

Being Realistic About Strategy

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In the midst of peace, war is looked upon as an object too distant to merit consideration.

—Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus,
De re militari

As this essay is written, America is reacting to a complex mix of international and domestic challenges. The U.S. and those aligned with it confront geostrategic rivalries characterized as great-power conflict, with a rising, revisionist China¹ and a resurgent, revanchist Russia² that act both independently and in collaboration.³ Growing and increasingly dangerous regional challenges manifest in nearly every corner of the globe. The scourge of terrorism, though diminished for the moment, remains.⁴ These challenges are further complicated by significant economic tension⁵ and daunting technological change.⁶ Diverging priorities and political discord at home⁷ and abroad⁸ often result in half measures and paralysis on large issues. The assumptions of the past have not worn well.⁹

These contemporary developments are complex, demanding, and dangerous. Former CIA Deputy Director Michael Morell characterizes this period as “the most complex and difficult global security environment in our nation’s history.”¹⁰ Economically, Bloomberg recently reported leading investors are “bracing for protracted superpower conflict and adjusting their portfolios accordingly.”¹¹ Exacerbating these challenges is a “technological revolution...unlike anything humankind has experienced before.”¹² Indeed, Leon Panetta,

former CIA Director and Secretary of Defense, observed “The last time the global threat picture was this crowded and combustible was in the lead-up to World War I.”¹³ That combustion consumed the world in a catastrophe of world war, economic calamity, and political upheaval that spanned three decades.

America eventually prevailed, but its response, bereft of strategy, was at best reactive. The U.S. entry into World War I, more out of “passion and propaganda...than by realistic analysis [or] prudent...‘war planning,’” left the President and the nation “powerless”¹⁴ to “make the world safe for democracy.” On the eve of World War II, General Albert C. Wedemeyer has noted, “Washington seemed as confused and divided as the nation itself.”

I could find few if any concrete answers to... vital questions. So far as I could discover, no systematic official attention had been given them. No mechanisms for considering them in an orderly and informed way existed within the government. Indeed, I found little awareness or acceptance of the notion that supreme issues of war and peace *required* thorough analysis in the top echelons of the national government. An uneasy feeling came over me that the ship of state was rudderless in the storm; or, if the rudder were still intact, there at least were no charts and orders on the bridge to guide the navigator.¹⁵

Success came at an exceptionally high cost. For the U.S., this included the economic and social displacement of the Great Depression and the bloodiest period of war in its history.¹⁶ With nations across the globe suffering, on average, a 30 percent economic downturn, rising illiberal political movements, including fascism, socialism, and Communism; civil and global war; and, in the end, some 100 million dead,¹⁷ this 30-year period was perhaps history's most consequential.

Yet in its aftermath, the U.S. prevailed in the no less dangerous four-decade Cold War at far less cost. Historically guided by doctrines,¹⁸ America's response to the Cold War challenge was a unique act of grand strategy.¹⁹ Compelled by its new role as a great power and the existential, global post-war challenge posed by an increasingly aggressive and capable Soviet Union,²⁰ America formalized its grand strategy of containment in President Harry Truman's National Security Council Paper NSC-68. Refined by President Dwight Eisenhower and comprehensively leveraging the whole of statecraft,²¹ that grand strategy guided America's successful response across nine presidential Administrations.²²

The Cold War, despite many lesser crises, saw the U.S. avoid nuclear Armageddon and end that great-power conflict with a "whimper rather than a bang."²³ The question is whether the U.S. can engineer a similar outcome despite facing two collaborating great-power competitors²⁴ and a host of other challenges as complex and volatile as any in history.²⁵

Today's great-power challenges, like those of the past, are contests of true consequence, as the global catastrophe of two world wars and the Cold War's threat of nuclear Armageddon confirm. Today's risks, posed by the centennial ambitions, capabilities, and actions of China,²⁶ along with Russia,²⁷ separately and in collaboration,²⁸ are no less consequential. Indeed, they may well be greater as the world has not yet properly evaluated the risk.²⁹

Given the magnitude of those challenges, America and others invested in a system that supports self-ruling government and

market economics should seek to repeat the geostrategic success of our Cold War predecessors: retaining America's global leadership, avoiding Armageddon, and preserving the principles that underpin that system. Fully realized, such an effort must be comprehensive, placing demands on every instrument of statecraft. The business of strategy is a complex one.

Why Strategy?

Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat...

—Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

The concept of strategy originated in ancient Greece³⁰ and evolved over time, with the Romans, Chinese, and Europeans all adding to its understanding. Entering common use in Europe in the late 18th century, its framework expanded as national interests ranged continentally and then globally; weapons increased in sophistication, reach, and lethality; and the resources, reach, and instruments of statecraft grew. On the eve of World War II, Princeton's Edward Meade Earle offered that "strategy is...an inseparable element in statecraft at all times."³¹

In the modern era, strategy has extended beyond the realm of government and war. As Lawrence Freedman has observed, "Everyone needs a strategy.... [N]o serious organization could imagine being without one.... [N]o military campaign, company investment or government initiative is likely to receive backing unless there is a strategy to evaluate."³²

Yet, while many fields rely on strategy to guide their endeavors, none is more consequential than national security. It is here that the concept of strategy originated and evolved, and it is here that the interests of nations and life and death hang in the balance. Given history and the risk inherent in a world challenged by conditions uncomfortably parallel to those preceding World War I,³³ it would seem prudent to "address causes rather than symptoms, to see the woods rather than the trees."³⁴

What Kind of Strategy?

In the realm of national security, however, the debate is spirited and unresolved. As strategy lacks an “agreed-upon definition...that describes the field and limits its boundaries,”³⁵ authorities generally take one of two views on strategy and national security. One holds that strategy is solely the purview of war. The other advances a more expansive understanding.

In this debate, adherents of Clausewitz, author of the 19th century classic *On War*,³⁶ maintain that strategy’s sole focus is war. This view, advanced by many,³⁷ is exemplified by Oxford’s Hew Strachan: “[P]oliticians, who in practice exercise strategic responsibility, have been persuaded by neo-Clausewitzians that war really is the continuation of policy by other means. This is to elevate theory over actuality.”³⁸ He continues:

Today strategy is too often employed simply as a synonym for policy.... Strategy has to deal in the first instance not with policy, but with the nature of war.... [W]estern military thought has been hoodwinked by the selective citation of... Clausewitz’s own introduction...that ‘war is nothing but the continuation of policy with other means.’ That...is not a statement about the nature of war.³⁹

While Strachan acknowledges more expansive views,⁴⁰ he is unconvinced. He asserts that “[s]trategy is about war and its conduct, and if we abandon it, we surrender the tool that helps us to define war, to shape it and to understand it.”⁴¹

Strachan’s skepticism would be familiar to Johns Hopkins’ Eliot Cohen, who rejects the very notion of grand strategy, specifically targeting Earle’s definition of grand strategy as “the science and art of controlling and utilizing the resources of a nation...to the end that its vital interests shall be effectively promoted and secured.”⁴² Perhaps reflecting frustration over the Iraq and Afghan wars, Cohen maintains that the “lure of grand strategy reflects the frustration of military officers at

the intractability of the problems they are assigned, and at what often seems to them the slackness of the rest of government”⁴³ and asserts that “grand strategy is an idea whose time will never come, because the human condition does not permit it [and it] confuses the big idea with important choices.”⁴⁴

For Cohen, containment of the Soviet Union was merely “policy...a more useful if less grand term”⁴⁵ that proved inadequate in defining the U.S. response to the likes of the Suez crisis, Vietnam, or China’s opening. His analysis appears to ignore containment’s larger geostrategic success. Focused on the existential threat of the Soviet Union, as Kennan described,⁴⁶ containment was more than mere policy. Comprehensively orchestrating all instruments of statecraft, this grand strategy enabled America to maintain its focus on the primary threat, notwithstanding countless crises. Reflecting Eisenhower’s view that in the “cold war...victory...could be as devastating as defeat,”⁴⁷ this grand strategy, balancing America’s strengths, guided successful resolution of that generational struggle.

While a thoughtful observer and strong advocate for military power, Cohen does not demonstrate that military-centered strategy is superior to a grand strategy. As Paul Kennedy concludes in *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, “the history of the past five hundred years of international rivalry demonstrates that military ‘security’ is never enough.”⁴⁸ Moreover, a strategy that relies solely on military power would seem to be insufficient given the challenge of China, described by Cohen as “America’s greatest challenge,”⁴⁹ and the complexities of Cohen’s other “distinct challenges.”⁵⁰ It is notable that recent Defense Department,⁵¹ U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission,⁵² and other reporting cast China and the greater security environment as far more challenging than even Cohen found.⁵³

Seemingly responding to Cohen, Freedman concludes that “[s]trategies are neither designed nor implemented in controlled environments.... [S]uccessful outcomes depend on trying to affect a range of institutions,

processes, personalities, and perceptions...[to cope] with situations in which nobody [has] total control.”⁵⁴ Consistent with this view, John Hopkins’ Hal Brands proposes that “[g]rand strategy is the highest form of statecraft...the intellectual architecture that lends structure to foreign policy” that is “essential to effective statecraft, but...so challenging as to be an illusion.”⁵⁵

Illusion or not, an evolving concept of grand strategy emerged from the realities of a world either at or on the brink of war. “The expansion in the meaning of strategy and grand strategy spilled over the boundaries of war and peace, propelled by the increasing complexity of war,” writes Lukas Milevski. “Strategy—and grand strategy—evolved in reaction to the requirements posed by the actual geopolitical context”⁵⁶ where the “distinction between war and peace [is] insignificant.”⁵⁷ These observations are instructive as strategists consider today’s challenges and those on the horizon.

Consistent with “actual geopolitical context,” Brands delineates grand strategy as “[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.”⁵⁸ In a new geostrategic environment of the sort described by Milevski, “[s]trategy is not merely the art of preparing for the armed conflicts in which a nation may become involved.... It is the rational determination of a nation’s vital interests...its fundamental...priorities” that guide “the narrower strategy of war planning and warfighting.”⁵⁹

In an era of increasingly complex geostrategic conditions, the interplay between a grand strategy and a series of aligned and complementary functional and regional strategies would seem to provide a more agile and resilient approach to “what a nation seeks to accomplish in [this] world, and how it should go about doing so.”⁶⁰ Such an approach acknowledges the complexities of this age, the unique and complementary nature of each instrument of statecraft, and the geographic, social, cultural, and historical distinctiveness of various regions.

While the Cold War era was fraught with unforeseen developments,⁶¹ it ended well. That outcome reinforces grand strategy’s value in the modern age while also exposing insights into the challenges of strategy development and key considerations for framing a strategy that can endure over the coming decades.

Considerations of Strategy

This comprehensive interpretation of strategy would give U.S. policy a measure of coherence and stability it has not had, and does not now possess, but which is utterly mandatory if our republic is to meet the challenges of the future.

—General Albert C. Wedemeyer,
USA, Retired

While essential to dealing with complexity, strategy is difficult business. In *Explorations in Strategy*, Colin S. Gray identifies six difficulties: its “complexity,” its demands on “the intellect” and “the imagination,” its “unique physical and moral burdens,” “the uniquely pervasive and uniquely debilitating nature” of friction “in that realm,” and the fact that “success in strategy calls for a quality of judgment that cannot be taught.”⁶² As America repostures strategically, Gray’s analysis warrants careful consideration, particularly when assessing the qualities of those charged with developing and implementing strategy.

Noting Gray’s cautions, strategy also requires capacity. Albert C. Wedemeyer, principal author of the World War II Victory Plan and no stranger to the imperatives for and challenges of strategy, questioned “the adequacy of our national policymaking machinery to deal with the challenges of an increasingly turbulent and complex world.”⁶³ He advocated more effective strategies, asserting that “all the [post-World War II] ordeals America has experienced...could have been much brighter” with more coherent strategies.⁶⁴

The complexity of today’s challenges, however, demands that other considerations be accounted for as well. A recent study usefully noted that U.S. strategies have suffered

systemically from unclear priorities, inattentive leadership leading to lowest-common-denominator decisions, poor links between objectives and resources, and are slow to respond to change.⁶⁵ Its recommendations emphasize the necessity to involve leadership, account for politics, drive priorities, account for resourcing, align objectives across strategies, focus aims, and address risk.⁶⁶

Mindful of history, the perspectives and insights reviewed above, and current and emerging challenges, several considerations should be taken into account in framing a strategy relevant to this era.

Interests. National interests, “the essential foundation for a successful American foreign policy,”⁶⁷ can be characterized as vital, extremely important, important, and secondary.⁶⁸ Interests are synonymous with priority, and strategies not aligned with interests needlessly expend resources and often fail at a high cost. “Only a foreign policy grounded in America’s national interests...will allow America’s leaders to explain persuasively how and why American citizens should support expenditures of American treasure or blood.”⁶⁹ While central to our understanding of our priorities, understanding other nations’ interests is equally important. As British Prime Minister Lord Palmerston observed, “Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow.”⁷⁰

American interests evolved rapidly in the early days of the Cold War. NSC 68 framed U.S. vital interests around national survival, avoiding war, and preserving America’s sphere of influence in the face of exhausted allies and a growing Soviet threat.⁷¹ With NSC 162-2, emerging from Eisenhower’s Solarium Project, expressions of national interests expanded, recognizing the importance of allies, the necessity of choices, the need to balance defense and economics, and the value of stabilizing nations and creating mutual interests.⁷²

On the eve of the 21st century, the Commission on America’s National Interests found “five vital US national interests” that reflect those formulated some 50 years earlier:

- Prevent, deter, and reduce the threat of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons attacks on the United States or its military forces abroad;
- Ensure US allies’ survival and their active cooperation with the US in shaping an international system in which we can thrive;
- Prevent the emergence of hostile major powers or failed states on US borders;
- Ensure the viability and stability of major global systems (trade, financial markets, supplies of energy, and the environment); and
- Establish productive relations, consistent with American national interests, with nations that could become strategic adversaries, China and Russia.⁷³

Even with this consistency, however, fostering a common understanding of these interests and the challenges to them, as well as building support for the actions and resources necessary to protect them, requires evidence, leadership, and communication. Unity on what comprises the nation’s vital interests is vital.

Mindful of Lord Palmerston’s judgment, strategy development must consider the interests of others. For example, the strategic concept of “offshore balancing,” relying on a regional power to check instability and counter hostile powers, depends on the alignment of national interests. The challenges of the non-aligned movement during the Cold War; the limits of ally or proxy commitment in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, or Syria; and issues of freeriding in alliances and coalitions all highlight the implications of conflicting or misaligned national interests. Mapping interests before acting prevents disappointment, overextension, and failure.

Leadership. As in most things, leadership is central to the development and execution of strategy. Leadership has both individual and international components. From an individual

perspective, effective strategy depends on vested leaders. Leadership styles and priorities vary; therefore, process must conform to the leader in question. However, the absence of leader involvement leaves strategy subject to bureaucratic and external influences, risking failure. From an international perspective, alliances and coalitions rarely function effectively when ruled by committee. One member must assume the leadership mantle.

The formulation of NSC 68 originated from Truman's staff because the President was not experienced in policy and planning and was wrestling with a host of domestic and international issues. Truman's inexperience was not unique. In the lead-up to World War II, Franklin Roosevelt "had little time to consider grand strategy."⁷⁴ This bottom-up approach created an impetus for action, but it also resulted in an overly militarized grand strategy and a host of disconnected policies.

Eisenhower's experience drove the top-down Project Solarium, resulting in a comprehensive strategy that prioritized economics and politics, buttressed by prudent military deterrence. Conversely, captured by Vietnam and domestic issues, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon allowed focus to slip. The result was military surprise as the Arab–Israeli War exposed superior Soviet military capabilities that nearly defeated Israeli forces, a reasonable proxy for American forces.⁷⁵ Ronald Reagan hastened the Soviet collapse through a complex, balanced campaign of economic growth, military modernization, aggressive pressure in Europe, arms control, relentless political action, and unsparing political warfare. Engaged national leadership ensures effective strategy.

Absent America's current global leadership role, any strategic approach is not likely to succeed. No nation or coalition with similar interests or values is likely to assume that role or capably bear that burden. Moreover, history has been unkind to declining powers in great-power transitions.⁷⁶ Further, eras without strategic leadership have invited risk, including world wars. However, unlike during the Cold War, growing diversification of power,⁷⁷ especially

economic power, enables more to share this burden. Current and future allies likely resist this obligation.

Unity. The Constitution's requirement that the Congress declare war and the Senate ratify treaties reflects the Framers' intent that a degree of unity is required on questions of national interest and security beyond our nation's shores. Developing, resourcing, and implementing a strategy that can resolve complex and enduring problems requires consent across political constituencies. Strategies without this consensus are invariably under-resourced, lack resilience, and exploitable by an adversary.

This challenge is reflected in the reception accorded America's most recent security and defense strategies. While addressing great-power conflict,⁷⁸ and despite statements of their import,⁷⁹ they are the subject of great criticism.⁸⁰ Moreover, they neither reflect a consensus view, given a widening partisan gap in national priorities,⁸¹ nor enjoy consensus support within the nation's political leadership.⁸²

Problem Definition. Not all challenges, no matter how emotionally compelling, can be treated equally. At best, addressing low-priority or poorly defined problems can needlessly waste resources. At worst, such errors can mire the nation in distractions, exposing it to strategic surprise or risking political, economic, and strategic bankruptcy. Clarity on the problem and its relationship to national interest reduces this risk. Conversely, the absence of unity on the nation's problems makes the coherent formulation and implementation of strategy less likely. This hinders the advancement of U.S. interests, creates opportunities for adversaries and other actors, and denies opportunities to the U.S. and its allies.

America is confronted by a complex mix of international and domestic challenges. Sorting these out is a function of probability and consequence. Some high-probability challenges are continuous, requiring careful prioritization and judicious response so that they will not distract attention from the most

consequential. In the current environment, the challenges of China and Russia are existential, with economics and technology equally consequential as “technology has blurred the lines between national security and economic competitiveness.”⁸³

China, both a Cold War adversary and partner of convenience, is now an expansionist, opportunistic power. Chinese strategic culture is asymmetric to Western tradition while involving the whole of statecraft.⁸⁴ Its social-historical culture is likewise asymmetric.⁸⁵ China’s approach is decidedly long-term. China was recently characterized as “climate change: long, slow, and pervasive, as opposed to Russia’s ‘hurricane.’”⁸⁶ Its strategic ambition, not yet well understood, is to supplant America as the dominant global power by mid-century.⁸⁷

China competes comprehensively. Economically, its gross domestic product (GDP) exceeds that of the U.S.⁸⁸ Technology figures heavily for China, presenting a decade-long,⁸⁹ Sputnik-like moment that can be existential. Over time, given the dominance historically accrued by technologically ascendant nations, China’s military will protect Chinese interests as they expand along the Belt and Road.⁹⁰ Should China’s military modernization and institutional reforms succeed, its military will likely pose an existential military threat in 10 to 15 years.⁹¹ Should China succeed in supplanting the U.S., America’s very way of life will be at stake.

Russia, as the Soviet Union, was a deliberate, opportunistic, and expansionist power with checks and balances that controlled escalation. Today, Russia is a defensive, reactive, and declining power with a smaller, less balanced structure that dangerously fears and will resist decline. Its strategic and historical-social culture is not in the Western tradition. It is driven by perceived vulnerabilities, comprehensive views of power, and the need for immediate decisive advantage.⁹²

While spanning Eurasia, Russia’s center of gravity remains west of the Urals.⁹³ Russia remains focused on securing buffers and restructuring Europe’s balance of power. Its military

is a priority: Its military creates a shield of perceived impunity behind which it wages an indirect campaign to unravel the European Union and NATO, seeking to improve its advantage in a divided Europe. Russia remains an existential threat, given its nuclear weapons, and its asymmetric political will and information power may create existential outcomes. Successful disintegration of Europe would invite instability and war, invariably pulling the U.S. across the Atlantic.

Economics remains an American strength. America and its allies must preserve, promote, and revise the market economic system that has significantly increased wealth, reduced poverty, and diversified economic power across the globe.⁹⁴ Unlike the Soviet Union in the Cold War, China is proving to be a worthy economic adversary, with a GDP exceeding America’s.⁹⁵ Economic security is national security as technology blurs the lines between national security and economic competitiveness.⁹⁶ Further, success will demand constant demonstration of the value of liberty and market economics, as current debates on inequality and socialism highlight. The U.S. must take steps to sustain if not increase economic growth to create resources both to meet the economic and social expectations of its people and to support necessary effort across all instruments of statecraft.⁹⁷ Allies must also reassess their economies and likewise increase the resources available to their nations.

Technology defines the 21st century socially, politically, economically, and militarily. In a period of change of greater consequence than the dislocating impact of the Industrial Age,⁹⁸ the U.S. and selected allies must regain and preserve undisputed intellectual and developmental leadership in technology and proactively prepare the international system and society for the potentially dislocating impacts of this emerging age.

Assumptions. In lieu of facts, prudently employed assumptions enable foresight and narrow the degree of uncertainty over time; imprudent assertions create or obscure risk. Strategy is necessarily forward-looking and is

only as good as the assumptions upon which it rests. Absent facts and evidence, assumptions allow the strategist to see the way forward. However, using overly optimistic projections merely hastens strategic surprise. When assumptions change, the strategies they underpin must change as well. Yet stubborn adherence to strategy despite changing conditions remains more the rule than the exception.⁹⁹

To America's benefit, Charles Bohlen did not fall prey to stubborn adherence to failing assumptions. In 1947, setting the predicate for containment, he observed that:

The United States is confronted with a condition in the world which is at direct variance with the assumptions upon which, during and directly after the war, major United States policies were predicated.... [H]owever much we may deplore it, the United States...must re-examine its major policy objectives.... Failure to do so would mean that we would be pursuing policies based on the assumptions which no longer exist....¹⁰⁰

Today's strategic process has not benefitted from such candid foresight. Despite decades of assumptions that discounted adverse outcomes,¹⁰¹ adversaries have been able to take advantage of American distraction. Although awareness is improving,¹⁰² technological trends can lead to optimistic assumptions on future conflict.¹⁰³ To temper such optimism, strategists should carefully consider Lawrence Freedman's *The Future of War: A History*, which chronicles the folly of short-war pundits and the consequences of their promoting hope rather than clear-eyed analysis.¹⁰⁴

Methods. The instruments of statecraft are most effective when adequately resourced, employed comprehensively, and coordinated. Significant objectives are rarely achieved without the coordinated use of these instruments; without coordination, they can even work at cross-purposes. The resources and capacity of the agencies associated with each instrument must also be clearly understood; otherwise,

strategies will fall prey to unrealistic expectations. Recognizing the truth of Eisenhower's Cold War concern that "victory...could be as devastating as defeat,"¹⁰⁵ America's political, economic, informational, and technological instruments must lead and be backed by capable military power, prudently resourced, and mindful of Paul Kennedy's great-power trap.¹⁰⁶

Given its importance to national security, military power deserves a more focused review. Military power serves the nation by protecting, defending, and supporting America and its people, deterring physical—or, given the technologies of this age, nonphysical or virtual—attack on the United States and its allies.

In the face of indirect operations in peacetime, the military must create conditions that enable statecraft's other instruments to create and sustain an environment in which American society, liberty, and market economies thrive. If America is attacked, military power should fight forward and defeat any attacker to defend the strength and viability of America's society and allies and minimize war's effects on the homeland.

However, the realities of war against an existential threat place a premium on deterrence, made real by the capability and capacity to fight and win. Deterrence enables other instruments of power to check and defeat China and/or Russia artfully, without direct conflict. While a militarized strategy is inadequate given the comprehensive and complex threats facing America, the other instruments of statecraft cannot succeed in the absence of a viable military strategy.

Accounting for these roles and emerging, new methods and means for war will require the military to posture accordingly. This is a complex undertaking, resolution of which exceeds the scope of this essay.

Resources. Resources enable action. An inadequately resourced strategy is merely rhetorical flourish, obscuring risk and inviting miscalculation by the nation and its adversaries. Conversely, resource-constrained objectives can also obscure risk. The phrase "strategy driven, resource informed," while

promoting the preeminence of interests over resources, loses credibility in the face of scarce resources. This requires a careful balance of disciplined ambition, risk, and resources, including the need to generate more. Absent that balance, any strategy rapidly becomes hollow rhetoric or worse.

In the concluding chapter of *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, Paul Kennedy highlights the risk of imbalanced, overextended strategies, noting that they come with “dire implications for [a state’s] long-term capacity to maintain...its international position.”¹⁰⁷ Reflecting that insight, Eisenhower weighted the economic and political over the military, relying on nuclear forces instead of a larger conventional military for deterrence. Reagan avoided Kennedy’s great-power trap by growing the economy, balancing America’s economic and military power, while creating additional resources to fund the so-called Reagan buildup, which built the modern military that delivered Desert Storm’s four-day air-ground war.

Strategies today require similar balances.

Conclusion

The international developments challenging the U.S. and the larger international system

are daunting. Nevertheless, those challenges can be resolved, ending with a “whimper rather than a bang”¹⁰⁸ through the development and implementation of comprehensive strategy.

This strategy must preserve America’s global leadership role and its military, economic, and technological advantages while preventing conflict, and success will demand leadership, clarity on America’s national interests and the challenges to them, a sense of common national purpose, adequate resources, foresight, and constant assessment and adjustment. It must be realistic regarding interests, risk, resources, and endurance. It cannot be narrowly focused on one aspect of statecraft, but rather should comprehensively orchestrate all instruments of statecraft.

Navigating this dangerous and complex period can repeat the geostrategic success realized by our Cold War predecessors: retaining America’s global leadership, avoiding Armageddon, and preserving the principles that underpin a system that promotes the consent of the governed and free markets. To do so, this effort must be comprehensive, placing demands on every instrument of statecraft. That is the business of grand strategy.

Endnotes

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