative Internationalist Grand Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2016).

Paul Miller has written a remarkable book on American grand strategy. In it, he defends the very concept of "grand strategy;" argues that contrary to the opinion of some commentators, the United States has pursued a largely consistent grand strategy, not only since the end of World War II, but from the beginning of the Republic; and that when commentators criticize American grand strategy or claim that it is nonexistent, they are really criticizing the management or execution of successful American strategic principles.

Strategy in general is about making choices in order to enhance one's competitive advantage. To think strategically is to attempt to answer such questions as: what are our interests? How do we best employ the limited means available to us in order to achieve those interests? How do we proceed—what strategic courses of action are available to us? What are the risks of a chosen strategic option and is that risk manageable? Strategy thus links ends and means, prioritizes ends, and translates resources into means. Although strategy can be described as the conceptual link between ends and means, it cannot be reduced to a mere mechanical exercise. Instead, it is a process, a constant adaptation to shifting conditions and circumstances in a world where chance, uncertainty, and ambiguity dominate.

Grand strategy is a relatively new addition to the American lexicon, gaining currency during the Second World War. Thus, in his introduction to the 1943 edition of *Makers of Modern Strategy*, Edward Mead Earle writes,

> strategy is the art of controlling and utilizing the resources of a nation—or a coalition of nations—including its armed forces, to the end that its vital

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> interests shall be effectively promoted and secured against enemies, actual, potential, or merely presumed. The highest type of strategy—sometimes called grand strategy—is that which so integrates the policies and armaments of the nation that resort to war is either rendered unnecessary or is undertaken with the maximum chance of victory.

The concept of grand strategy has come under attack lately, most recently by Eliot Cohen in his book, *The Big Stick*, for being too amorphous and impractical. Miller argues that while this criticism applies to the idea of an all-encompassing plan for coordinating the entire power of a state, it does not invalidate the concept of a grand strategy, which after all, is about making choices concerning the effective employment of scarce national means to achieve national goals while minimizing, or at least managing risk.

All too often, policymakers try to reduce grand strategy to a bumper sticker, something that is easy to remember while encompassing sweeping concepts and abstract theories of international relations. "Containment" is the prime example. Indeed, since the end of the Cold War, policymakers have been looking for such a simple but comprehensive replacement for containment. But "simple" labels usually result in a *simplistic* foreign policy. For example, most U.S. National Security Strategy documents over the last decade tend to be aspirational with little indication of how those aspirations are to be realized. Implementation must be a part of strategy making.

Miller argues that there are two aspects of grand strategy properly understood: as an organizing concept shaping a state's approach to the international environment; and as a pattern of behavior reflected in the distribution and employment of its instruments of power—diplomatic, military, and economic—in pursuit of its overall goals. He contends that a major problem with U.S. grand strategy today is the lack of consensus concerning America's role in the world after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the wars of 9/11.

Miller claims that U.S. policymakers are prone to what he calls "recentcy bias," a tendency to focus on the immediate past at the expense of the longer term. This mindset, he argues, leads to imbalanced overreactions to recent events, e.g. focusing on the threat of terrorism after 9/11 even as other threats were apparent. Miller contends that we need to take a broader perspective and relearn the history of a largely successful U.S. record in foreign affairs.

Miller takes both "realists" and "liberal internationalist" to task. The former define "security" too narrowly, reducing all international relations to questions of power. They tend to focus on the formal structure of the international system—anarchy, state sovereignty, and the distribution of power—arguing that all states are guided by the same logic of power, regardless of domestic politics. But in reality, international politics transcends a one-dimensional pursuit of power under uniform conditions. Instead, international politics describes how different kinds of states (regimes), which perceive the international arena through the lens of different identities and political principles, respond to power relations. In other words, different types of regimes approach foreign affairs differently.