FOREIGN AFFAIRS STRATEGY

This is a book on how to think – strategically – about foreign policy, especially American foreign policy. Strategy is about the application of resources to achieve objectives, about the relationship, in thought and action, between ends and means. In the realm of ends this book explores the concept of the national interest and describes how to select objectives that will take advantage of opportunities to promote interests while protecting them against threats at reasonable cost and risk. On the means side it discusses national power and influence, as well as the political, informational, economic, and military instruments of state power. It also surveys the contemporary international environment for foreign affairs strategy, as well as the domestic context in which strategy must be formulated and executed. Based on a graphic model that illustrates strategic logic, the book uses examples from recent American statecraft, and it ends with an extended critique of current American foreign policy, outlining an alternative strategy better suited to the problems of the twenty-first century.

Terry L. Deibel is a graduate of Ohio Wesleyan University, the Institute of Advanced International Studies, in Geneva, Switzerland, and the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. In Washington he has served in the International Programs Division of the Office of Management and Budget, Executive Office of the President of the United States, and in the Politico-Military Affairs Bureau of the Department of State, as well as at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. In the 1970s Dr. Deibel taught at the School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, and since then he has been on the faculty of the National War College, where for many years he directed the teaching of foreign affairs strategy to mid-career foreign service, intelligence, and military officers.
To the students and faculty
of the National War College,
strategists all.
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More than three decades ago, in a graduate class I was teaching at Georgetown University, there occurred one of those little epiphanies that later turn out to have much greater significance than initially appears. I was expounding on the foreign policy of one or another nineteenth-century American president – probably James K. Polk – and concluded my peroration by labeling it an example of a good foreign policy. A hand shot up. “Professor, why was it good?” What had seemed self-evident to me obviously was not. I doubt the answer I gave that day was at all satisfactory from the student’s point of view. But the question began an intellectual odyssey on my part, a search for standards by which to judge the quality of foreign policy, that has ultimately led me to write the following pages.

In a sense, this is a book about one of the ingredients that makes for a good foreign policy, as well as a book about how one ought to define the term “good” with regard to the nation’s external affairs. It is a book, in the broadest sense, about how to think productively about foreign policy. And its thesis is that effective thinking in this realm is necessarily strategic in nature: that is, consciously concerned with means as well as ends of policy, and with the relationship between them. It argues, in short, for a strategic approach to foreign policy, using the term “strategic” not in a military sense but as a kind of shorthand for the ends-means relationship and all that it implies.

This is not, then, a book that argues for any particular foreign affairs strategy, although it does end with a critique of current American foreign policy and a proposed alternative. It was not written so much to provide answers as to suggest questions, to offer guidelines that might help structure the search for effective policy. At the same time, this is very much a book about American foreign affairs strategy. Although I believe that the strategic logic discussed in these pages is applicable to any nation’s (or even a nonstate actor’s) foreign policy, the examples I use to illustrate it are exclusively American, and the book is animated by the range of choice available to the world’s only superpower and by the importance of the choices it makes to all the world’s people.

It has been said that professors are people who see that something works in practice and wonder whether it would work in theory. Nevertheless, the
reader will discover that this book is not one of international relations theory. It is in the broader and I hope more useful tradition of international affairs, written empirically as much as a priori, and rests its logic more on the tradition of self-evidence than close theoretic reasoning. Its purpose is to provide a guide to systematic thinking, and to the strategic logic that underpins it, that will be useful both to students and practitioners. I will be more than satisfied if these chapters record in an ordered way some of what successful statesmen already know from experience and intuition.

The concept of foreign affairs strategy as I use it has two very important limitations that should also be noted at the outset. First, it will tell us very little about how foreign policy is actually formulated by the government. This is not, in other words, a book about the policy process but about policy substance. It hopes to provide a useful intellectual framework for an individual's thinking about foreign policy, but policy in our democracy is of course a product of a complex process involving compromise among many people in the public at large, the Congress, and the Executive branch. If it succeeds, this book might help the various players in the process with their own policy thinking, but it will do nothing to ameliorate the predictable clash of divergent strategic visions.

Second, readers will find that this book has little to say about what happens after the policy process works its magic. It does not deal with foreign relations, with what the United States does in executing its foreign policy. Although the prospect of successful execution is certainly critical to the strategist's work, foreign affairs strategy itself is rather an intellectual conception, existing on paper or in someone's head. It is a plan for action that will usually require continuous adjustment once it gets into the hands of practitioners and runs into the real world.

Still, an essential requirement for success in foreign affairs, as well as within the policy process, is a firm sense of what one wants to do and how one expects to get it done. Faced with the end of the Cold War and with terrorist assaults on its homeland, the United States must urgently refashion its foreign policies for a new era, and this book contends that that process must begin with individuals who can think strategically about the whole range of foreign affairs. The pages that follow provide one view of what such thinking entails.

1 See Daniel J. Boorstin, The Americans: The Colonial Experience, Book II, Part V (New York: Random House, 1973), for a description of this peculiarly American approach to philosophy. On "international relations" versus "international affairs" as terms of art, the former refers to the international branch of the traditional academic discipline of political science, whereas the latter denotes a multidisciplinary academic approach to foreign affairs drawing on diplomatic history, international economics and law, security studies, and the international slices of other disciplines in addition to political science.
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As would necessarily be true of a decades-long effort, many people since my Georgetown graduate students have contributed to the thinking exhibited here. Most important among them are the extraordinary diplomats, policymakers, and military officers who have come to learn and grow at the National War College since I began teaching there in 1978. Beginning in 1986 I created and have since more often than not directed the College’s core course on national security strategy and statecraft, and many of these ideas were born and refined in that crucible. More directly, the College contributed a year’s sabbatical in 1993 during which an early draft of much of this book was written, and then a decade later some additional release time from teaching duties and a second sabbatical in 2005–06 to allow its completion. Thanks are also due to David Abshire and the Center for Strategic and International Studies, which provided a stimulating and congenial home while the initial writing was in progress. Needless to say, the views expressed in these pages are only my own, and do not represent the policies of any administration, agency, or department, in or out of government.

The work of so many scholars and practitioners has been important to my own education in strategic thinking over so many years that I can only acknowledge here those whose contributions were outstanding or directly related to the production of this manuscript. First, I am most particularly in the intellectual debt of John Lewis Gaddis, not only for his penetrating insights about the logic of strategy, but also because his legitimization of historical “lumpers” and frank recognition that “to remain broad you’ve got to retain a certain shallowness” may help excuse many of the errors of omission and understanding in what follows.2 Thanks are also due to a broader array of scholars whose writings, as will be apparent in the pages to follow, have had the most profound impact on my conceptualization of foreign affairs strategy, especially Thomas Schelling, Joseph Nye, Robert Gilpin, David Baldwin, K. J. Holsti, Donald Puchala, and Robert Art. I am grateful to Richard Melanson of the NWC faculty and Ambassador Steve Mann of the Department of State, who read and commented upon the entire manuscript, as well as Marcelle Wahba, John Tefft, Mary Kilgore, Mark Clodfelter, Elaine Grigsby, Michael Mazzarr, Karen Wilhelm, Robert Gallucci, Susan Watters Steel, Theresa Sabonis-Helf, and Jack Leonard, who have given me the benefit of their counsel or commented on sections of the manuscript. Special thanks is also due to Harvey Rishikof,

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