

Primacy without a Plan?

NATHAN FREIER

“Most people assume there are all sorts of ‘master plans’ being pursued throughout the US government. But, amazingly, we are still searching for a vision to replace the decades-long containment strategy that America pursued to counter the Soviet threat.”

— Thomas Barnett¹

Textbook models for policy and strategy formulation argue that grand strategic success relies on the effective development of a rational, consistent, meaningful, and—to some extent—consensus grand strategic design that enforces discipline and unity over the discrete policy choices of American government.² One can, for example, make a cogent argument that foundational Cold War efforts like Kennan’s “long telegram” and his “X” article (“Sources of Soviet Conduct”); NSC 20/4 (“US Objectives with Respect to the USSR to Counter Soviet Threats to US Security”); NSC 68 (“United States Objectives and Programs for National Security”); the Eisenhower Solarium Project; and, finally, NSC 162/2 (“Basic National Security Policy”) established just such a grand strategic foundation; and further, that this foundation, with some subsequent and at times substantial course correction and style adjustment, informed and guided strategic decisionmakers for half a century.³

These foundational Cold War initiatives chartered grand strategic choices for the nation that were ends-focused, progressively ways- and means-rationalized and thus more readily risk-informed. They enabled senior decisionmakers to see discrete policy choices within a strategic context that was broader and often more consequential than that which defined and bounded the most immediate challenges and crises of the day. In the end, it is safe to say that they enabled successive executives to make effective and rational cost-benefit calculations that enforced some consistency on policy decisions over time. By doing so, they also underwrote an ordered defense of the nation’s long-term strategic interests.

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The post-Cold War reality is unfortunately quite different. Over a half decade of blue-ribbon panels, think-tank research, and expert commentary have made it quite clear that, since the end of the Cold War, the nation has had no grand strategy.⁴ Nor, for that matter, does it have the capacity for meaningful net assessment and planning.⁵ There is no risk-informed grand strategy or consensus strategic vision guiding American great power or enforcing discipline over the employment of those instruments of power so critical to securing American primacy most effectively. There is no standing design chartering broad, integrated American political, military, and economic action to secure the state's position and influence in a rational and deliberate way.⁶ Frankly, the exercise of American influence is not, as many imagine and as Thomas Barnett quips about in the quotation at the beginning of this article, the product of some deliberative, whole-of-government process enforcing unity, order, and focus on the nation's instruments of power. Instead, American power is employed against discrete challenges in isolation as they arise with neither detailed nor comprehensive, whole-of-government consideration of the broader implications or risks associated with either action or inaction.⁷

Believing otherwise—believing, for example, that the nation is operating according to some coordinated grand doctrine that has been both vetted by and socialized across the whole of the American government—implies that three key questions can be answered satisfactorily. First, since the end of the Cold War, has the United States corporately devoted the requisite intellectual and political energy necessary to truly understand its own relative position in detail and the real obstacles, risks, and costs associated with maintaining that position over time? Second, has the United States developed a consensus grand design that employs all of the enormous potential embodied in its instruments of power in order to secure its strategic position and influence effectively against direct and indirect challenges to both?⁸ Finally, if one believes the previous two questions can be answered in the affirmative, have the nation's strategy elite identified and articulated the principal aspects

Lieutenant Colonel Nathan Freier is Director of National Security Affairs at the US Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute (SSI). Prior to joining SSI, he served in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, where his principal responsibilities included development of the *National Defense Strategy*. Previously, he was a visiting scholar at the University of Maryland's Center for International and Security Studies and a strategist with the Strategic Plans and Policy Directorate, Department of the Army Staff, in Washington, D.C. From January to July 2005, Lieutenant Colonel Freier served as a strategist with Headquarters, Multi-National Force–Iraq. He is a graduate of the US Army Command and General Staff College and holds master's degrees in international relations and politics from Troy State University and the Catholic University of America.

of the resultant grand design and have they assessed and accounted for the real costs associated with pursuing it in a meaningful way? Reasonable analysts will conclude that the answer to all three questions is no.⁹

Opportunity Lost?

When the Soviet Union collapsed, the power dynamics of international politics changed for certain. Yet American policy elites in and out of power never fully appreciated that this fundamental and quite favorable sea change in the distribution of power still required some deliberate and thoughtful consideration of the nation's newly acquired, singular position of dominant influence.¹⁰ These same elites also failed to undertake any serious appraisal of the extraordinary demands associated with maintaining the nation's dominant position against an expanding sea of smaller but nonetheless uniquely capable and complex strategic competitors and challenges. This newly recognized universe of challenges ranged from the purely economic, political, and obstructionist to the irreconcilably violent and dangerous. Today, this universe includes states, transnational movements, sub-state spoilers, and even individuals. In the 2006 report *Integrated Power: A National Security Strategy for the 21st Century*, Lawrence Korb and Robert Boorstin agree, observing:

From the fall of the Berlin Wall to the collapse of the Twin Towers to the invasion and occupation of Iraq, the United States has lacked a national security strategy that properly reflects the reality of a new era. This despite the fact that today's geopolitical situation is markedly different from the Cold War era, when our country had a clear, coherent, and widely supported plan that focused on containing and deterring Soviet Communist expansion. And this despite the events of September 11, 2001, which reshaped the way Americans looked at the world.¹¹

Absent the Cold War's compulsion for political discipline on issues of grand strategy—a discipline imposed by the threat of imminent nuclear confrontation—the strategic environment within which the United States would in the future defend its political, economic, and security advantages was at once abundantly more complex and unpredictable. Yet then and now, in spite of 15 years of post-Cold War experience, much of this complexity remained and remains unaccounted for in a deliberate and objective way. Despite continuing post-Cold War, mainstream consensus on the need to maintain the nation's dominant position, there simply has never been any serious effort made to appreciate how the nation might do so effectively, employing its broad instruments of power under such radically different strategic circumstances.¹² Many outside of Washington officialdom have recognized that employment of the classical instruments of power—particularly military power—in tradi-

tional combinations and according to 20th-century rules would be at best less relevant to securing American primacy in the 21st century. However, those exercising or destined to exercise decisive influence over the strategic direction of the nation failed to recognize this transformative event in sufficient detail, and thus opted instead for a form of business as usual.

There was at the end of the Cold War and is today a desperate need for strategic innovation and a new commitment to reasoned grand strategy.¹³ Nuance, consensus-building, burden-sharing, strategic deliberation and patience, risk management, policy discipline, humility, and, above all, temperance are necessities for the effective defense of American position in the 21st century. However, all of these were and remain in increasingly short supply, as American decisionmakers continue demonstrating an almost messianic confidence in the strength, durability, vitality, and universal appeal of American post-Cold War dominance.¹⁴

Chronic overconfidence comes from post-Cold War triumphalism. Many, viewing the world through the prism of 19th- and 20th-century great power, believed the United States emerged from the Cold War unchallenged and unchallengeable—even bulletproof—in grand strategic terms. Thus, grand strategy died. In the minds of many, absent effective great-power competition, there was no longer a need for grand strategy.¹⁵ Conventional wisdom held that the deliberate maintenance of position need not be so deliberate if the United States could continue underwriting a secure status quo solely by drawing on what many thought to be an unlimited and invulnerable supply of strategic advantages. There simply was no need to evaluate relative position and plan deliberately to maintain it, if that position was and would remain unassailable.

Today, strategic decisionmaking is dominated more by regionalists and policy wonks than by grand strategists.¹⁶ In this environment, national interests are often conflated with the narrower interests of popular whim, individual executive departments and their bureaucracies, even ambitious and convincing politicians jealously pursuing discrete policy interests and exercising power disproportionate to their official position. Under these circumstances, policy decisions that trigger either action or inaction can, without some care, unknowingly expose the nation to enormous risk. For example, absent the guiding hand of a consistent grand strategy and without some advanced and thoroughgoing assessment of strategic risk and cost in context, it is simply unknowable whether the most expedient and direct route to deposing a hostile regime is not, at the same time, fundamentally disruptive to the reasoned defense of the nation's strategic position in the future. Likewise, though it may seem outwardly intuitive, it is equally unclear whether or not new nuclear states are intolerable or manageable. And, if they are the former,

whether the United States can do anything about them without incurring some prohibitive grand strategic cost.

It is simply safe to say that deliberative net assessment, strategy development, and strategic planning are not employed as “best practices” for the exercise of American great power. There is, to be sure, a surplus of unclassified statements of strategy that purport to govern the nation’s approach to broad national security issues, national defense and military affairs, homeland security, terrorism, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, cyber-security, and so on. However, all rely heavily on form over substance and focus more on delivering strategic communications themes than they do on establishing real, actionable, risk-tested strategic or grand strategic priorities.¹⁷ In the end, therefore, none satisfies, in whole or in part, the very real and growing need for a more fundamental *ends*-focused, *ways*- and *means*-rationalized, and *risk*-informed grand strategy governing the deliberate maintenance of American position and influence into an indefinite strategic future. It is simply assumed as a matter of faith that American primacy is in principle secure at its foundation—no matter what the risk and cost associated with maintaining it.

Primacy of the Comfortable, Vulnerable, and Unaware

I propose an alternative perspective that calls the assumption that closed the previous section into serious question. This view accepts that the nation’s absolute power, in classically realist terms, may be unassailable for the foreseeable future; in short, its material capacity may in fact be somewhat secure from fundamental dislocation. However, its relative position of power and influence may at the same time be increasingly vulnerable to some conscious, internal repudiation of the high costs and risks associated with maintaining American primacy. Thus, though the United States may have all the potential power necessary to maintain its position, the will to employ that power most effectively may be at increasing risk. The framers of NSC 68 feared the same in 1950 when they observed:

We run . . . the added risk of being confused and immobilized by our inability to weigh and choose, and pursue a firm course based on a rational assessment of each. The risk that we may thereby be prevented or too long delayed in taking all needful measures to maintain the integrity and vitality of our system is great. The risk that our allies will lose their determination is greater. And the risk that in this manner a descending spiral of too little and too late, of doubt and recrimination, may present us with even narrower and more desperate alternatives, is the greatest risk of all.¹⁸

The events of 9/11 changed only our perspective on the world, not our approach to it. The realities of post-modern great power and primacy were sud-

denly at the nation's doorstep, seemingly unannounced and without the benefit of advanced consideration of how to both protect our physical security while, at the same time, securing and extending our long-term strategic position across Morgenthau's elements of power. American great power relies on three key but vulnerable sources of strength for its continued vitality: a homeland secure from fundamental dislocation or disruption,¹⁹ a strong and vibrant network of alliances and partnerships founded on common interests and values,²⁰ and a population and its opinion elites inured to the inherent costs of primacy.²¹ The events of 9/11 and subsequent experience have made clear the inherent vulnerability of all three.

From the end of the Cold War to 9/11, there had been an obvious and natural erosion of common interest and discipline in the nation's traditional alliances and partnerships. Further, many had begun warning that the political, economic, and physical security of the American homeland itself was increasingly vulnerable to attack by sub-state and transnational actors less constrained by the norms and conventions that govern international relations. Finally, all Americans had grown comfortable with the benefits of primary influence, but had done so with little appreciation for the substantial fiscal, material, human, psychological, and political burdens that could be associated with its continued maintenance over time. Thus, many were caught quite unaware by the steady accumulation of real cost that began suddenly with the 9/11 attacks and that has continued unabated ever since.

With respect to the latter source of strength in particular—a population inured to the costs associated with primacy—there continues to be some genuine shock among average and elite Americans alike that ubiquitous American influence breeds resistance and unease. This dangerous naiveté ignores a central maxim of international politics—great power engenders respect but it also foment fear, envy, and venom as well. Worse, it hazards a persistent underappreciation of the accumulating costs associated with maintaining American primacy in a world increasingly marked by open resistance to and mistrust of US power and motivations. It is difficult for many Americans to reconcile in their own minds the idea that the United States can be admired, revered, and relied on, while at the same time actively resisted, balanced against, and hated as well.²² This cognitive dissonance can result in imprudent denial of political realism where some in the American strategy elite are captured by unachievable, risk-untested political rhetoric at the expense of real strategic calculation.

This unique and difficult position makes for very turbulent and treacherous strategic waters which, to be sure, are best navigated by design rather than chance. This is the inhospitable environment that honest post-modern national security strategists must occupy and conquer. It is an envi-

ronment that requires far more Thomas Hobbes than many would like to admit. Successful defense of American position and interests often requires suspension of ideal goals in favor of more stable, often minimally favorable, but still acceptable alternatives.

Self-awareness and early acknowledgment are often identified as essential first steps in overcoming addiction. If this is true, then the United States and its strategists can break what amounts to a dangerous dependency on idealism only by recognizing two very important realities about the American position of dominant power and influence. First, no one—except the most powerful—considers dominant global power to be benign. Thus, resistance and obstruction to the United States are natural and unavoidable components of the post-Cold War, post-9/11 strategic environment.²³ Further, current American dominance in traditional realms of security competition will most assuredly guarantee that any active, violent resistance to it will be, by definition, irregular and catastrophic in character. Indeed, it is clear that the United States has likely entered a period of persistent irregular and potentially catastrophic conflict that will present it with the most immediate and consequential physical and psychological challenges to its position and influence.²⁴ Thus, a national security structure that remains optimized to confront increasingly lower-probability traditional threats—even under the guise of transformation—will face fundamental challenges without some substantial structural and cultural adjustment.

Second, great power is neither exercised nor retained effectively without strict adherence to a long-term, self-interested grand design that jealously protects the nation's key sources of strength but also employs power judiciously. This is not to suggest that the United States should exercise power without some reference to its moral compass, core values, or beliefs. However, it does imply that the nation should calculate its real, tangible interests first and then identify those areas where its morals, values, beliefs, and interests intersect most decisively in order to establish priorities for action.²⁵

Failure to come to terms physically, morally, or psychologically with either of these realities will only bring political and grand strategic disappointment. Failure in the first instance, for example, hazards naïve optimism about how the United States and its actions will be perceived by others around the world. The United States ignores the history of great powers at its peril. Failure with respect to the second will see the United States erode its finite capacity, addressing the immediate and most visually evocative traditional challenges at the expense of husbanding its capacity to contend decisively with what may be its less obvious or less immediate but nonetheless more important and truly strategic challenges.

Uninformed by a grand design that takes the aforementioned to heart and then identifies where the nation is headed, how it will proceed, what ob-

stacles it can expect to encounter, and, finally, in what condition it would like to arrive at its destination, American great power today appears only capable of attacking one big challenge at a time. And even then ineffectively, given no rational whole-of-government capacity for net assessment, strategy development, strategic planning, and risk assessment. In the absence of grand design, the United States is left to employ its enormous power reactively and sometimes haphazardly. As a result, US policy can, both in perception and fact, be more short-sighted, less judicious, more arbitrary, and perhaps more martial than it either should or has to be. The United States may enjoy immediate, transient success as a result of some policy choices. However, at what cost to its yet-undefined, enduring grand strategic interests and, indeed, at what price to those around the world upon whom the United States depends for some assistance in protecting and extending its primary influence?

Absent some revolutionary change in the thinking of the most senior in the strategy development and strategic decisionmaking arena, these circumstances will persist. And while the United States enjoys unprecedented international influence and power now, it hazards precipitous loss of both by its own errors of strategic omission and commission in the future. Indeed, strategic action—undertaken without reference to some guiding vision or consensus destination; without conscious, risk-informed choices; and without some deliberate strategic plan for achieving minimum acceptable outcomes—can serve to undermine, vice underwrite, American great power in very short order.²⁶ Thus, the high cost of primacy is rarely accounted for, nor is it ever effectively communicated to the population and their opinion elites. As a result, the United States may have all the potential power necessary to maintain its position of influence, but the will to employ that power most effectively may at the same time be at substantial risk. This may be true at the very time that many around the world believe implicitly in the necessity of continued American primacy as a real bulwark against disorder and insecurity.²⁷

The Iraq War in Context

We know the future is unknowable. But you can't plan a great nation's steps based on everything, quote, "being unknowable."

— US Senator Joseph Biden²⁸

The war in Iraq in microcosm has proven illustrative of the very real hazards associated with exercising great power in the absence of grand strategy. An honest inventory of the strategic environment concludes that aspects of the ongoing conflict in Iraq challenge the nation's three sources of strength fundamentally. Indeed, Iraq demonstrates quite well the intrinsic connection between today's strategic choices, the continued security of the aforemen-

tioned vulnerable sources of strength, and tomorrow's capacity to effectively defend American position, interests, and influence.

With regard to the first source of strength—a secure homeland—the United States must anticipate that the intervention in Iraq will trigger some extremist blowback. Further, it would be prudent to expect that one legacy of the war in Iraq might be a persistent challenge to the American homeland hatched from within the resistance movements now concentrated against the United States in the northern Arabian Gulf and Afghanistan. Given the terrorists' increasing capacity for unbounded violence, this more intense and motivated irregular challenge may in fact threaten the United States with some fundamental disruption or dislocation. Indeed, it is almost certain to threaten the same for a number of key strategic partners around the world.

This does not imply that increased extremist resistance will succeed. Nor does it imply that inaction in the hope of avoiding some near-term increase in violence is acceptable. Rather, it recognizes that—as in the case of the “Afghan Arabs” in the wake of the Soviet war in Afghanistan—there will be some post-conflict terrorist reckoning that, while free-riding on the uncontrollable forces of globalization, will challenge the interests of the United States over time.²⁹ It may be that this reckoning will include some significant near-term increase in the virulence of the terrorist challenge. That this is so should not necessarily inhibit strategic action; rather, it should be an important consideration in the cost-benefit calculations that are so crucial to effective strategic decisionmaking.

With regard to the second source of strength—a strong and vibrant network of alliances and partnerships—it is abundantly clear that the Iraq War has had some negative impact on American relationships around the world. The extent to which the impact is permanent is open to question. However, American decisionmakers should be mindful of two important considerations that can, without some deliberate management, erode the reach and strength of American influence over time. Both are essential considerations for grand strategy development and long-term risk assessment. Each has been made more problematic by the type of great-power activism the United States has demonstrated since the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

First, absent compelling threats to their physical existence, some of the United States' closest partners are suddenly freer to pursue their own discrete national interests in ways that are sometimes at odds with the most conventional conceptions of alliance discipline. This implies that key partners of the United States are increasingly likely to weigh policy options far more independently than they have in the past. They are likelier, as a result, also to follow the political imperatives that are most associated with their own narrow national interests when arriving at their most important strategic deci-

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sions. This will occur at the expense of some of the more abstract common interests they share with their traditional allies or strategic partners. Second, close association with the United States may become very costly in human, fiscal, material, political, and psychological terms to those foreign partners upon whom the active maintenance of American position and influence is most reliant for steadfast support. They too will become the targets of those prone to actively resist American great power. Thus, American position and influence may become increasingly vulnerable to the risk calculations of a handful of foreign political leaders who are themselves vulnerable to voting populations and who are thus certain to pay some price for their government’s continued alignment with the United States.

Finally, with respect to the third source of strength—an American population inured to the high cost of primacy—it is important to remember that great power, latent or otherwise, will invariably engender some general resistance from the less powerful. This is less a matter of theology—good versus evil—than it is one of natural or social law—the instincts of fight or flight, or the conflict between haves and have-nots. In particular, an activist great power like the United States, no matter its motives, can expect that even modest employment of its enormous capacity will provoke substantial physical and political resistance from some quarters. Additionally, it is inevitable that a continuing perception of American unilateralism among some will trigger active balancing behavior as well. Friend and foe alike who perceive dangerous inequity in the global distribution of power or who sense in the current distribution of power a more fundamental, existential challenge will seek to effectively limit American influence through recourse to active resistance and obstruction. Thus, the mere possession and retention of dominant influence, as well as its active employment, will engender some substantial cost. Americans and those who are decisive in shaping their beliefs need to become accustomed to these costs. Without some recognition of them, the United States hazards popular repudiation of international activism.

With regard to Iraq specifically, there are real indications that the broad costs associated with American great-power activism there are increasingly prohibitive to many Americans. Indeed, this appears to be translating

into a more generalized rejection of those activist foreign and security policies that might be essential to the retention of dominant great power into the indefinite future.³⁰ If one accepts that the nation's unique position of strength relies on continued activism, then it is safe to assume that increased popular sentiment against activism places that position in some significant jeopardy. Allowed to continue, this trend is certain to affect the strategic decision-making of those vulnerable at the ballot box. Collective self-doubt, excessive caution, and self-deterrence are natural by-products of a popular rejection of activism. Thus, as a result, the active retention of the nation's position and influence may at some point become unsustainable.

It appears that when the broad cost of any one aspect of activism greatly exceeds popular expectations, the whole enterprise of American great power itself may be wounded. Among the three sources of strength, a decisive loss of popular and, by implication, political will might be the most dangerous and debilitating. If the population cannot be convinced of the very tangible benefits of primary influence—if, for example, Americans see only the downsides associated with primacy—then they cannot be expected to bear the burdens necessary to secure the nation's position of influence over time.

None of the above is intended to imply that the risks associated with the Iraq War are excessive or that its costs automatically inhibit the future defense of wider American interests. It is meant only to argue that those risks and costs must be weighed within a grand strategic context. What should be clear by now with respect to Iraq and grand strategy is that the war is not occurring in a strategic vacuum. Rather, it is occurring within a broader and perhaps as yet undefined strategic context where competing and arguably more enduring interests hang in the balance. In short, there are risk considerations of some consequence that exist above and adjacent to the immediate operational and theater strategic challenges in Iraq. In this environment, one can see how the mounting costs of the war can place the future of American primacy itself at some substantial risk.

Conclusion—What Is at Stake?

Describing a time half a century ago, the authors of NSC 68 wrote, “Conflict has, therefore, become endemic and is waged . . . by violent or non-violent methods in accordance with the dictates of expediency.”³¹ The same language might be used today. If the United States has entered a period of persistent irregular and catastrophic resistance and friction—a period of endemic conflict not unlike that suggested by those words from NSC-68—now is not the time to ignore the imperative for grand strategic calculation. The United States cannot afford to satisfy the immediate demands of its strategic present at the expense of its grand strategic future. It can no longer make discrete policy

of enormous import without some reference to a coherent grand design.³² In short order, the United States needs to assess its relative position holistically, determine a consensus vision for the future of American great power, and then chart the most effective *ends*-focused, *ways*- and *means*-rationalized, and *risk*-informed route to secure that position over time. This demands more than rhetorical strategy. In fact, it demands a new, comprehensive vision for the sustained maintenance of American great power that establishes priorities, places discrete circumstances like Iraq in their proper strategic context, clinically recognizes that resistance and obstruction are natural aspects of a very dangerous environment, and accounts for the real and accumulating costs of primacy in a deliberate and rational way.

Though it will be costly, most agree that the active maintenance of the nation's dominant position is essential, if for no other reason than to ensure continued US control over its own future. In addition, many have argued that American hegemony—humbly applied—will benefit more people worldwide than would a return to the chaos and uncontrolled competition of multipolarity.³³ It is wise counsel to recall that much about the American course once rested on decisions made in foreign capitals. Today, it is clear that American strategy elites prefer exercising exclusive control over the nation's strategic future and those key aspects of the environment that will most affect the character of that future. Yet it is not clear that the American population and their elites are socialized in ways that will allow them to chart the most prudent and forward-looking path to do so or to accept the costs and burdens associated with it.

In the end, guaranteeing the nation's position of primary influence—ensuring decisive retention of both the capacity and will to employ American great power effectively—relies on conscious strategic choices born of deliberation and not impulse. Thus, the war on terror cannot effectively constitute the sum total of the nation's grand strategy, as it constitutes a national response to just one of many challenges to American primary influence.³⁴ A more comprehensive defense against the myriad sources of friction and resistance likely to accumulate over time is required. Clearly, messianic terrorists and irresponsible mullahs undermine the security of American position and interests at their foundation, but these challenges exist alongside others that are or will be equally exigent now and in the future.

Today, states compete with other states and entities economically as much if not more than they do in the realm of security. Thus, maintaining the level of competitiveness essential to continued economic dominance demands the same type of strategic calculation once devoted exclusively to physical security. Additionally, the state and the state system are increasingly vulnerable to the forces of unchecked globalization, while the increasing strength of the simple and compelling idea, identity, ethnicity, and religion all

***“The United States ignores the history of
great powers at its peril.”***

compete against state identification as key principles of social organization. Combined, these erode the foundations of already fragile political systems, fuel the pervasive under-governance so endemic to a number of critical regions worldwide, and increase the likelihood that a state of strategic significance will succumb to its own internal weakness and cause the world some untold catastrophe. All present challenges to physical security, human development, and the spread of effective representative governance. Finally, some prospective great-power challengers and potentially hostile great-power ententes remain on the horizon. But while these sources of competition are traditional in character, it is now likelier that their preferred form of resistance will be surreptitious employment of physical, political, and economic “violence” rather than direct military confrontation. Without some detailed cross-government consideration, these actors could compete with the United States for niche primacy at a future date.

This short list is not exhaustive, but rather illustrative. It should, however, indicate the degree of complexity confronting today’s grand strategist. Embedded in this complexity is one certainty: The nation simply cannot depend solely on intuition to determine what is and is not important. Interest-based calculation must prevail. Thus, strategic choices need to be made within some broader ends-focused strategic context and with some reference to a grand destination for the nation and its people. Without this, the nation’s strength might be consumed by increasingly costly efforts, focused on achieving the truly unachievable—absolute security—at the expense of achieving what is both attainable and minimally necessary to the sustained retention of American position and influence. Indeed, American decisionmakers and the US population ought to become content with managing (and not necessarily eliminating) active resistance, forcing it below the threshold of strategic significance, while pursuing a grand strategy that focuses on securing and extending the nation’s advantages in ways that will both underwrite sustained retention of its strategic position and stable political, economic, and security development worldwide.

Today, the greatest risk to American position is not defeat at the hands of a peer competitor, but slow voluntary retreat from international activism hastened by a cultural aversion to grand strategic calculation and risk assess-

ment. Quite simply, the end of American primacy may come via a persistent, unwelcome, and unanticipated accumulation of strategic costs, as successive American executives exercise great power without reference to grand design, and as average Americans, their most influential opinion elites, and those states upon whom the United States relies for support grow increasingly weary of the price associated with doing so. Absent a real *ends*-focused, *ways* and *means*-rationalized, and *risk*-informed grand design, the United States is vulnerable to slow surrender to strategic exhaustion and voluntary retreat from that essential activism necessary to the security of its position in perpetuity.

NOTES

1. Thomas P. M. Barnett, *The Pentagon's New Map: War and Peace in the Twenty-first Century* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2003), p. 1.

2. An earlier draft of this article included the subtitle, "Toward an *Ends-Focused, Ways- and Means-Rationalized, and Risk-Informed* Grand Strategy." On this point, see H. Richard Yarger, "Towards a Theory of Strategy: Art Lykke and the Army War College Strategy Model," <http://dde.carlisle.army.mil/authors/stratpap.htm>, pp. 6-8; and Christopher Layne, "Rethinking American Grand Strategy: Hegemony or Balance of Power in the 21st Century?" *World Policy Journal*, 15 (Summer 1998). Yarger argues, "Ends are objectives, that if accomplished create, or contribute to, the achievement of the desired end state" (p. 6). He continues, "Ways (strategic concepts/courses of action) explain 'how' the ends are to be accomplished by the employment of resources" (p. 6). Means, according to Yarger, are the "specific resources [that] are to be used in applying the concepts to accomplish the objectives" (p. 7). Finally, Yarger observes, "Risk explains the gap between what is to be achieved and the concepts and resources available to achieve the objectives" (p. 7). Layne defines grand strategy as "the process by which the state matches ends and means in the pursuit of security" (p. 8).

With regard to the first sentence of this article, see, for example, William Ascher and William H. Overholt, *Strategic Planning and Forecasting: Political Risk and Economic Opportunity* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1983), p. 32. Ascher and Overholt observe, "Enumeration of a straightforward core strategy entails a great virtue. . . . The virtue is that its enunciators, their subordinates, the relevant public, and adversaries will all possess a clear guideline to which they can adjust their behavior." Ascher and Overholt continue, "However well contrived individual policies may be, frequent contradictions among policies in different areas and lack of a generally accepted concept of the nation's overall strategy enhance bureaucratic warfare, fragment political support, erode overall credibility, and elicit accusations of inconsistency or even bad faith from allies and adversaries alike."

3. For a thorough discussion of early Cold War strategic net assessment and planning efforts, see Robert R. Bowie and Richard H. Immerman, *Waging Peace: How Eisenhower Shaped an Enduring Cold War Strategy* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998); and Michael J. Hogan, *A Cross of Iron: Harry S. Truman and the Origins of the National Security State* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000).

4. For pre- and post-9/11 perspectives in this regard, see The Commission on America's National Interests, *America's National Interests: A Report from the Commission on America's National Interests, 2000*, The Nixon Center, <http://www.nixoncenter.org/publications/monographs/nationalinterests.htm>; US Commission on National Security/21st Century (USCNS/21), *Seeking a National Strategy: A Concert for Preserving Security and Promoting Freedom*, April 2000, <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/nssg/phaseII.pdf>; Clark A. Murdock and Michèle Flournoy et al., *Beyond Goldwater Nichols: U.S. Government and Defense Reform for a New Strategic Era, Phase 2 Report*, July 2005, http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/bgn_ph2_report.pdf; and Lawrence J. Korb and Robert O. Boorstin et al., *Integrated Power: A National Security Strategy for the 21st Century* (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2006). Before 9/11, both The Commission on America's National Interest and USCNS/21 arrived at similar conclusions. In its report, The Commission on America's National Interests observed, "Lacking basic coordinates and a clear sense of priorities, American foreign policy becomes reactive and impulsive in a fast changing world." Likewise, a prescient USCNS/21 observed in its report, *Seeking a National Strategy*, "No concern of American society is more in need of creative thinking than the future security of this country, but in no domain is such thinking more resistant to change. . . . The time for reexamination is now, before the American people find themselves shocked by events they never anticipated." Post-9/11, Murdock and Flournoy et al., in the CSIS *Beyond Goldwater Nichols Phase II* report (p. 26), observed similarly, "The structures and mechanisms the United States uses to develop and implement national security policy remain largely unchanged. Cabinet agencies continue to be the principal organizational element of national security policy, and

each agency has its own strategies, capabilities, budget, culture, and institutional prerogatives to emphasize and protect. . . . [T]he mechanisms to integrate the various dimensions of U.S. national security policy and to translate that policy into integrated programs and actions are extremely weak, if they exist at all.”

5. For detailed discussions of both the systemic gaps in the nation’s strategic planning capacity and some recommended changes in structure and policy to contend with them, see both Murdock and Flournoy et al., pp. 26-42; and Michèle A. Flournoy and Shawn W. Brimley, “Strategic Planning for National Security: A New Project Solarium,” *Joint Force Quarterly*, No. 41 (Second Quarter, 2006), pp. 80-86.

6. On this point, current President of the Council on Foreign Relations and former Bush State Department Director for Policy Planning, Richard N. Haass, is particularly instructive. See Richard N. Haass, “Is There a Doctrine in the House?” *The New York Times*, 8 November 2005 available at http://www.cfr.org/publication/9168/is_there_a_doctrine_in_the_house.html. Haass observes, “What should U.S. policy be toward a rising China? Or toward an emerging India, a newly assertive Japan, a drifting Europe, or a less democratic and possibly declining Russia? What should be done to thwart the nuclear ambitions of North Korea, Iran, or anyone else? To reduce terrorism? To promote trade? To increase freedom? . . . These are all tough questions, but what makes them tougher is that the United States is trying to answer them without an intellectual framework.”

7. On this point, Flournoy and Brimley agree. See Flournoy and Brimley, p. 81, and Murdock and Flournoy et al., p. 27. Flournoy and Brimley observe, “The reality is that America’s most fundamental deliberations are made in an environment that remains dominated by the needs of the present and the cacophony of current crises.” Similarly, Murdock and Flournoy et al. argue that this “near-term focus brings some substantial risks.”

8. For pre- and post-9/11 perspectives on this, see Lawrence Freedman, “Grand Strategy in the Twenty-First Century,” *Defense Studies*, 1 (Spring 2001), 11; and Korb and Boorstin et al., p. 3. This article assumes both that the United States will encounter direct, purposeful resistance from state and non-state competitors but will at the same time encounter indirect resistance or friction from competing forces of globalization, integration and interdependence, disintegration, and fragmentation worldwide. Before 9/11, Lawrence Freedman observed, “The logic of ‘globalisation’ undermines state boundaries and encourages linkages that transcend and bypass them. Thus any grand strategy for a status quo state in the twenty-first century may not so much be about protecting its international position vis-à-vis other more radical states, but vis-à-vis these more fundamental shifts in the system that contest the very idea of the state.” After 9/11, Korb and Boorstin et al. observed, “Today the greatest danger to the American people is not a single great power or group of rising powers. Instead, the greatest threats are the forces of fragmentation.”

9. For a pre-9-11 perspective, see The Commission on America’s National Interests, *Report*, and USCNS/21, *Seeking a National Strategy*. For post-9/11 perspective, see Murdock and Flournoy et al., and Korb and Boorstin et al.

10. On this, Henry Kissinger observed, “At the apogee of its power, the United States finds itself in an ironic position. In the face of the most profound and widespread upheavals the world has ever seen, it has failed to develop concepts relevant to the emerging realities.” See Henry Kissinger, *Does America Need a Foreign Policy? Toward a Diplomacy for the 21st Century* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), p. 19.

11. Korb and Boorstin et al.

12. Flournoy and Brimley are particularly pointed in their criticism in this regard in the post-9/11 period. See Flournoy and Brimley, p. 80. They observe, “More than four years after September 11th, 2001, there is no established interagency process for assessing the full spectrum of threats and opportunities endemic to the new security environment and identifying priorities for policy development and resource allocation.”

13. Flournoy and Brimley argue similarly, “Given that the United States has embarked on what is surely another long twilight struggle, it is past time to make a serious and sustained effort at integrating all the elements of national power in a manner that creates the unity of effort necessary for victory.” See Flournoy and Brimley, p. 81.

14. See Charles A. Kupchan, “Life After Pax Americana,” *World Policy Journal*, 16 (Fall 1999); and Korb and Boorstin et al., p. ii. On the strategic environment in the 1990s, Kupchan observes, “This decade has been a relatively easy one for American strategists. America’s preponderant economic and military might has produced a unipolar international structure, which has in turn provided a ready foundation for global stability. . . . America’s uncontested hegemony has spared [the Bush 41 and Clinton administrations] the task of preserving peace and managing competition and balancing among multiple poles of power.” Recently, Korb and Boorstin et al. argued more pointedly that the current leadership “has been stubbornly consistent in its certainty that the omnipotent power of the United States will triumph no matter the challenge.”

15. On this, Freedman concludes similarly, “The evaporation of anxieties about a superpower war eased the strategic imperatives that led major powers to keep a close eye on international affairs. It may be for the best that they are no longer obsessed by a search for Soviet mischief-making and communist subversion, but the down side may be the conclusion that there is no need to pay much attention to anything.” See Freedman, p. 15.

16. Perhaps most telling in this regard is the penchant within the American government to channel strategic thought into regional and functional subdivisions. The organization of the executive departments is instruc-

tive. The regional bureaus of the Department of State exercise primacy over institutions like the Office of Policy Planning that, if organized correctly, may in fact be better positioned to attack discrete grand strategic challenges from a global perspective, informed by the vast army of regional and functional specialists. Similarly, within the Department of Defense, grand undertakings like wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are the exclusive purview of regionalists, reporting directly to principals. Those at the working level of global strategy and risk assessment are not consulted. Thus the burden of complex global cost-benefit calculations are left to the senior executive, informed only by the narrow interests of the regional specialists and their skilled advocates.

17. With respect to the current Administration in this regard, Flournoy and Brimley observe, “While the George W. Bush Administration’s 2002 National Security Strategy . . . did articulate a set of national goals and objectives, it was not the product of serious strategic planning. . . . Describing a destination is no substitute for developing a comprehensive roadmap for how the country will achieve its stated goals.” See Flournoy and Brimley, p. 80.

18. Dean Acheson and George C. Marshall, “A Report to the President Pursuant to the President’s Directive of January 31st, 1950,” in *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) 1950, Volume I, National Security Affairs; Foreign Economic Policy*, ed. Everett S. Gleason and Frederick Aadahl (Washington: GPO, 1977), p. 264.

19. This should be taken to imply the physical, economic, social, and political security of the United States. For a foundational Cold War perspective on this, see Acheson and Marshall, p. 238. The concept is outlined best in Section II (“Fundamental Purpose of the United States”) of NSC 68. The report by the Secretaries of State and Defense observe, “The fundamental purpose [of the United States] is to assure the integrity and vitality of our free society. . . . Three realities emerge as a consequence of this purpose: Our determination to maintain the essential elements of individual freedom . . . to create conditions under which our free and democratic system can live and prosper; and . . . to fight if necessary to defend our way of life.”

20. Francis Fukuyama and G. John Ikenberry, “Report of the Working Group on Grand Strategic Choices.” The Princeton Project on National Security, p. 13 <http://www.wws.princeton.edu/ppns/conferences/reports/fall/GSC.pdf>, are particularly instructive on this point. They observe, “The U.S. has an interest in having American leadership accepted and supported by other free nations. . . . Consensual hegemony should not be taken for granted.”

21. See Kupchan; Dean Acheson, “Memorandum of Conversation, by the Secretary of State,” in Gleason and Aadahl, p. 207; and Directing Panel of Project Solarium, “Project Solarium,” in *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) 1952-1954, Volume II, National Security Affairs*, ed. William Z. Slaney, Lisle A. Rose, and Neal H. Petersen (Washington: GPO, 1984), p. 363. Before 9/11, Kupchan remarked on this topic, “Today’s unipolar landscape is a function not just of America’s preponderant resources but also its willingness to use them to underwrite international order. Accordingly, should the will of the body politic to bear the costs and risks of international leadership decline, so too would America’s position of global primacy.” There is also historical precedent for routinized consideration of the cost and risk of great power and its impact on the population. Dean Acheson, for example, told Representative Christian Herter, “The American people must be made to recognize the gravity of our situation and must become reconciled to the fact that we must make certain sacrifices in order to meet the problem of Soviet aggression; that we can only meet it with the full support of the American people, which cannot be marshaled without a thorough understanding on their part.” Further, during the Eisenhower Administration, the Project Solarium task forces were instructed specifically to address, “To what extent would proposed policy and lines of action be supported by the U.S. public and by the Congress, assuming vigorous leadership on the part of principal leaders of the government?”

22. Two years ahead of 9/11, the US Commission on National Security warned in their report *A New World Coming: American Security in the 21st Century*, “A world amenable to our interests and values will not come into being by itself. Much of the world will resent and oppose us, if not for the simple fact of our preeminence, then for the fact that others often perceive the United States as exercising its power with arrogance and self-absorption. As a result, for many years to come Americans will become increasingly less secure than they now believe themselves to be.” See USCNS/21, *Seeking a National Strategy*, p. 8.

23. On this note, the 2005 *National Defense Strategy* acknowledges that “our leading position in world affairs will continue to breed unease, a degree of resentment, and resistance.” See Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), *The National Defense Strategy* (Washington: DOD, March 2005), <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Mar2005/d20050318nds1.pdf>.

24. These ideas were foundational in the development of the 2005 *National Defense Strategy*; for more complete descriptions of irregular and catastrophic challenges, see pp. 2-4.

25. See Haas; Kissinger, p. 31; and James Kurth, “America’s Grand Strategy: A Pattern of History,” *The National Interest*, No. 43 (Spring 1996), p. 14. In discussing democratization, Haas argues national interest trumps all other compelling but less-important concerns. He observes, “Too many threats in which the lives of millions hang in the balance . . . will not be solved by the emergence of democracy. Promoting democracy is and should be one US foreign policy goal, but when it comes to relations with Russia or China, or Saudi Arabia and Egypt, other national security interests must normally take precedence (or at least co-exist with) concerns about

how people and leaders elsewhere govern themselves.” Likewise, Kissinger observes, “Certainly to be truly American, any concept of national interest must flow from the country’s democratic tradition and concern with the vitality of democracy around the world. But the survival of the United States must also translate its values into answers to some hard questions: What, for our survival, must we seek to prevent no matter how painful the means? What, to be true to ourselves, must we try to accomplish no matter how small the attainable international consensus, and if necessary, entirely on our own? What wrongs is it essential we right? What goals are simply beyond our capacity?” Kurth too argues, “Any effective national strategy must be grounded in the long-term, concrete interests of organized groups. This is necessary to sustain the strategy through the ebbs and flows, the fads and fashions, of media attention in foreign affairs.”

26. Fukuyama and Ikenberry (p. 9) agree. They observe, “A solid understanding of the interests of the United States is required in order to enable us to recognize the scale and parameters of the dangers likely to emerge in the coming decades and to deal with them in such a way that advances rather than erodes American interests.”

27. See Kissinger, p. 17; and Robert Kagan, “U.S. Dominance: Is It Good for the World?: The Benevolent Empire,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 111 (Summer 1998), p. 31. Kissinger agrees and argues: “At the dawn of the new millennium, the United States is enjoying a preeminence unrivaled by even the greatest empires of the past. . . . During the last decade of the twentieth century, America’s preponderant position rendered it an indispensable component of international stability.” Further, Kagan observes, “For all the bleating about hegemony, no nation really wants genuine multi-polarity. No nation has shown a willingness to take on equal responsibilities for managing global crises. No nation has been willing to make the same short-term sacrifices that the United States has been willing to make in the long-term interest of preserving the global order.”

28. US Department of Defense, “On Iraq: Testimony as Delivered by Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, and Director, Office of Management and Budget, Joshua Bolten, and Acting Chief of Staff, U.S. Army, General John Keane, Tuesday, July 29, 2003,” <http://www.dod.mil/speeches/2003/sp20030729-depsecdef0385.html>.

29. Just after 9/11, Fouad Ajami described the phenomenon of the “Afghan Arabs” this way: “Today’s warriors have been cut loose from the traditional world. Some of the leaders—the Afghan Arabs—had become restless after the Afghan War. They were insurrectionists caught in no-man’s land, on the run from their homelands but never at home in the West. . . . The counterinsurgencies [in their native lands] had been effective, so the extremists turned up in the West. There, liberal norms gave them shelter, and these men would rise to fight another day.” It would be wise counsel to understand the character of the blowback Ajami describes here, in the context of the current and future strategic environment. See Fouad Ajami, “The Uneasy Imperium,” in *How Did This Happen? Terrorism and the New War*, ed. James F. Hoge, Jr., and Gideon Rose (New York: Public Affairs, 2001), p. 17.

30. See the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, “Opinion Leaders Turn Cautious, Public Looks Homeward,” 17 November 2005, <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=263>. According to polling data, the report indicates, “The public’s overall support for global engagement—which increased in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks—has clearly receded. Just a quarter of the public favors the U.S. being the most active of leading nations, which represents a significant decline compared with October 2001 (33%). The percentage of Americans who agree that the ‘U.S. should mind its own business internationally’ has risen from 30% in 2002 to 42% currently.” With respect to Iraq specifically and its effect on popular attitudes, the study concludes, “The war in Iraq has had a profound impact on the way opinion leaders, as well as the public, view America’s global role.”

31. The National Security Council, “A Report to the President Pursuant to the President’s Directive of January 31, 1950,” in Gleason and Aadahl, p. 235.

32. Here Haass is instructive. He observes, “That a guiding principle is needed cannot be doubted. A doctrine furnishes policymakers with a compass to define strategies and determine priorities, which in turn helps shape decisions affecting long-term investments involving military forces assistance programs, and both intelligence and diplomatic assets. A doctrine also helps prepare the public for what commitments and sacrifices may be required—and sends signals to other governments, groups, and individuals . . . about what this government seeks or is striving to prevent.”

33. On this point, Fukuyama and Ikenberry are instructive. On pp. 11-12 they observe, “American primacy is a necessary condition for an international order that produces great-power peace and prosperity. No other state has the necessary strength, values and geographical position necessary to underwrite such an order. . . . The true logic behind primacy is not a simple desire to be number one or nationalist egotism but stems from recognition that in an anarchical world some states or groups of states will exercise power. Our experience has taught us that it is best that this power is exercised by liberal democracies; the alternative is great-power security competition between the United States and her allies on the one hand and an autocracy or combination of autocracies on the other.”

34. Haass agrees. He argues, “Attempts to ascribe a ‘Bush Doctrine’ to George W. Bush’s presidency come up short. There is less a coherent policy than a mix of counter-terrorism, preemption, unilateralism, and democracy promotion.”