Applied Grand Strategy: Making Tough Choices in an Era of Limits and Constraint

by Clark Murdock and Kevin Kallmyer

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Abstract: This article hopes to contribute to the strategic content of U.S. foreign policy by offering a definition of grand strategy and case for reorienting U.S. policy around it. Rather than advocate a specific grand strategy—a matter still open for debate—the analysis concludes with a set of attributes to assess whether a proposed grand strategy constitutes a “good” grand strategy. It concludes by introducing the concept of an applied grand strategy approach, which may help to identify and assess the strategic implications of foreign policy choices.

During the Cold War, the United States faced a threat so large and so compelling that it needed to develop a grand strategy to provide an organizing framework in which it could formulate its foreign policy and thereby deploy its military, economic and political resources most effectively. While it appeared that the September 11, 2001 attacks galvanized support for a return to grand strategy against a new danger, the United States has instead operated its foreign policy largely through crisis management. As a result, National Security Strategy (NSS) practitioners—the President, his national security team and the senior staff who support them—lack a framework to guide and orient the hard decisions they inevitably face.

Defining Grand Strategy

Defining what is meant by grand strategy is not a trivial matter. Eminent thinkers have wrestled with how broadly or narrowly to define it. John Lewis Gaddis defines it quite generically: “grand strategy is the calculated relationship of means to large ends.”¹ Peter Feaver is more specific, defining grand


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strategy as “the collection of plans and policies that comprise the state’s deliberate effort to harness political, military, diplomatic, and economic tools together to advance that state’s national interest.” On the other hand, William Martel outlined that grand strategy “provides an overarching guide for the policies we should implement” and should be cast at a higher level than that taken by the practitioners of national security strategy. Martel has the correct level of analysis, because, after all, it is grand strategy, not strategy.

In our view, the essence of grand strategy is found in two elements: (1) the goals (or ends), including the priorities among them, being pursued by a nation; and (2) the general way—that is, collaboratively or unilaterally, proactively or reactively and internationally or nationally—that the nation’s leadership pursues these goals. It addresses both the what and the how: both the national ends (or interests) and the manner in which they are sought. We use the term “applied grand strategy” as a reminder that nations vary with respect to both the goals they seek and the ways in which they seek them. Nations following different goals (for example, economic prosperity or democracy promotion) will have different grand strategies for achieving them. Similarly, nations following the same goal (e.g., economic prosperity) but with different operating styles (e.g., collaborative or unilateral) will also have different applied grand strategies (e.g., liberal globalism or economic nationalism).

The Absence of Grand Strategy

During the Cold War, the existential nature of the Soviet threat compelled unity of action as NSS practitioners self-organized against the Soviet threat. Successive U.S. administrations tried other grand strategies but, as this author observed earlier, “returned to containment again and again because it struck the right balance between risk and reward.” In fact, the unifying effect of a compelling threat may be so great that Feaver observed that “perhaps Grand Strategy requires a Grand Threat.”

Since the end of the Cold War, there has been, again in the words of Feaver, a “quest to identify and brand the grand strategy the United States... should now follow.” In the immediate post-Cold War period, this search for a new grand strategy yielded little, as ad hoc crisis management, episodic

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engagement, inattention to critical domestic issues and the pursuit of ambitious objectives on the cheap characterized U.S. national security policies.7 At first, the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 seemed to forge a Cold War-like security climate as the American people, galvanized by a new clear and present danger, turned to their government for security. But this dissipated quickly. The challenge for NSS practitioners is to fashion a grand strategy in a compelling enough fashion that the strategy does not have to fail (for example, by failing to prevent a catastrophic terrorist attack) before the political basis for sustaining the strategy can be established.

The slow recovery of the U.S. economy from the Great Recession has reinforced the perception, both at home and abroad, that the United States has entered a new era of limits. This perception has, in turn, sparked another round of the post-Cold War debate over grand strategy. Among the many lessons learned from the recession, most come in the form of two variants: (1) that the United States must learn to live with constrained means, and (2) that the United States needs to learn to work with others. These two lessons do not replace the galvanizing effect of Soviet-size threat on what the United States should do, nor address the critical strategy issue of how to address strategic challenges, but they could both catalyze and inform a return to grand strategy, in particular, one that realistically weighs ends and means.

The Case for Grand Strategy

If the United States hopes to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century, NSS practitioners need to formulate and adopt a grand strategy appropriate for the current and expected security environment. Constructing a grand strategy that continues to have value over multiple political cycles will help the NSS practitioner make difficult trade-offs between competing strategic priorities and will help explain these decisions to the American people in a credible manner. The outcome being sought is better decisions on the part of U.S. national security policymakers. This, however, is no easy task. A combination of internal and external challenges have made the list of potential U.S. objectives both longer and more diffuse, while U.S. means have become increasingly constrained; these factors have both increased the need for grand strategy while posing additional obstacles to the formulation thereof. Yet, in the absence of improvements to U.S. strategic thinking, Andrew Krepinevich and Barry Watts warn that it is unlikely the United States will “meet the security challenges of the twenty-first century without suffering imperial overreach, bankruptcy, or defeats worse than Vietnam.”8

7 Murdock, Improving the Practice of National Security.
Prioritizing Ends

American leaders have consistently mistaken a list of objectives as a strategy. Niall Ferguson believes that “the defining characteristic of Obama’s foreign policy has been not just a failure to prioritize, but also a failure to recognize the need to do so.” While Ferguson may overstate his case, he does have a valid point that the last several administrations have tended to treat many diverse challenges as equally urgent. Unfortunately, the trend to pursue a long list of unprioritized objectives fails to provide policymakers with strategic direction when objectives come into conflict, or when constrained resources force tradeoffs between competing objectives.

To establish priorities among a long list of potential objectives, grand strategy is central. The United States remains the most powerful nation in the world. Yet even this preponderance of power does not afford the United States the ability to solve every problem and respond to every potential threat. U.S. power relative to other major powers is declining and the nation’s ability to achieve intended effects seems to be dissipating even more quickly. Bottom line: the total demand posed by all global challenges exceeds our resources and capacity. This characteristic relates to other problems America faces, such as the increasingly large deficit. The Sustainable Defense Task Force, commissioned by Congress, characterized the deficit problem as a prioritization problem, stating that the United States “spend[s] too much because we choose too little.” Further, when priorities are established, the objectives selected are often maximalist and unrealistic. Americans tend to be problem-solvers and want to attack the “root causes” of an issue in order to solve the problem and then put it behind them. Unfortunately, many, if not most, major security challenges are dilemmas that cannot be solved (at anything approaching an acceptable cost, if at all) and whose ill effects can only be minimized or suppressed. When managing dilemmas, the range of suitable objectives becomes much broader: “kicking the can down the road” may be acceptable if it helps avoid catastrophe. Therefore, the United States needs to determine which risks are vital, which are manageable, and which can be ignored. Christopher Hemmer relates this task to the importance of grand strategy:

Assessing threats is also an essential part of grand strategy. What global regions and issues does Washington need to be deeply concerned about and what ones can be ignored safely? While there is a tendency for a great power’s security perimeter to

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9 Ibid, p. viii.
grow, grand strategy is about assessing the most important threats a country needs to put its scarce resources against.\footnote{Christopher Hemmer, “Grand Strategy for the Next Administration,” Orbis, Summer 2007, p. 453.}

The current security environment, unfortunately, makes establishing vital threats and choosing which objectives deserve scarce resources difficult. Threats are increasingly transnational, interconnected and volatile—therefore, as John Ikenberry puts it, “when we try to imagine what the premier threat to the United States will be in 2015 or 2020, it is not easy to say with any confidence that it will be X, or Y, or Z.”\footnote{G. John Ikenberry, “An Agenda for Liberal International Renewal,” in: Finding Our Way: Debating American Grand Strategy. Eds. Michèle Flournoy and Shawn Brimley (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2008), http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/FlournoyBrimley_Finding%20Our%20Way_June08.pdf, p. 50.} In turn, the difficulty of predicting the future security environment with a high degree of confidence, coupled with the importance of making investment and procurement decisions years before a capability is needed, presents an “investment” problem for U.S. decision-makers. While this problem cannot be eliminated, grand strategy attempts to confront it and inform decisions as to where the United States should invest resources and build capacity given a world characterized by uncertainty and, as Donald Rumsfeld made famous, “unknown unknowns.”\footnote{Ibid, p. 50.}

The injunction to formulate a “grand investment plan” to implement a grand strategy is easier said than done. Although the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) report arguably does a better job of establishing strategic priorities than its predecessors, and former Secretary Robert M. Gates and recently confirmed Secretary Leon E. Panetta are noted for their ability to make tough budgetary decisions, the task of changing the Pentagon’s strategic spending priorities is a Herculean one. It requires expending vast amounts of political capital. Therefore, while the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review “may be the best QDR ever produced,” Patrick Cronin believes that the United States needs to do more to establish priorities and, ultimately, accept risk against extreme, but unlikely challenges.\footnote{Patrick Cronin, “What the Quadrennial Defense Review Tells Us about Ends and Means.” Economics and Security: Resourcing National Priorities. Ed. Richmond M. Lloyd (Rhode Island: Naval War College, 2010), p. 102.} This is where grand strategy comes into play. In the absence of grand strategy, decisions are severely complicated by a systemic preference to resolve immediate rather than long-term problems. An essential component of grand strategy is that it is proactive and anticipatory—crisis management, therefore, “occurs when there is no strategy or the strategy fails.”\footnote{H. Richard Yarger, “Strategy Theory and Planning?” Theory of War and Strategy. 4th Edition. Ed. J. Boone Bartholompees, Jr., http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub870.pdf, p. 45.}
Despite this core principle, and reinforcing the absence of grand strategy in current U.S. policy, Amy Zegart warns that “the “thundering present” has exerted tremendous pressure on secretaries of state to focus on current issues at the expense of longer-term planning.”\footnote{Amy B. Zegart, “Why the Best Is Not Yet to Come in Policy Planning.” Avoiding Trivia. Ed. Daniel W. Drezner (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2009), p. 115.} Officials often do not have the luxury to reflect on the strategic picture in the face of foreign and domestic crises and election cycle transitions. While we can think strategically about some short-term issues, comprehensive and long-term strategic thinking is in disrepair.\footnote{Krepinevich and Watts, Regaining Strategic Competence, pp. 6–7.} As a result, crisis management and ad hoc responses, instead of strategic leadership, have become a defining characteristic of recent U.S. “strategy.” This point is highlighted by a recent Foreign Affairs article by Daniel Drezner. Drezner argues that the Obama administration has, in fact, adopted two distinct grand strategies during its presidency: multilateral retrenchment (cutting back on commitments and shifting the burden to others) and counter-punching (responding to international provocations to demonstrate that the U.S. can rally allies and counter threats). While Drezner accurately describes the Obama administration’s changing operational approach or behavioral style, Drezner fails to mention that the Obama administration has not defined its strategic priorities or (in Drezner’s words) has not provided a “clear articulation of national interests.”\footnote{Daniel Drezner, “Does Obama Have a Grand Strategy?” Foreign Affairs 90, no. 4 (July/August 2011), EBSCO.} Defining strategic priorities, not operational style, is at the heart of effective grand strategy. This also requires long-term thinking, as Harvey Sicherman argues:

> Because the challenges are long-term, the conflicts associated with them will be protracted, and therefore American policy must assume a longer-term perspective, as well. Such a perspective is the precondition for a national security strategy, a plan that proposes objectives and then relates means to ends.\footnote{Harvey Sicherman, “Cheap Hawks, Cheap Doves, and the Pursuit of Strategy,” Orbis, Fall 2005, p. 614.}

If the United States hopes to be prepared for the challenges over the horizon, it would be well served to have a strategy to guide it over that horizon. While this ability is currently lacking, “success depends on more effort and the longer view.”\footnote{Ibid, p. 629.} Through the adoption of a longer-view, U.S. policymakers may gain a greater capacity to establish priorities and determine which risks deserve U.S. resources and which do not, given the short, medium and long-term threat they represent to U.S. national security.

\footnotesize{18} Krepinevich and Watts, Regaining Strategic Competence, pp. 6–7.
\footnotesize{19} Daniel Drezner, “Does Obama Have a Grand Strategy?” Foreign Affairs 90, no. 4 (July/August 2011), EBSCO.
\footnotesize{21} Ibid, p. 629.
Relating Ends to Means

The importance of prioritizing ends is tied to the degree that means are constrained. Effective strategy requires ends, ways and means to be unified and appropriately balanced or the strategist must accept the addition of risk to their strategic equation.\textsuperscript{22} Thus, if U.S. policymakers are left with a large list of unprioritized challenges, then the prioritization problem is significantly amplified when economic trends further constrain the means available to deal with such challenges. Richard K. Betts’ approach to the making of military strategy adds to this point:

Strategy fails when the chosen means prove insufficient to the ends. This can happen because the wrong means are chosen or because the ends are too ambitious and slippery. Strategy can be salvaged more often if peacetime planning gives as much consideration to limiting the range of ends as to expanding the menu of means.\textsuperscript{23}

While Betts analyzed strategy at the operational level of war, as opposed to the grand strategy level, the spirit of inquiry for Betts extraordinary work and this analysis are the same. Weighing means serves as a reality check. It is a critical part of grand strategy because it tells national security policymakers what tools they actually have to achieve U.S. government ends. This reality check then reconnects the process weighing means to the process of prioritizing ends because, again, while the United States resources are ample, they are not unlimited. Therefore, more important than assessing means—and much more difficult—is a dispassionate weighing of ends that can realistically be achieved given available means.

Merely acknowledging a relationship between ends and means is not enough, however. Indeed, a critical role of grand strategy is to specify the “how.” Walter McDougall addresses this issue, assessing that U.S. strategic culture is “uniquely prone” to forget this question. Rather than address “how,” he argues that U.S. decisionmakers instead articulate “utopian ambitions and universal commitment” with the promise of “minimal cost.”\textsuperscript{24} Sicherman expands upon this idea. He believes that rather than a realistic assessment of means to specific ends, U.S. strategy is dominated by a preference for a “spectacular, and inexpensive solution to the crisis at hand.”\textsuperscript{25} While doves may ignore a threat, hawks substitute adequate resources with apocalyptic rhetoric. In either case, the U.S. response is merely a bluff waiting to be called. Worse, it is only after this bluff has been called and the “faux strategy” fails, that America considers a more strategic response to the crisis.\textsuperscript{26} Thus, for

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{22} Yarger, \textit{Strategy Theory and Planning}, p. 48.
  \item \textsuperscript{23} Ibid, p. 50.
  \item \textsuperscript{24} Walter A. McDougall, “Can the United States Do Grand Strategy?” \textit{Orbis}, Spring 2010, p. 179.
  \item \textsuperscript{25} Sicherman, \textit{Cheap Hawks, Cheap Doves, and the Pursuit of Strategy}, p. 616.
  \item \textsuperscript{26} Ibid, p. 616.
\end{itemize}
policymakers to succeed, Colin Dueck prescribes that grand strategy requires a “successful, accurate, and realistic ordering and identification of strategic ends and strategic means, including the relationship between them” [emphasis added].

The importance of matching means to ends has only grown in recent years. While heroic efforts by the outgoing and incoming Presidents undoubtedly prevented another Great Depression, it came at the price of trillion-dollar-a-year-federal budget deficits and an unemployment rate far above pre-2008 levels. Roger Altman and Richard Haass believe that U.S. fiscal irresponsibility will result in “an age of American austerity,” and that the United States must “get its fiscal house in order” so that it can “exert the global influence that it could and should.” After noting that “just what the United States will and will not do will be the most important issue in international relations in the years ahead,” Michael Mandelbaum argues the United States must become a “frugal superpower” and start asking itself “the first question that any other nation does: but how much will this cost?” If the United States avoids asking these hard questions, then the nation’s attempt to eliminate every risk imaginable may unintentionally “[erode] the underlying economic basis for our long-term security.” Therefore, whereas past leaders were able to overwhelm problems, Hemmer argues that the United States should now rely on grand strategy:

Given...the variety of challenges facing the United States abroad, the next American president will not have the luxury of being able to overwhelm America’s foreign policy problems. As a result, thinking about grand strategy, how best to keep America’s means and ends in balance, will become an increasingly important and difficult task.

This point is not meant to imply that grand strategy was unnecessary before the financial crisis. Rather, in an era of increasingly constrained resources, the need for a grand strategy grows proportionally to the increased need to allocate scarce resources among competing strategic needs. Indeed, in response to the current imbalance of ends and means in U.S. strategy, and the resulting addition of substantially increased risk to the U.S. strategic equation, Hoffman may be right that “deferring decisions or failing to provide a strategic framework to assess and allocate constrained resources will only generate additional cascading effects later.”

30 Hoffman, Towards a Balanced and Sustainable Defense, p. 388.
31 Hemmer, Grand Strategy for the Next Administration, p. 460.
32 Hoffman, Towards a Balanced and Sustainable Defense, p. 403.
Executing Grand Strategy

Grand strategy is largely irrelevant if it is not integrated into decision-making processes and executed in a meaningful way. McDougall frames the debate over grand strategy as a debate over whether the United States is capable of executing grand strategy. The core question that must be answered, for him, is: “can the relevant agencies of the U.S. federal government plan, coordinate, and execute grand strategy with sufficient competence to secure the nation and defend its vital interests?” Many authors have a fairly pessimistic response to this question. Aaron Friedberg argues that U.S. strategy faces bureaucratic and political obstacles because bureaucratic interests cause agencies to focus on departmental interests in the strategic planning process, while political appointees’ distrust for bureaucracy and fear of leaks discourages open, candid debates on strategy.

Walter Russell Mead reflects that the nature of American politics acts as an impediment to grand strategy. While he is more optimistic than McDougall about the overall prospects for U.S. foreign policy, he argues that unlike other countries where a leader can guide a country’s strategic direction, “in the United States, secretaries of state come and go very rapidly, and any time a leader is ready to launch a grand design, some congressperson comes in and prevents it because one or another aspect of it might discomfit some industry in their state.” Therefore, the case for grand strategy must include a case for strong leadership in both the formulation and implementation of grand strategy. To overcome the political and bureaucratic inertia that causes strategic concepts to be compromised or to falter in their execution, a leader needs to expend “energy and political capital to bring it into existence.” Thus, while the substance of a grand strategy is important, Dueck argues that “political leadership—and in the United States, presidential leadership especially—. . . turns out to be of major significance in assessing the reasons for strategic success as well as strategic failure.”

Attributes of Good Grand Strategy

NSS practitioners are now facing America’s strategic problems head-on. Congress has mandated that each administration publish a national security strategy by the end of its first year in office. No administration has made this deadline, as the NSS is usually issued in the second half of the first year.
year. However, the world does not wait while an administration thinks through its grand strategy.

The overriding goal of a good grand strategy echoes the author’s earlier work on improving the practice of NSS, namely a “United States that employs an adaptive strategy in the sustained pursuit of achievable objectives.” That earlier work, however, was based on the belief that “it was not the lack of a specific grand strategy to replace containment that is the problem, but the uneven effectiveness with which NSS practitioners make and implement strategy.” While still concerned about the operational effectiveness of NSS practitioners, this revised approach is predicated on the assumption that how the United States defines its grand strategy is critical. This is because it provides strategic guidance to the NSS practitioner as she decides what the United States should and should not do in coping with the seemingly innumerable security challenges of the twenty-first century. Good grand strategy, therefore, is about defining what the right job is, not just doing the job right.

Not surprisingly, strategists are once again debating: what should be the U.S. grand strategy? In this debate, there has been a surge of recent proposals that attempt to win the “Kennan sweepstakes.” While this debate has featured excellent ideas and generated important insights on American strategic culture, it has lacked a set of principles to assess the relative strengths and weaknesses of different approaches. More than a decade ago Mark T. Clark cautioned against uncritical acceptance of a new “trendy” strategy, because “even a passing fad can leave considerable damage in its wake.”

What, then, are the attributes or characteristics of a good grand strategy? The following represent the five most important attributes for grand strategy to guide the United States in the twenty-first century:

1. Balanced: The strategy must ensure that competing interests (security, economics, and values) are properly aligned.

2. Prudent: Since the challenges of coping with a rapidly changing world greatly exceed total U.S. power resources, the U.S. must engage conservatively and cautiously.

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38 Murdock, Improving the Practice, p. 5.
39 Ibid.
40 Feaver, What is Grand Strategy and Why Do We Need It.
Few analysts question the need to ratchet back U.S. ambition and activism. Good grand strategy must strike the correct balance between maintaining the United States’ role as a global leader, while ensuring that U.S. leadership does not face strategic exhaustion. In this case, “prudent” does not suggest that the NSS practitioners should avoid exerting U.S. power when it is in the U.S. national interest, but instead submits that a more restrained application of U.S. power is in the U.S. national interest.

3. **Principled:** As a nation built on “certain inalienable rights,” the United States has never been comfortable with a narrowly-defined realist grand strategy.

The debate over the meaning of American exceptionalism has already entered the partisan discourse and must be addressed. A grand strategy that rejects a role for American values in U.S. foreign policy contradicts America’s character, which will likely prove untenable and may undermine America’s accepted leadership traditions. Sicherman notes that, “in a democracy, foreign policies that cut across the grain of public opinion cannot be expected to last for long.”

4. **Purposive:** U.S. foreign policy should be animated by a vision, articulated in its grand strategy.

No NSS practitioner or theorist believes, much less takes comfort in, the notion as expressed both by President Clinton and his National Security Advisor Sandy Berger that “we can make it up as we go along.” In the context of his grand strategy of restrainment, for example, Martel makes the telling observation that the “exercise of self-restraint can never be a grand strategy itself…. To be effective, a grand strategy must advance positive principles” [emphasis added]. American grand strategy must see over the horizon and articulate a positive vision for that future.

5. **Sustainable:** A successful grand strategy endures over several administrations and is broadly supported by the American people.

U.S. policymakers need a prioritized set of strategic ends, and pragmatic analytic process for matching the right means to those ends. This, in the context of the security environment in which the United States operates and expects to operate. The challenge for the coming decade, of course, is how to

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43 Gaddis, p. 2.
do this without a Soviet-size threat to unify a fragmented national security apparatus and an inattentive public.

**The Applied Grand Strategy Approach**

Some grand strategies—such as primacy, containment or offshore balancer—are defined by the distribution of power of the international system in which they are pursued. Bipolar rivals “contain” each other; multipolar competitors seek “balances” by shifting alliances or “re-balancing” growing rivals; states seeking to prevent the rise of a peer competitor and maintain a dominant position of power. Implicit in these definitions, however, is the narrow realist assumption that all nations pursue power as an end itself, which makes the structure of international power (unipolar, bipolar or multipolar) the principal determinant of nation-state behavior. While this might have been a good approximation of U.S. behavior during the Nixon-Kissinger era, it fails to account for the large role that values or ideals have played in U.S. policy in administrations as diverse as Woodrow Wilson’s or George W. Bush’s. Moreover, both of these approaches to grand strategy ignore the significant role that economics played in U.S. foreign policy during the Manifest Destiny and Monroe Doctrine eras. Additionally, while it is debatable whether revisionist historians are correct that the Cold War was driven by the imperatives of American capitalism, economics has certainly played an increasingly important role in recent U.S. foreign policy, ranging from the promotion of free trade to the protection of U.S. energy interests.

Nations, like people, are not single-cell entities that pursue only one objective or interest. They pursue a combination of security, economic and value goals, each of which can be (and is) defined variably (as is from physical to material or emotional security), and which can change with the context (such as, with the nature and extent of the security threat). In fact, there may be utility in defining a nation’s grand strategies by the different prioritization that it gives to its security, economic and value goals. For example, today’s China has an economics-first grand strategy that seeks to achieve “national strength” through mercantilist, beggar-thy-neighbor policies. Its behavior is that of an Economic Nationalist whose aggressiveness in the market place is tempered by security considerations, not by consideration of values (Confucian or otherwise). Of course, China’s economic pursuits are, in part, driven by internal security concerns (the need to provide employment for a rapidly urbanizing population).

In addition, much as nations have “national characters” or “strategic profiles,” each nation has a value system that is unique to itself, one that

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reflects its origin and traditions. While security and economic goals can be defined in a manner that is common for all nations (basic physical security, minimal sustenance levels, prosperity, etc.), value goals vary among nations—for Americans, freedom is more about liberty and individual rights while Europeans emphasize fraternity and equality. American grand strategies, which vary in the emphasis they place on values, reflect American values (not Russian or Chinese) and are unique to it. No nation, particularly the United States, pursues a completely amoral grand strategy, if only because the appearance of amorality detracts from the effective pursuit of economic and security interests.

Grand strategies vary both in the interests they pursue and the manner in which nations pursue them. For example, those characterized as “Wilson internationalists” and “neoconservatives” placed heavy emphasis upon similar values in their respective grand strategies. Yet they followed very different ways (establishing the United Nations vs. “creating new realities” through U.S. power) for achieving those ends. Similarly, Americans generally support increasing American prosperity, but will differ on the extent to which that prosperity should be shared internationally (in a win-win game) or consumed by Americans (in a zero-sum game).

Recently, the Obama administration has faced a real-time case of applied grand strategy, namely the U.S. intervention in Libya. On March 28, 2011, President Obama explained to the American people why the United States was forging a coalition to impose a no-fly zone over Libya in, according to one columnist, “an exceptionally honest and rigorous defense of humanitarian intervention.”46 Fareed Zakaria observed that the U.S. presidents have “always experimented with the use of limited military means” for important-but-not-vital interests. And “in all cases, the central task was to find the balance between the goals we sought and the means we were willing to deploy.”47 This unfolding case study of applied grand strategy helps to illustrate a methodological approach to better explain U.S. foreign policy decisions and improve its strategic content.

The first step to develop such a methodology is to identify the principal grand strategies that American presidents have applied (and in the case of President Obama, “is applying”) in their foreign policymaking. America has a roster of applied grand strategies that vary according to the priority given to the three types of interests (security, economics and values) and the principal way each grand strategy was implemented. For each of these actual instances of applied grand strategy, the following dimensions of the applied grand strategy can be described:

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47 Fareed Zakaria, “Do We Really Want to Own Libya?,” Ibid.
- Brand Name: a catchy phrase that differentiates it from other grand strategies;
- The approximate weight given to the three baskets of interests: for example, **SECURITY-ECONOMICS-values**;
- The stance/orientation towards the rest of the world: internationalist vs. nationalist;
- The preferred mode of international cooperation: collaborative vs. unilateral;
- The leadership style: pro-active or reactive;

Using this template, the roster of U.S. applied grand strategies includes the following archetypes:

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<tr>
<th>Economic Nationalism</th>
<th>Liberal Internationalist</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>ECONOMICS</strong>-SECURITY-values</td>
<td><strong>VALUES</strong>-Security-economics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nationalist</td>
<td>Internationalist</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unilateral</td>
<td>Collaborative</td>
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<tr>
<td>Proactive</td>
<td>Both Proactive and Reactive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manifest Destiny and the Monroe Doctrine led many presidents to aggressively pursue natural resources, territory, and trade opportunities in the 19th and 20th centuries.</td>
<td>Wilson’s support for the League of Nations and 14 Points speech makes him the archetype for Liberal Internationalists.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Containment</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>SECURITY-VALUES</strong>-economics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nationalist</td>
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<tr>
<td>Both Unilateral and Collaborative</td>
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<tr>
<td>Proactive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Truman adopted Containment to counter the expansion of Soviet governance and ideals and applied it through covert action, the Marshall plan, and founding NATO.</td>
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<th>New World Order</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>SECURITY-Economics-values</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Internationalist</td>
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<tr>
<td>Both Unilateral and Collaborative</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reactive</td>
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<td>Bush 41’s New World Order speech and corresponding Desert Storm intervention exemplified this grand strategy.</td>
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<th>NeoConservative</th>
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<td><strong>VALUES-SECURITY</strong>-economics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nationalist</td>
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<td>Proactive</td>
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<td>Bush 43 adopted a NeoConservative grand strategy, best demonstrated through the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.</td>
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<th>Realpolitik</th>
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<td><strong>SECURITY</strong>-Economics-values</td>
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<td>Nationalist</td>
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<td>Unilateral</td>
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<td>Proactive</td>
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<td>Nixon and Kissinger adopted a Realpolitik grand strategy and applied it by re-opening relations with China and ending the Vietnam War.</td>
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<th>Liberal Globalism</th>
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<td>Clinton’s support for multinational trade institutions highlighted his grand strategy of Liberal Globalism.</td>
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<td>Obama’s measured approach to Libya illustrates the Balanced Internationalism grand strategy.</td>
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The potential utility of the concept of applied grand strategy for analyzing U.S. foreign policy can be seen in the Obama administration’s careful parsing of ends and means in Libya. Economic interests matter greatly to this President as he faces re-election in 2012: the Japanese earthquake/tsunami and the unfolding crisis in Libya did not prevent him from taking his first trip to Latin America because, as he put it, “in this increasingly interconnected and fiercely competitive world, our top priority has to be creating and sustaining new jobs and new opportunities for our people.”48 In fact, it is noteworthy that the title of his USA op-ed at the beginning of the trip was “Jobs at top of Latin America agenda.”

The importance of economics in the administration’s handling of Latin America appears to stand in contrast to its Libya policy. The United States has few direct economic interests in Libya (most Libyan oil goes to Europe, particularly Italy). Rather than economics, a motivating factor in the U.S. intervention in Libya appears to be the careful weighing of the burdens of global leadership. As Jim Hoagland observed, President Obama “is recalibrating American power in a world where a financially weakened, politically polarized United States no longer commands but can still lead—if with a lighter touch.”49 The administration was also weighing the importance of American values and security. President Obama stated on March 28 that both American values—preventing “the prospect of violence on a horrific scale” if Qaddafi’s forces seized Benghazi—and American security—the potential reversal of the historic wave of “democratic impulses that are dawning across the region”—were at stake. However, in weighing these factors the administration decided that they were not important enough to warrant U.S. unilateral action, given the burdens the U.S. incurred in Iraq and the potential risks from the introduction of U.S. ground forces. Instead, as Michael O’Hanlon acutely observed, President Obama emulated his predecessor, Bill Clinton, in Kosovo by finding “a strategic middle path between decisive force and passivity.”50

How well has Obama done? Ruth Marcus believed that it was a “confluence of factors” that tipped the balance in favor of intervention: “the capacity to prevent imminent harm with little risk to U.S. forces; willing international partners, including Arab nations [Hoagland believes that the participation of neighboring countries is the “cardinal rule for the success of humanitarian intervention”]; negative spillover effects of inaction, including encouraging other dictators to conclude that repression is the best strategy.”51 The Washington Post, however, pointed out that “[w]hat was missing...was a

48 President Obama, “Jobs at Top of Latin America Agenda,” USA, March 18, 2011, p. 15A.
strategy that doesn’t rely on good fortune, a sudden coup, an unexpected rebel advance, or an unlikely political deal for Mr. Gadaffi’s departure.”

President Obama addressed this ends-means gap by stating that the purpose of military action was limited to “protecting the Libyan people” and that the goal of removing Qadaffi from power would be “actively pursue[d]. . . through non-military means.” This, of course, was not robust enough for Charles Krauthammer (and many other neoconservatives) who quoted Napoleon: “If you go to take Vienna, take Vienna.” Another conservative columnist but one with considerably more empathy for the Obama administration, David Brooks, does not like the words being used to describe the evolving policy but does approve of the policy which he characterizes as a “Squeeze and See” strategy that may eventually work. Michael O’Hanlon also believes it may succeed because it “seems like a prudent way to test the strength of the regime and expose its weakness.”

How will this work out? That, of course, remains to be seen, but hopefully—since chance always plays a role—it will meet Zakaria’s standard for “limited interventions,” which may be “limited successes” but “avoid catastrophic failures.”

Utilizing the applied grand strategy—in the Libyan case, the grand strategy that the Obama administration is still developing—helps the analyst understand how an administration, particularly the President, iterates between ends and means in deciding what to do in a particular instance. Several commentators and bloggers—most notably Foreign Policy’s Daniel Drezner and The Guardian’s Michael Tomasky—insist that grand strategy, a so-called “Obama Doctrine,” played no role in the Libyan crisis. Additionally, others have argued that the Libyan intervention was a case of strategy overreach because U.S. interests in Libya are not sufficiently important. Robert Farley, however, has it right when he observes that “there is no simple dichotomy opposing grand strategy and muddling through”:

[GRand strategy offers neither a template nor a roadmap for dealing with particular foreign policy events. Rather, it highlights certain values and gives some indication of how those values relate to one another. As such, a grand strategy gives guidance to policymakers in specific crises without dictating a particular response.

This is the level of applied grand strategy, which provides a standard (or guidance) against which to compare the means at hand to achieve the

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53 Need to find citation.
55 Zakaria, Ibid.
combination of ends called for in the grand strategy being applied. Using the standard provided by its grand strategy, the Obama administration decided that the stakes involved merited their carefully-limited intervention in Libya but not, in contrast, either in Bahrain or Syria. The applied grand strategy approach can be used as means to better understand what the Obama administration did and did not do in the unfolding Libyan case. Policy decisions at the grand strategy level, however, do not guarantee the unproblematic implementation of that policy at the operational or tactical level since, as demonstrated by the Libyan operation’s current stalemate caused in part by the Obama Administration’s use of “national caveats” prohibiting NATO’s use of C-130 gunships and A-10 fighters.

The process of formulating a grand strategy and applying it effectively is a complex and difficult one. It must grapple with the current and future security environment, America’s enduring interests in this environment, and sober analysis of the available and acceptable means to accomplish a set of prioritized objectives. The goal of assessing applied grand strategy is to create the foundation for a heuristic tool to identify and assess the strategic implications of foreign policy choices facing the President and his national security team. Strategic decisions are currently made through an interagency process that does not often produce coherent, purposeful foreign policy. However, if practitioners can develop a methodology to apply grand strategy, the hope is to provide the President with a tool to cut through the trivia and chaff to make more strategic decisions about what the United States should and should not do in coping with the seemingly-innumerable challenges of the twenty-first century. The final result of this task is, ideally, to limit overall risk and maximize opportunities in an effort to preserve America’s national security.