Grand strategy is in vogue. Its importance as a guidepost for success in foreign affairs is celebrated, and practitioners’ mistakes in the practice of it have been criticized in a bunch of books and articles in recent years. Pundits prattle about it. Donors fund university programs in it. For practical purposes, the idea of grand strategy may only matter for policy wonks writing position papers, but it will be no surprise if, before long, presidential candidates are taken to task in op-eds or campaign debates for having foolish or nonexistent grand strategies.

So, it is good to step back and realize that there is less in the idea of this voguish concept than meets the eye. It makes sense abstractly but falters in application, honored far more in principle than in practice.

In principle, grand strategy is something between national interests, or the full range of objectives and intentions, and the lower level of just plain “strategy” (a scheme for a particular campaign within a larger contest). Adding the term “grand” conjures up unrealistic images of sweeping and far-seeing purpose, ingenuity, direction, and adroitness. But grand strategy is grandiose as a description of what actually drives governments’ actions. The concept is more often a description imposed by observers on the record of statesmen, a notional description of an administration’s goals that isn’t actually followed (i.e., a national security strategy document), or a claim made in hindsight rather than a conscious and coherent plan of an administration in advance of action that is actually implemented. Observers devoted to the concept rescue it from evidence of practice’s messy deviation from principle by redefining it to accommodate the deviation.
These shortfalls do not mean that grand strategy never exists. If the occasional examples of real grand strategy are emphasized, the glass looks half full. The criticism here only means that genuine practice of grand strategy is not the norm—that, when practiced, it is usually very vague or little more than an ad hoc application of common sense or basic ideology—and that the idea is more a fixation of intellectuals looking for rationality in practice than a concern of actual practitioners. In fact, if grand strategy is impractical, that may not even be a bad thing, at least for strong countries.

The later part of this essay reflects on obstacles to grand strategy in practice and some good and bad examples of it. First, however, I assert a proper definition of the concept of grand strategy and refute challenges to it. This is not to dwell pedantically on semantics, but to counter those who affirm the concept by defining it so as to fit whatever statesmen do. Most common conceptions of grand strategy in the abstract are simple (a good thing) and rather unfocused (a necessity to distinguish it from just plain strategy). In a 2018 book devoted entirely to the grand strategy concept, John Lewis Gaddis defines it as “the alignment of potentially unlimited aspirations with necessarily limited capabilities,” usually in preparation for war, and identifies its grandness “with what’s at stake.”1 MIT Professor Barry Posen defines it more directly in his 2014 book with the term in the subtitle as “a nation-state’s theory about how to produce security for itself,” primarily against military threats.2 To most observers, it is best distinguished from plain strategy by its concern with shaping the peace after war rather than the aim of military victory alone.3

The definition of grand strategy that I submit is a practical plan to use military, economic, and diplomatic means to achieve national interests (or political ends) over time, with the least feasible cost in blood and treasure. It is important to emphasize three of the points: “plan,” because in some form that is a necessary condition for implementing any intention; “practical,” because a strategy that cannot be implemented is irrelevant; and “over time,” to distinguish grand strategy concerns as ones that are long-term or at least transcend a particular incident.4 Altogether, this ideally means that grand strategy shapes the ability of practitioners to coordinate national resources and actions to achieve objectives.5 Most observers have implicitly accepted these emphases in conceptualization, but some who go to the greatest lengths to honor the concept reject them.

**Rescue by Redefinition**

To be analytically useful, a concept must be distinct from others, not synonymous. What makes grand strategy essentially distinct from the whole jumble of foreign policy is the idea of a plan for action to turn wishes into facts. When the idea
of grand strategy is conceived more vaguely, in contrast, almost anything a country
does can be seen as pursuing it. To evaluate a grand strategy—to judge whether a
country actually made gains because it implemented one, rather than for fortuitous
reasons unconnected with it—the strategy has to be
specified in advance. For any strategy to be
meaningful, it should also have a modicum of
cohesion and consistency. When defined
specifically, however, actual grand strategies,
especially in democracies, often turn out to be
compromises and combinations of quite different
ideas. For example, after outlining four theoretical
alternatives for post-Cold War US grand strategy,
Posen and Naval War College professor Andrew
Ross accurately characterized the then-current Clinton administration’s strategy
as a mélange of three of them.6

One way to make the concept sensible is to redefine it in a way that deflects
criticisms based on the typical gap between principle and practice. This has
been done in two main ways: one expands the grand strategy definition,
broadening the usual vagueness to a laundry list of characteristics that cover
almost any concern; the other sees it not as a plan but as a process of
adaptation. Neither of these redefinitions is useful.

Consider this example of salvaging the concept via all-encompassing vagueness,
“[Grand strategy is]… the intellectual architecture that gives form and structure to
foreign policy … a purposeful and coherent set of ideas about what a nation seeks
to accomplish in the world, and how it should go about doing so … an integrated
scheme of interests, threats, resources, and policies. It is the conceptual framework
that helps nations determine where they want to go and how they ought to get
there.”7 This description covers too much to remain analytically useful. It is as
much about objectives as about ideas for how to achieve them, and as much about
attitudes as decisions. What notions, intentions, aspirations, or declarations are
excluded? What possible behavior, however active or passive, clear or confused,
would not qualify as grandly strategic? Such a characterization may serve well
enough (when the blanks are filled in) as a general commentary on a country’s
ambitions, agenda, and operating style, but it is too flabby to denote whether a
grand strategy worth the name is really being pursued, or judge its impact as
distinct from all the other forces in play. To be worth credit as a real cause, a grand
strategy must be more than what seems to the actors to be common sense.

To paraphrase Einstein, a concept’s definition should not be simplistic, but it
should be as simple as possible—more than a bumper sticker, but tight enough
to fit in a paragraph. If specified abstractly but well enough to serve as a basis
for assessment, characterizations of grand strategy become more complex and

What makes grand
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contingent. For example, one detailed taxonomy offered by three scholars categorizes variations according to a 4 by 13 matrix that incorporates types of grand strategy, objectives, policy levers, and choices of action. This taxonomy can be useful for theory, but it is too complicated to help much in a National Security Council meeting.

The second way that grand strategies have been redefined is accurate about many things, but it is not about how grand strategies can be practiced. This second definition, compatible with the sprawling one previously described, rejects the requirement that the concept be a plan: “think of grand strategy as a process, not a blueprint … seeking out and interpreting feedback, dealing with surprises, and correcting course where necessary, all while keeping the ultimate objective in view.” This concept comports with famous aphorisms of sage practitioners, from German General Helmuth von Moltke’s that no plan survives contact with the enemy, to President Eisenhower’s that “plans are worthless but planning is everything.” It is indeed a realistic view of how strategy is implemented—or rather, changed—but it is not strategy itself. It describes what statesmen should properly do, but at the level of operations and tactics, or at most just plain strategy, not the higher level of grand strategy.

Adaptation is good and soundly tactical, but it cannot be strategy per se. Of course, adaptation is good. Strategists should be flexible, not hidebound, and strategy should change when circumstances demand—Clausewitz saw this as fundamental to the reciprocal nature of real war. But although adaptation is good and soundly tactical, it cannot be strategy per se. It describes how strategy should change when it does not produce the intended result. If adaptation in itself constitutes strategy, only demonstratively maladaptive behavior would discredit the rational model of strategy. Indeed, rats in a maze would qualify as strategists. When adaptation occurs on significant scale, the strategy becomes something new, not whatever had been the grand strategy.

If grand strategy is conceived ab initio, and in broad terms of pursuing the country’s security interests efficiently, deviation from it in the face of events that derail it is sensible. By some measure, however, significant deviation represents failure of the intended strategy, even if the result is acceptable for other reasons. As strategy worth the name, distinct from just sensible behavior, grand strategy should be judged by how far leaders can actively apply the general plan—not exactly, but at least roughly—more than by how well they adjust reactively to events that confound it, or by how hindsight reveals faults in the original strategy and wisdom in abandoning it. An evolving accumulation of stratagems may prove a wise course, but it is not grand strategy.
Recognition of the process by which strategy is buffeted and adjusted is correct for understanding, but is a reflection of the limits of strategy. A better term for the idea of strategy as process is “policymaking.”

Definition of grand strategy as an adaptive process rather than a plan is closer to the concept of “emergent” strategy, which is drawn from business literature and offered as an alternative to cover the same ground as grand strategy. Emergent strategy is evident “where a pattern realized was not expressly intended. Actions were taken, one by one, which converged over time, to some sort of consistency or pattern.” This is an equally dubious conception if meant to compensate for grand strategies. First, the standard of “some sort” of coherence is too vague to be useful for evaluation—by that measure, most actions by intelligent adults could be deemed sufficient. Second, the conception poses strategy as more an effect than a cause, a notion opposite to what strategy means to most. For action to be strategic, as distinct from successful, the strategy must precede the action, not follow it. “Emergent strategy” really denotes how alleged purpose and coherence emerge in the eye of the beholder. So while emergent strategy is not a good normative concept, it does reflect how analysts come to detect method in the madness of practice. Policies are implemented with various confusions and dysfunctions, while logic in the process is inferred, exaggerated, and imposed rhetorically after the fact rather than via a plan in advance. Grand strategy in this sense emerges as a rationalization more than an explanation.

These redefinitions drag the concept into conformity with practice at the price of deforming its accuracy and usefulness. Evading the criterion of a plan blurs differences between grand strategy and objectives or foreign policy. So this essay insists on assessing grand strategy in terms of a plan roughly implemented in practice.

Obstacles to Grand Strategy in Practice

This critique focuses on the United States of America, since it is both a great power (whose actions affect the world the most) and a modern democracy. The argument would apply less to countries that are weak relative to their adversaries, as they have a narrower range of security policy choices, or to stable autocracies. Both are better equipped to put some measure of real grand strategy into practice. In the late twentieth century, for example, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) may have planned and, more or less, executed an effective grand strategy when its leadership decided to rank improvement of its military capabilities as the last priority among the “four modernizations.” A few decades later, it then increased defense spending and assertive deployments in the western Pacific after the higher priority economic development had succeeded, thereby providing, as planned, a stronger resource base for doing so.
The first problem for great powers is the scope of objectives. The more general and varied they are, the more almost any actions can seem to reflect a strategy. Two general goals are usually cited as fundamental for US foreign policy since 1945: maintaining a favorable international power position (usually conceived as either military primacy or balance of power) and, at least until President Trump, preserving and extending a “liberal international order” (conceived in terms of economic openness and promotion of democracy). Some of the resources, instruments, norms, and tactics to optimize strategy are the same for both of these general goals, but others are not. For example, covert political interventions or restrictions on trade are more likely to be compatible with the first goal than the second.

One solution might be to have two grand strategies: one for economic and ideological interests and one for military or security policy. To the extent that there is more than one, however, strategies are not very grand. The norm of integrating plans and operations has long been well recognized in principle but limited in practice. From the original 1947 National Security Act to the legislation decades later requiring an annual presidential report on national security strategy, Congress has expected the executive to have an integrated strategy—even to include domestic matters. That has rarely been done, beyond boilerplate rhetoric. The criticism typically leveled at the official US national security strategy publication is that it became a Christmas tree on which all departments and interest groups hung their pet priorities and programs.

At the loftiest level, US grand strategy since World War II can be seen to have worked. Economic liberalism, from the Bretton Woods system to the World Trade Organization (WTO), was pursued through multilateral institutions and diplomacy and overlapped with the goal of military and political containment of communism in policies such as the Marshall Plan. The primary objective of containment was pursued through strategies of deterrence and alliance, again through highly successful multilateral organizations like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and some unsuccessful ones like the South East Asia Treaty Organization. After the Cold War until 2017, US objectives were more or less preservation of American primacy in power and extension of the First World liberal order to what had been the Second World. The former was emphasized in the two Bush administrations, the latter by Clinton and Obama, but there was remarkable bipartisan similarity in all four. (Trump’s advent has put all of these long trends in doubt.) There has been consensus as well on the elimination of global terrorism, a big goal tacked on after September 11th.
Until recent years, however, initiatives on all of these were usually cited as US policy, not grand strategy. Does applying the latter term increase understanding?

Great powers, even superpowers, need to accommodate allies, which often means compromising objectives or preferred strategies. Large democracies, in turn, face four main overlapping sets of obstacles that frustrate selecting or implementing their own preferred strategies (for good reasons more important than foreign policy):

- influence of elections and public opinion which can lead domestic political priorities to override external strategic ones;
- frequent leadership turnover, which inhibits consistent action over a long time span;
- organizational complexity or technical operating requirements that displace higher goals in the bureaucracies which refine and implement strategy; and
- constitutional dispersion of policymaking power (in presidential as opposed to parliamentary systems), which can promote either suboptimizing compromise or paralysis.

Consider some examples. World War II should be a case demonstrating the efficacy of grand strategy because the circumstances were quite conducive to it: the unconditional surrender policy made it a total war with comparatively simple criteria for success; allies and Americans both agreed on the strategic priority of “Europe First” over the Pacific theater; one political party controlled both branches of the US government before and throughout; and a single president governed for a dozen years straight. Nevertheless, US strategists bowed to British demands to delay a cross-channel invasion of France until 1944, and they let operations in the Pacific grow and sap the pace in Europe. Franklin Roosevelt overruled his military advisors to launch the invasion of North Africa (Operation TORCH), which the military believed would divert resources and delay achievement of the main objective, because the president felt the need to deliver a military achievement to the American public in 1942. General Marshall said the problem was that “in wartime the politicians have to do something important every year.” 17 (As it turned out, a good case could be made that TORCH proved sensible, but only for reasons evident in hindsight rather than anticipated in strategy.)

All in all, did the outcome of World War II match the prior grand strategies of the victorious great powers? If the test is achievement of goals for which the war was undertaken, only in part. In 1942, Churchill famously said, “I have not become the King’s First Minister in order to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire,” but the liquidation began soon after the war. Before Pearl Harbor, Franklin Roosevelt wanted the defeat of Nazi Germany, but he hardly
schemed to leave other major powers in the dust in a new bipolar world and a
hostile superpower in control of half of Europe. Great victory may validate the
actions chosen despite unanticipated consequences, but it does not, in itself,
demonstrate the impact of grand strategy. In the Cold War, the Truman
administration’s planning document, NSC-68, laid out a grand strategy. It was
irrelevant, however, due to lack of support for the necessary expenditures, until,
almost three months later, the completely unanticipated Korean War fortuitously
eliminated the resistance. The inconclusive, costly, and unpopular nature of that war, in
turn, hardly fit a grand strategy. In fact, if Cold War grand strategy is characterized by
reliance on deterrence, the Korean War did not follow the strategy at all, since there was
no effort to deter the North Korean attack before it occurred.

Domestic constraints are more obvious in limited wars than in World War II and, together with inconstancy of
leadership, can easily promote compromises that undercut strategic effectiveness. In the Vietnam War, US presidents always sought to balance
conflicting pressures to do more and to do less: to balance the goals of, on one
hand, defeating the Vietnamese Communists, and on the other, not alienating
public opinion at home by mobilizing for major war over small stakes. This
balancing act produced a trend of incremental escalation and then de-escalation
over a period of twenty-odd years, as each president determined not to have the
war lost on his watch. A leader with indefinite tenure might have put a
higher priority on concluding the war, either by stronger escalation or
withdrawal. Over thirty years later, Barack Obama sought a similar balance
between domestic political and external strategic imperatives—not to lose in
Afghanistan, but not to maximize effort to win—as he approved an increase in
military forces but less than requested by military leaders.

Between Vietnam and the late phase of Afghanistan, the two George Bushes
had a mixed record. In just plain strategy, George H. W. Bush had stunning
success in the first war against Iraq in 1991, winning decisively at low cost, but
this came with comparably huge failure in higher grand strategy. As with Korea
forty years earlier, the whole war could almost certainly have been avoided if
the United States had articulated a deterrence commitment to protect Kuwait’s
sovereignty, threatening decisive military defeat of an aggressor. Had Saddam
Hussein known definitively that invading Kuwait would put him at war with
the United States, it is hard to imagine that he would have done it. But, like
Korea, the contingency that precipitated the war was not even on the radar of

Victory may validate the actions chosen, but it does not demonstrate grand strategy.
the Bush administration before the summer of 1990. Before Saddam moved, not a moment’s thought had been given to how a war over Kuwait should fit into US grand strategy for the post-Cold War world. Yet the unanticipated, easy success once the United States was pulled in had a formative impact on subsequent visions and set the stage for the biggest disaster of post-Cold War foreign policy: the second war against Iraq that began in 2003.

George W. Bush’s war, a dozen years after his father’s, proceeded from a clear and more pertinent grand strategy, but its assumptions, and the military strategy employed toward it, proved a calamity. The neoconservative vision of using American primacy to keep “rogue” states from developing weapons of mass destruction, countering terrorist groups by striking their assumed support bases in such states, and promoting democracy in the Middle East—all of which animated the 2003 assault on Iraq—was clearly linked to the logic of preventive war. The plan for the second war fit with a grand strategy; it was just a plan inadequate for the ambition. Not having a serious plan for occupation and stabilization beyond the march to Baghdad (the State Department and specialists in the national security bureaucracy tried to provide such a plan but were rebuffed) was the US political leadership’s error in the original plain strategy, and thereby the grand strategy, that assumed its low cost.

Even if grand strategy is clear and sensible in principle, success depends on translating it into military strategy, operations, and tactics which would actually work toward the grand strategic ends and produce the desired results. Grand strategy must drive plain strategy and the levels below it. In real war as opposed to war on paper, as Clausewitz and practitioners have long known, the reverse often happens. This is why adaptation may sometimes necessarily revise policy goals. If this happens in minor ways that limit efficiency but not effectiveness, grand strategy may be seen to be applied, roughly. If the process changes outcomes substantially from what was expected by grand strategy, however, the latter is discredited even if the surprising result is acceptable.

National security policy may be conceived and declared by theorists or politicians, but it must be implemented by professionals—diplomats, intelligence officers, and above all, complex and highly institutionalized military organizations. As in many other aspects of modern life, such organizations tend to foster goal displacement. The difficulties of implementing general instructions for complicated jobs are establishing instrumental techniques and operational goals more detailed than the putative main missions of the

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**Grand strategy must drive plain strategy and the levels below it; the reverse often happens.**
organization as well as standardizing operating procedures and norms for avoiding mistakes and overcoming technical obstacles. As they are institutionalized, these processes associated with professional expertise, usually necessary to enable the organization to function effectively, can make means become ends which diverge from the higher ends policymakers have in mind.24

For example, it could be argued that the grand strategy of containment that the United States applied to the Vietnam War mandated “winning hearts and minds” of South Vietnamese farmers so they would support the Saigon government rather than communists of the National Liberation Front and North Vietnam. The US Army, however, had difficulty embracing the tenets of counterinsurgency theory and acted more in tune with the institution’s standard orientation to conventional war, using high firepower and destructive operations more likely to alienate than endear the rural population.25 The institution also elected to limit personnel to one-year tours in country and commanders to six-month rotations in order to distribute combat experience throughout the career force. This limited learning and relevant expertise of officers on the scene. As John Paul Vann put it, “the United States has not been in Vietnam for nine years, but for one year nine times.”26

The most vivid and chilling illustration of the gap between what intellectuals see as the logic in a nation’s plans and behavior and what the underlying structures and processes actually are can be seen in the area where the gap was never tested in war: nuclear strategy. Most observers high in the US government and among civilian analysts came to view American nuclear strategy as one of stable deterrence based on the danger of mutual assured destruction (MAD)—that is, the idea that nuclear war would never be started because the consequences were recognized to be unthinkable, or that if started, it would be with carefully controlled, limited strikes designed to force de-escalation. Late in the Cold War, however, evidence emerged that the military organizations tasked with readiness for nuclear use applied criteria for planning and deployment that imposed fewer limitations on scale and authority for using such weapons, and at some points, created dangerous weaknesses in the safeguards meant to prevent accidental use.27 Thus, the widespread assumption that peace endured because of solid stability in nuclear strategy, rather than luck, now seems wobbly.

If grand ideas are refracted when inflexible organizations translate them into action, grand strategy might be saved either by giving more power to small groups of planners or by using secret diplomacy to evade bureaucratic deformation. Mechanisms designed for strategic planning have never prospered inside the US government, however, with partial exceptions such as the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff under George Kennan and Paul Nitze, or the National Security Council Staff under Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski. Secret circumvention of bureaucratic constraints, in turn, may
overcome inertia or resistance, but it is not always wise. It can also derail strategy by substituting ignorant activism for plodding expertise. For example, when intervening in the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) by back channel from the White House, Kissinger came close to accepting a technical provision that would have inadvertently precluded a crucial American missile modernization program. US defense policy was saved from the gaffe when the regular bureaucrat leading the official delegation found out.28

Dispersion of power within large democracies is a natural barrier to coherence and consistency, and the constitutional separation of powers between Congress and president leaves room for struggle that compromises or confuses strategy. This separation has been an obstacle less often than might be expected, primarily because of the high degree of bipartisan elite consensus on the highest foreign policy goals for most of the time since Pearl Harbor. Congress posed the greatest restraint when the consensus broke for a decade after the 1968 Tet Offensive, the most vivid illustrations being passage of the 1971 Cooper-Church Amendment, limiting military operations in Indochina, and the 1973 War Powers Resolution requiring congressional approval for all lengthy US combat operations. Richard Nixon would also likely have preferred a less accommodating grand strategy toward Moscow and Beijing, but was compelled toward détente by public opinion and an opposition-led Congress that favored retrenchment and lower defense spending.

**Limitations of Good Grand Strategy**

Of course, there are examples of real grand strategy, contrary to my critique, that do pass the test, at least more or less. Otto von Bismarck’s is one that most would credit. He had clear priorities among objectives—for example, German unification and neutralizing threats from other great powers—and careful plans for achieving them. The principle of always being one of three in the alliances among the five main European states was grandly strategic and the crafty maneuvers he engineered to pursue those aims amply exceeded common sense. Bismarck’s diplomacy mastered the balance of power for at least two decades. His record may look especially good in light of the mistakes of Kaiser Wilhelm, who followed him, but it is hard to think of another example in modern times who did better in matching means to ends in ways that were more than obvious.

There are few, if any, American examples that match Bismarck, but Richard Nixon, supported by Henry Kissinger, may come closest. It is no accident that, just months before assuming office as Nixon’s assistant for national security affairs, Kissinger published an admiring essay on the Prussian statesman.29 Nixon’s main aims were to disentangle the United States from Vietnam and
manage what seemed at the time a trend toward US decline. The twin ideas of the Nixon Doctrine—substituting aid as well as military assistance for American combat forces in Third World conflicts and détente with Moscow and Beijing—were simple, compatible, went well beyond conventional wisdom, and once underway, were pursued consistently. The idea of using rapprochement with China to balance Moscow was truly radical and survived countervailing pressures in American domestic politics because of Nixon’s solid status as a conservative hawk. The initiative, which would have strained the bounds of controversy if handled normally, was also accomplished in secrecy, circumventing the normal bureaucratic tendencies to obstruction and entropy.

Nevertheless, even this example has elements of “emergent” strategy. Nixon and Kissinger entered office believing that China was “the more aggressive of the Communist powers,” and they did not immediately plan the triangular diplomacy that marked the administration’s subsequent policy. As Kissinger put it, “the new administration had a notion, but not yet a strategy, to move toward China. Policy emerges when concept encounters opportunity.” In coming to reconciliation with China, “we took even ourselves by surprise.” Moreover, though the Nixon triangular strategy was about as grand as strategy gets in the United States, only half of it—rapprochement with Beijing—lasted long: about a quarter century. The other half, détente with Moscow, succeeded in the short term but crumbled within a decade, displaced by a reinvigorated Cold War. How long a strategy must endure to qualify as grand is an unsettled question, but, though one of the closest American examples, Nixon’s seems only half grand.

The Glass Half Empty

Most interesting questions in politics can be answered only subjectively, but the standards for judging the utility of the concept of grand strategy are more subjective than most. Neither success nor failure of a nation’s fortunes in international politics is proof that the result was caused by its strategy, grand or otherwise. A strategy that aspires to grandness needs to be general enough to cover a wide range of contingencies, but specific enough to prescribe priorities and sources of leverage for a particular contingency. Where that balance can be struck is hard to measure other than impressionistically. This essay is admittedly impressionistic, but it asks that the recently fashionable status of the concept of “grand strategy” be justified to mean something more than a grandiose synonym for foreign policy.

The argument here is that, with some exceptions, the rough and tumble of international politics rarely leaves time for true grand strategy. Statesmen usually feel compelled to operate ad hoc, focus on the short term, act on
axiomatic values and weakly examined assumptions, put out fires, and seldom think deeply about long-term planning beyond their unconscious instincts and buzzword ideas of the day. Their less-than-grand strategies are usually channeled by hunches, constraints, and concrete options disjoint from theory. A grand strategy is a simple intention, but political give and take at high levels and the complexity of implementation further down render it more often a slogan than an effective plan—a rhetorical prop or motherhood statement more than a clear guide to choices that are not already obvious. Sometimes leaders in democracies come into office with genuine ambitions to pursue a markedly different course for their country with a serviceable grand strategy in mind, but most often they are ground down by circumstances, robustness of the status quo, and guerrilla warfare by dissenters in the policymaking process. Leaders may alter their nation’s course, but they seldom exert the amount of control and direction implied by the lofty idea of grand strategy.

Consider the Trump administration. Conventional wisdom to the contrary, one can, in fact, infer a reasonably clear grand strategy in the president’s rhetoric and demonstrated intent—something like: “Make America great again via economic protectionism, political unilateralism, coercion of allies to contribute more, retrenchment of US military commitments, and a combination of carrot-and-stick bargaining and belligerence toward adversaries.” This grand strategy is bad, and the glass is disturbingly half-full—to much of the strategy has worked as intended. But while wrong, and although the chief strategist is reckless, the strategy is not as incoherent as critics assert. More than halfway through his term, nevertheless, Trump has failed to force the disciplined and consistent execution of his simple intentions as both subordinates and opponents have sidetracked, undermined, or stopped various directives in their tracks.

Grand strategy does have value in principle, primarily as a lodestar for plain strategy. That it usually falters in application is not always bad, as the Trump example attests. The dispersion of power within democratic government that is anti-strategic in tendency risks incoherent action, but effective grand strategy is not necessarily preferable. If the commander in chief happens to be radical, ignorant, confident, and impulsive all at the same time, subversion of his authority and frustration of his grand strategy by the “deep state” (what is traditionally known as the permanent government of departmental bureaucracies) is a good thing.
The argument here is not cynical. If authoritarian leaders are better able to set and pursue grand strategies, that is not necessarily always an advantage. In democratic theory, there is a strong strand of argument against the wisdom of attempting consistently rational strategies, on grounds that the method of incrementalism, trial and error, contention in the marketplace of ideas, fashioning coalitions that agree on policies for different reasons, and other forms of sub-optimization—the “science of muddling through”—accommodates interests and necessities unforeseen in singular strategies and forges less risky and more durable solutions.31 Or, as Fisher Ames, Federalist politician in the era of the Founders, is often quoted, “monarchy is a merchantman, which sails well, but will sometimes strike on a rock, and go to the bottom; whilst a republic is a raft, which would never sink, but then your feet are always in water.”32 This less strategic approach has many deficiencies, and sometimes it produces disaster, as in the incremental American descent into Vietnam, but it often avoids the naive disasters that can follow mistaken assumptions and bold activism.

The term “grand strategy” is not worthless. Sometimes it does describe reality, and it is useful within limits as a normative construct for theorists to use in prescribing how nations should try to pursue their material or moral interests. It is also perfectly serviceable as a near synonym for foreign policy when needed by drafters of good prose to avoid repetitive language. The term has simply come to be overused and the concept overvalued as a standard. Theorists should use it more sparingly, and analysts should not use the concept as the main grounds for assessing the wisdom of any nation’s policies and behavior.

Notes

3. Liddell Hart defines grand strategy as “policy in execution,” which should “calculate and develop the economic resources and man-power . . . . the moral resources . . . . regulate the distribution of power between the several services . . . . industry” while looking “beyond the war to the subsequent peace.” B. H. Liddell Hart, Strategy, 2nd ed. (New York: Praeger, 1967), 335–336. See also Paul Kennedy, “Grand Strategies in War and Peace: Toward a Broader Definition,” in Grand Strategies in War and Peace, ed. Paul Kennedy (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 1–10.


10. Moltke’s line is folklore, rendered in various wordings in numerous sources; Eisenhower’s is quoted in Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 609–610. An earthier version of the point is boxer Mike Tyson’s famous line, “Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.”


12. Lawrence Freedman places a discussion of strategy as adaptation under just that subhead, “The Limits of Strategy” in Freedman, 609, 611.


15. Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel, 189.


