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Thoughts on grand strategy

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What keeps big systems integrated? Can they go on getting bigger and bigger? How much do communications media matter? How far can globalization go? How does systems-failure begin to appear? From the reign of Hadrian, the Roman empire, gigantic system that it was, stopped getting bigger, more integrated, more complicated, stopped providing so many opportunities, stopped improving the possibilities of change and innovation. Maybe it was enough that the positive trends faltered; maybe they started to go into reverse. No one noticed for generations, but the pace and nature of change had altered for ever. The big labels, Greek, Roman, Christian, remained but concealed increasing chaos.¹

We might begin our examination of the issues involved in grand strategy with an effort to describe what we mean by the term. Over the centuries, some governments and their leaders have attempted to chart a course for their nations that has involved more than simply reacting to the course of events. In most cases they have confronted sudden and major changes in the international environment, often resulting from the outbreak of great conflicts, but at times involving economic, strategic, or political alterations that threaten the stability or even existence of their polities.

Yet, grand strategy is a matter involving great states and great states alone. No small states and few medium-size states possess the possibility of crafting a grand strategy. For the most part, their circumstances condemn them to suffer what Athenian negotiators suggested to their Melian counterparts in 416 BC about the nature of international relations: “The standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel and that in fact the strong do

¹ Danny Danziger and Nicholas Purcell, *Hadrian's Empire: When Rome Ruled the World* (London, 2005), pp. 287–288.

what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept.”²

But if great states have choices that their smaller cousins do not, then the concomitant burden they must bear is what one might best describe as *overstretch*. Quite simply, *overstretch* is an inevitable part of the landscape in which great states exist. They have no other avenue but to address a wide variety of vital interests in the economic, political, and military spheres, some of which are contradictory by their nature and demands. Those vital interests will inevitably present threats either in the immediate present or to the state’s long-term survival. General James Wolfe, victor on the Plains of Abraham before Quebec City in 1759, described conflict best with the short aphorism “War is an option of difficulties.”³

The same is even truer for grand strategy. In a world where great states confront *overstretch*, they must make hard choices. Thus, in the end, grand strategy is more often than not about the ability to adjust to the reality that resources, will, and interests inevitably find themselves out of balance in some areas. Strategy is about balancing risks. But above all, it is about insuring that the balance is right in those areas that matter most. And in times of great stress, it is also about adapting national focus on the international environment to those areas of *overstretch* that threaten the polity to the greatest extent.

What distinguishes leaders who have attempted to develop and execute a grand strategy is their focus on acting beyond the demands of the present. In other words, they have taken a longer view than simply reacting to the events of the day. Nor have they concentrated on only one aspect of the problem. Instead, in times of war, while they may have focused on the great issue confronting them, such as Lincoln’s effort to maintain the Union in the great Civil War that enveloped North America, that vision has recognized the political, economic, and diplomatic framework within which the conflict was taking place.⁴

There is, one must admit, considerable confusion of grand strategy with policy, military strategy, and strategies to achieve this or that specific goal.

² Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (London, 1954), p. 402. There are two exceptions to the rule. Both the Swiss and the Finns were able to exercise a certain independence that allowed them to maintain a grand strategic framework: the former by balancing great powers off against each other; the latter, by creating the distinct impression in the minds of the Soviets that they were willing to fight to the last man and woman in defense of their independence.

³ Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War: The Seven Years’ War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754–1766* (New York, 2000).

⁴ Thus, in discussing the goal of his grand strategy (namely, the preservation of the Union, as he was about to issue the Emancipation Proclamation), Lincoln commented, “If I could save the Union without freeing *any* slave I would do it, and if I could do it by freeing *all* the slaves I would do it; and if I could do it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that.” Quoted in Stephen W. Sears, *The Landscape Turned Red: The Battle of Antietam* (New York, 1983), p. 166.

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Grand strategy is none of these, but to one extent or another, it consists of all of them. It demands a recognition of and ability to react to the ever-shifting environments of war and peace. Thus, the day-to-day decision making that drives policy making must be involved in the execution of grand strategy. The latter will envelop military strategy and diplomatic strategy. Nor must grand strategy ignore the other issues that invariably confront leaders who are in a position to develop and execute it. However, it also demands that statesmen encompass within their view of the larger goal the pieces of bureaucratic decision making, policy, and specific strategic approaches. Thus, those who develop a successful grand strategy never lose sight of the long-term goal, whatever that may be, but are willing to adapt to the difficulties of the present in reaching toward the future. Above all, at the same time that they have maintained a vision focused on the possibilities of the future, they have adapted to the realities of the present.

Those who are interested in the subject of grand strategy must understand that much of the flesh and muscle that went into its creation and maintenance in its various forms is lost to the pages of history. To a considerable extent, the past remains an unrecoverable land, where time has muted or obscured the relationships, hatreds, and calculations of those who made decisions. As one of the leading historians of the rise of Britain to mastery over the world's oceans has noted about the creation of Britain's strategy during the War of Spanish Succession:

[The proximity of the major military and political players in London during the winter when strategy was made] makes the process of strategic formulation almost unrecoverable for the historian, at least in its more interesting aspects. Parliamentary debates and gossip remain, but thousands of other informal discussions in saloons, taverns, dinner parties, balls, and random encounters are lost. Unofficial correspondence exists only when key figures retreated to their country estates or were otherwise absent, and official documents tend to reflect decisions rather than the processes that created them. The compromises, trade-offs, and private deals characteristic of advanced systems of clientage are often lost to recorded memory. Decisions were usually compromises, and those who dissented could only grumble and criticize until victory dismissed their complaints or misfortune made them next year's policy.⁵

In fact, those who have developed successful grand strategies in the past have been much the exception. The affairs of man as recorded by historians seem nothing more than one long catalogue of crimes, follies, and egregious

⁵ William S. Maltby, "The Origins of a Global Strategy: England from 1558 to 1713," in Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox, and Alvin Bernstein, eds., *The Making of Strategy, Rulers, States, and War* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 163.

errors.⁶ Wars begun with little or no thought of their consequences, assumptions unchallenged in the face of harsh reality, the possibility of second- or third-order effects casually dismissed with the shrug of a shoulder, and idle ignorance substituted for serious considerations have bedeviled the actions of statesmen and generals over the course of recorded history. During much of the past, a strategic framework, much less a grand strategy, has rarely guided those responsible for the long-term survival of polities either in a political or military sense.

And so the inevitable question that should concern American policy makers and military leaders – much less the polity as a whole – is simply put: is there even the possibility of charting a grand strategy for a United States that at present confronts monumental challenges to its security?⁷ Is there a strategic path that would protect the United States, its interests, and its values more effectively than simply reacting to the next great crisis? If so, what does history suggest about how those few in the past who have done so have thought clearly and coherently in setting out a course to the future? In other words, how have first-rate statesmen and their military and diplomatic advisers developed effective approaches to grand strategy in meeting the demands of the present as well as those of the future?

The history of the past century certainly underlines the importance of a coherent approach to grand strategy, one that is flexible, realistic, and above all connects means to ends. It warns, however, that this has rarely been the case. In an article examining military effectiveness and the impact – or lack thereof – of a coherent strategic approach over the years from 1914 to 1945, this author and his colleague Allan Millett argued:

No amount of operational virtuosity . . . redeemed fundamental flaws in political judgment. Whether policy shaped strategy or strategic imperatives drove policy was irrelevant. Miscalculation in both led to defeat, and any combination of politico-strategic error had disastrous results, even for some nations that ended the war as members of the victorious coalition. Even the effective mobilization of national will, manpower, industrial might, national wealth, and technological know-how did not save the belligerents from reaping the bitter fruit of severe mistakes [at this level]. This is because it is more important to make correct decisions at the political and strategic level than it is at the operational and tactical level. Mistakes in operations and tactics can be corrected, but political and strategic mistakes live forever.⁸

⁶ The title of Barbara Tuchman's book, *The March of Folly*, encapsulates much of mankind's historical record.

⁷ For a general examination of strategy as a process over the course of human history, see Murray et al., *The Making of Strategy*.

⁸ Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray, "Lessons of War," *The National Interest*, Winter 1988–1989.

UNDERSTANDING GRAND STRATEGY

No simple, clear definition of grand strategy can ever be fully satisfactory. The closer one comes to understanding what it entails, the more one sees how complex and uncertain in historical terms are the aspects that encompass its making and use. One might adapt a comment by Clausewitz to our purpose of developing a theoretical understanding of grand strategy:

The second way out of this difficulty is to argue that a theory need not be a positive doctrine, a sort of *manual* for action. . . . It is an analytical investigation leading to a close *acquaintance* with the subject; applied to experience – in our case [strategy] – it leads to thorough *familiarity* with it. The closer it comes to that goal, the more it proceeds from the objective form of a science to the subjective form of a skill.⁹

Grand strategy involves some willingness and ability to think about the future in terms of the goals of a political entity. Yet, those who have been most successful at its practice have also recognized that the “future is not foreseeable” and consequently have been willing to adapt to political, economic, and military conditions as they are rather than as they wish them to be. Above all, grand strategy demands an intertwining of political, social, and economic realities with military power as well as a recognition that politics must, in nearly all cases, drive military necessity.¹⁰ It must also rest on a realistic assessment and understanding not only of one’s opponents but also of oneself.¹¹ There is rarely clarity in the effective casting of grand strategy because, by its nature, it exists in an environment of constant change, where chance and the unexpected are inherent.¹² Thus, simply thinking about developing a concept of grand strategy demands not only a deep understanding of the past but also a comprehensive and realistic understanding of the present.

⁹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ, 1976), p. 163.

¹⁰ The German military in the First World War consistently rejected strategic and political concerns in what its leaders consistently posited as “military necessity” – a concept they used to override all political and strategic concerns. In this regard, see Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction, Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca, NY, 2005).

¹¹ Sun Tzu’s most justly famous aphorism is that “if you know the enemy and you know yourself, you need not fear the results of a hundred battles.” Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. and ed. Samuel B. Griffith (Oxford, 1963), p. 84.

¹² One of the most important contributions to our understanding of international relations, diplomatic and strategic history, and the conduct of war has been the impact of non-linearity. For its implications for history and political science, see John Lewis Gaddis, “International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War,” *International Security* 17, no. 3, Winter 1992/93.

Grand strategy may be as concerned with avoiding war as with fighting it, although there are times when there is no alternative to conflict.¹³ War avoidance was certainly a basic principle of Byzantium's approach to grand strategy, at least from the death of Justinian in 565 AD.¹⁴ Thus, one should not assume that grand strategy is only a matter of war; some of the greatest successes of grand strategy have been wars not fought, the most obvious of which was the Cold War.¹⁵ Moreover, miscalculations of grand strategy in peacetime, such as Neville Chamberlain's policy of appeasement and its execution, can lead to catastrophic results not only in peace but in the initial conduct of military operations, although the latter, not surprisingly, are far easier to see with historical perspective than the former.¹⁶

History is essential to any understanding of the present; only the past can clarify and elucidate the factors, trends, and political and economic frameworks that have made the present and will certainly drive the future. Moreover, grand strategy demands a recognition of unpleasant realities and a willingness to challenge one's own assumptions and the myths and truisms of one's own culture – normally not characteristics of the human race in general or of its political or military leaders in particular, who generally prefer pleasant and comfortable illusions to the stark truths of reality.

Given their importance, one might suppose that grand strategy and strategy would be the subjects of innumerable books and studies. In fact, they have not been. The greatest book on war, Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, presents a deep and thorough examination of grand strategy, among a number of other crucial issues.¹⁷ However, the Western historical canon is largely silent on the subject until Machiavelli, and even he is largely focused on stratagems for the individual ruler to follow in the pursuit of internal and external power. Jomini concerns himself mostly with the geometry of war, although he was finally forced to admit that Clausewitz was

¹³ This was the case with the response of the Western Powers in dealing with Hitler's Nazi Germany in the 1930s.

¹⁴ This is the main theme in Edward Luttwak's book on the grand strategy of the Eastern Roman Empire.

¹⁵ See, among others, John Gaddis, *Now We Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York, 1998); and *The Cold War: A New History* (New York, 2006).

¹⁶ Neville Chamberlain's decisions to surrender Czechoslovakia in September and October 1938, while maintaining Britain's leisurely pace of rearmament, underlines how crucial decisions of grand strategy in peacetime can be. For further discussion of the military and strategic results of Munich, see, among others, Williamson Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–1939: The Path to Ruin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), chaps. 7 and 8.

¹⁷ One of the more bizarre aspects of modern historiography is the argument among ancient historians that there was no understanding of strategy in the Greco-Roman world. For a refutation of such nonsense, simply refer to the speech given by King Archidamnus in Book 1 of Thucydides' great history: *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, pp. 82–86.

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right that war is a matter of “the continuation of politics by other means.”¹⁸ The great Prussian theorist himself admits, at the beginning of *On War*, that policy and strategy represent the crucial drivers and determinants of human conflict; however, because his subject is the phenomenon of war, his work discusses these subjects only peripherally.

Nor is grand strategy described better by more recent theoretical approaches such as Alfred Thayer Mahan’s work on sea power; Guiliho Douhet’s work on air power; or British pundits Basil H. Liddell Hart’s and J. F. C. Fuller’s theories of the indirect approach and armored warfare.¹⁹ Each of these authors focused his attention on specific aspects of the technological attributes of war, although Mahan and Liddell Hart were willing to use historical examples effectively to support their arguments. Only Julian Corbett, the great British naval thinker, was willing to draw on Clausewitz for understanding the fundamental nature of war as a means to understand the role of naval conflict in grand strategy.²⁰

In the twentieth century, the subject of grand strategy as a topic for rigorous historical examination first appears in serious form in Edward Meade Earle’s classic *Makers of Modern Strategy*, which, not surprisingly, appeared at the midpoint of America’s participation in the Second World War.²¹ Of the voluminous official studies of the two world wars commissioned by the various governments involved, only the British undertook a deep study of their performance at the level of grand strategy.²² America’s official histories were far less coherent and, in the end, less satisfactory in their efforts to discuss U.S. grand strategy.²³ Their examination of the war was more about military strategy and decisions involving the employment of military forces than about American grand strategy.²⁴

¹⁸ “We see, therefore, that war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means. What remains peculiar to war is simply the peculiar nature of its means.” Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 99.

¹⁹ Douhet’s major works were not translated into English until after the Second World War, although translations of his articles were available at the Air Corps Tactical School in the 1930s. For Basil Liddell Hart’s views on the subject, see *Strategy* (London, 1929).

²⁰ See Julian Corbett, *Principles of Maritime Strategy* (Mineola, NY, reprint, 2004).

²¹ Edward Meade Earle, ed., *The Makers of Modern Strategy* (Princeton, NJ, 1943). It was reedited by Peter Paret in 1984 in a far less satisfactory volume, *The Makers of Modern Strategy* (Princeton, NJ, 1984).

²² See the outstanding six-volume series dealing with British grand strategy in the Second World War, published by Her Majesty’s Stationery Office from 1957 to 1972. The most outstanding volume in the series is Michael Howard, *Grand Strategy*, vol. 4, *August 1942–September 1943* (London, 1972).

²³ For examples of the American approach to the analysis of grand strategy, see Maurice Matloff, *The United States Army in World War II – The War Department: Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare, 1943–1944* (Washington, DC, 1959).

²⁴ In fact, many of the discussions in the Green Books, as the Army’s official histories are known, are flawed by faulty assumptions and sloppy research. The clearest example is their almost complete silence on the strategic debates that took place in late 1942 over

Why then, considering the importance of the topic, has the subject of grand strategy proven so peripheral in the literature of war and peace? There appear to be several explanations, none of them entirely satisfactory but useful nevertheless. Grand strategy lies at the nexus of politics and military strategy and thus contains important elements of both. Moreover, it exists in a world of constant flux, one in which uncertainty and ambiguity dominate. And the international environment will more often than not have its say, as national opponents take the most inopportune moments to change their policies, while internal and ideological factors also have a vote.

Thus, the *Weltanschauungen* (worldviews) of statesmen and military leaders alike – a major determinant in the formation of any grand strategy – will come under constant assault from the ever-changing environment within which they work. One does not make effective grand strategy entirely as one would like but rather according to the circumstances in which a national polity finds itself. Finally, as noted earlier, great states possess considerable wiggle room in the casting of grand strategy, but small states have virtually none.²⁵

A part of the problem in understanding grand strategy – or for that matter strategy of any kind – lies in the belief of most historians and commentators that it represents an enunciated set of goals and principles to which statesmen and military leaders adhere in a consistent fashion. However, historical examples of marches toward clear goals are less than enlightening, one example being the disastrous trajectory of the Third Reich. From his beginnings as a street agitator in Munich to his dismal end in a bunker in Berlin, Hitler possessed a coherent, carefully thought-through, long-term grand strategy from which he rarely deviated in the course of his rise and fall – although in his early years in power, he was willing to make temporary adjustments such as with his signing of the Non-Aggression Pact with Poland in 1934. Initially, Hitler's strategy brought Nazi Germany great military and diplomatic triumphs, but within those successes lay the seeds of catastrophe, because Hitler's conception of grand strategy and the assumptions on which it rested led straight to the invasion of the Soviet Union and his declaration of war on the United States.²⁶ In fact, although the goals of grand strategy may

American mobilization and the nation's ability to support the buildup of ground forces as well as the argument, entirely fallacious, that George Marshall argued for a landing on the coast of northwest France in 1943 at the Casablanca conference. For a refutation of such views, see James Lacey, "Economic Foundations of American Military Strategy, 1940–1943," Ph.D. diss. University of Leeds, 2009.

²⁵ In the cold, dark words of the Athenian negotiators on the island of Melos in 416 BC, "in fact the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept." Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, p. 402.

²⁶ Far and away the best books on Hitler's grand strategy – its origins, its development, and its end – are Gerhard Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (Cambridge, 1994); and MacGregor Knox, *To the Threshold of Power, 1922/33*, vol. 1, *Origins and Dynamics of the Fascist and National Socialist Dictatorships* (Cambridge, 2007).

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be clear, the path to achieving them is invariably tortuous and uncertain, a reality that has inevitably led to great difficulties.

In fact, the best analogy for understanding grand strategy is that of how French peasant soup is made – a mixture of items thrown into the pot over the course of a week and then eaten, for which no recipe can possibly exist.²⁷ In thinking about the soup of grand strategy, recipes and theoretical principles are equally useless. What works in one case may well not work in another. In various strengths, grand strategy consists of leadership, vision, intuition, process, adaptation, and the impact of a nation’s particular and idiosyncratic development and geographic position, but in no particular order or mixture.²⁸

Geography, historical experience, and culture have all invariably exercised a heavy, but often unseen, influence over the making of national grand strategy, but individuals and their own particular abilities to upset every seemingly rational calculation represent a factor that statesmen rarely seem to command. In other words, Murphy’s law works at every level.²⁹ This is particularly so because what appears rational to the leaders of one national group inevitably reflects their own cultural biases.³⁰ Thus, one must think of grand strategy in terms of an idiosyncratic process rather than a specific, clearly thought-through approach to the world. When successful, it almost invariably involves the choices and guiding hands of individuals, for better or worse, rather than an effective bureaucratic system. Thus as a human endeavor, it is suffused with the idiosyncrasies that mark all of humanity’s decision making.

The two greatest grand strategists of the nineteenth century, Abraham Lincoln and Otto von Bismarck, are cases in point. Neither individual began his course with a clear idea of his route or the political and international framework within which he was going to have to work. Both had specific long-term goals in mind: Lincoln, the preservation of the Union; Bismarck, the political security, internal as well as external, of the Prussian monarchy. Both found themselves remaking and even extending their goals. Lincoln, for his part, turned to emancipation of the South’s slaves, which was not a part of his original agenda, as an essential component of the preservation of the Union.³¹ Bismarck eventually turned to unifying the “Germanys,” southern and northern, to secure Prussia.

²⁷ This analogy, used in a different context, and apparently used often by General William E. Deputy in various briefings, was passed along to the author by General Don Starry, U.S. Army (ret.).

²⁸ For a discussion of these issues, see Murray and Grimsley, “Introduction, On Strategy,” in Murray et al., *The Making of Strategy*.

²⁹ The law posits that if something can go wrong, it will go wrong.

³⁰ This reality makes the whole concept of the “rational actor,” on which so much of American political science rests, completely irrelevant to any real understanding of the world.

³¹ In this case, Lincoln’s decision to issue the Emancipation Proclamation had as much to do with undermining the economic stability of the Confederacy and bucking up the North’s

Perhaps the most important factor that one needs to recognize when thinking about grand strategy is that the decisions that constituted it in the past confronted considerable ambiguities in the international environment. That recognition is crucial because the uncertainties of the present are little different in their fundamental nature from those that have confronted statesmen and military leaders throughout history. As the Bible clearly underlines, mankind peers into the future “through a glass darkly” – a reality that Winston Churchill caught so brilliantly in his history and memoir of the First World War:

One rises from the study of the Great War with a prevailing sense of the defective control of individuals upon world fortunes. It has been well said, ‘there is always more error than design in human affairs.’ The limited minds of the ablest men, their disputed authority, the climate of opinion in which they dwell, their transient and partial contributions to the mighty problem, the problem itself so far beyond their compass, so vast in scale and detail, so changing in its aspects – all this must be considered [in understanding the outbreak of war in 1914]... Events... got onto certain lines and no one could get them off again.³²

For this reason alone, grand strategy is easier to recognize after the fact, when events have clarified the landscape, uncertainties have disappeared, and only historians remain to pick over the bones. The balancing act that statesmen confront between the means available and the ends desired disappears, and only its results drive the conventional wisdom of historians. What appeared difficult and complex when statesmen were charting an intelligent course in a complex and uncertain environment now appears simple and obvious in the aftermath of events. Herein lies the great danger in historical analysis: again, to paraphrase Clausewitz, grand strategy may appear to be a simple matter, but given the enormous uncertainties within which it must work and the prevailing forces that work on it, its execution is exceedingly difficult.³³

The remainder of this chapter examines a series of issues to tease out the factors involved in grand strategy. The discussion is not meant to be prescriptive but rather to suggest the realm of possibilities in which success and failure in grand strategy have rested in the past. Some of the questions which should frame an examination of grand strategy are: How has geographic position influenced the making of grand strategy? How has the nature of government influenced its development? What has been the role of alliances or unilateralism in its success or failure? Finally, are there examples

morale and strategic situation as it did with his belief that slavery represented a moral wrong. But politics and grand strategy are matters of the practicable.

³² Winston S. Churchill, *The World Crisis* (Toronto, 1931), p. 6.

³³ Clausewitz comments on the fundamental nature of war: “Everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult.” Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 119.