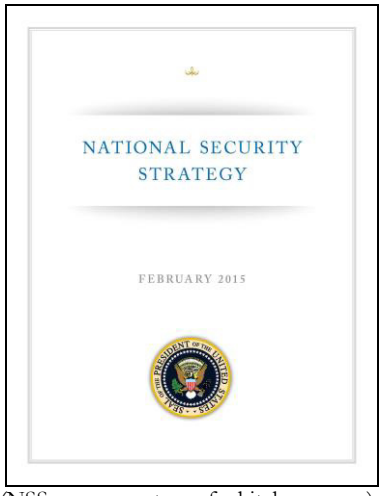
On Strategy, Grand and Mundane

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Abstract: *Is "grand strategy" a useful concept? What is it, and how is it different from "strategy"? Some definitions of grand strategy—as an all-encompassing idea for coordinating the resources of an entire nation to achieve its ultimate goals—are unachievable, overly focused on strategy as a master concept, could unintentionally militarize domestic policy, and blur the lines between strategy and policy. The concept is salvageable. Grand strategy is best thought of as both the intellectual framework or master concept that ties together whole-of-government (but not whole-of-nation) planning, and the long-term pattern of behavior that reveals states' behaviors and priorities in action.*



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Every few years, the White House releases a National Security Strategy, as required by Congress since 1987. Critics immediately pounce: the document, they declare, lacks priorities, is unfocused, is too idealistic or too cynical, too specific or too general. The document describes goals, but not how to achieve them. It describes laudable goals that no one could object to, with little sense of how the various goals (President Obama's 2010 strategy had 18 of them) were to be achieved, with what means, and under what scheme of prioritization. Above all, they say, the document simply is not a strategy—proof that the president (whoever he or she is) does not know how to think strategically and that U.S. foreign policy is in the hands of amateurs. In its defense, advocates may cite some key phrase—"strategic patience" or "democratic expansion and enlargement"—that, they claim, captures the conceptual center of gravity for the president's foreign policy and defines the president's eponymous doctrine and grand strategy.

Despite its repetition, the venerable Washington parlor game of sniping at the president's national security strategy has not, as yet, resolved the broader question that it implies: what is strategy? What is the difference between *strategy*, *policy,* and *grand strategy*? Does grand strategy need a pithy catchphrase to exist? What is the difference between not having a strategy, having a poor strategy, and having a strategy poorly executed? Lawrence Freedman opens his magisterial history of the concept of strategy by noting "There is no agreed-upon definition of *strategy* that describes the field and limits its boundaries."[1] Hew Strachan wrote in 2005 that "The word 'strategy' has acquired a universality which has robbed it of meaning, and left it only with banalities."[2] In some corners, the debate has come to resemble Socrates' practice of examining the meaning of words, only to conclude with his confession of ignorance. In others, the debate resembles the Medieval Scholastics' careful parsing of abstract concepts—security studies having become the theology of "policy," "strategy," "statecraft," "planning," and "ends, ways, and means." The confusion is damaging to public debate because it breeds skepticism about the possibility of grand strategy and the very meaning of words. When Ike Skelton, then Chairman of the U.S. House Armed Services Committee, held hearings on American grand strategy in 2008, several witnesses expressed skepticism that the United States had a grand strategy, or that having one was even possible, and one member suggested the United States give up on "fuzzy Grand Strategy stuff."[3]

However abstruse they seem, these questions are important. As President Obama has said, words must have meaning. We cannot have a conversation about U.S. strategy—or grand strategy—if we cannot first agree on what those words mean. Nor can we judge if U.S. grand strategy is effective or ineffective, or propose alternatives. Conceptual clarity is a fundamental prerequisite of clear thinking—the absence of which has been much on display in U.S. foreign policy in recent history. Grand strategy is possible, even necessary—at least, some versions of it. Rescuing the idea of grand strategy also requires paring it down to something less fuzzy but more useable. One of the simplest improvements the U.S. national security

[1] Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford University Press, 2013), pg. xi.
[2] Hew Strachan, "The Lost Meaning of Strategy," *Survival* 47, no. 3 (2005), p. 34.
[3] House Armed Services Committee, *Considerations for an American Grand Strategy*, 2008.

establishment could make is to root out the more abstract and grandiose notions of grand strategy—for example, that it should be a master concept for harnessing the resources of the entire nation—and settle on something simpler and more functional.

Strategy Defined

Etymologically, "strategy" derives from the Greek word *strategos*, or "general." The art of *strategos* was, originally, the art of wartime command and leadership, specifically on land: thus Carl von Clausewitz's classic definition of strategy as "the use of the engagement for the purpose of the war."[4] A chorus of classic definitions essentially has restated Clausewitz's, with variations: Basil Liddell-Hart wrote in 1954 of strategy as "the art of distributing and applying military means to fulfill the ends of policy," or "the art of the general."[5] Michael Howard wrote in 1979, "strategy concerns the deployment and use of armed forces to attain a given political objective."[6] Richard Betts, in 2000, defined strategy as "the link between military means and political ends, the scheme for how to make one produce the other," or "a plan *between* policy and operations, and idea for connecting the two."[7] Adam Elkus argued in 2012 "The dynamics of political enmity, competition between two opposed forces, and the management of violence are key to classical conceptions of strategy."[8]

The U.S. military has almost universally taken up a model of thinking about strategy developed in 1989 by Col. Arthur Lykke: "Strategy equals *ends* (objectives toward which one strives) plus *ways* (courses of action), plus *means* (instruments by which some end can be achieved)."[9] This has bred some confusion. Classical definitions of strategy identified it as the linkage between goals and tools; or, using Lykke's language, the *ways*. Yet Lykke insists that the whole package—ends, ways, and means together—is strategy. Strategy, then, becomes both the process of linking ends, ways, and means, and, incoherently, the ways themselves. Lykke specifically warned against this blunder, but it has nonetheless become a commonplace and unhelpful confusion in American military circles.

Strategy is "the art of a commander-in-chief" and a "plan for successful action" in circumstances of "competition or conflict," according to the Oxford English Dictionary. According to the Department of Defense, strategy is "a prudent idea or set of ideas for employing the instruments of national power in a synchronized and integrated fashion to achieve theater, national, and/or

[4] Michael Howard and Peter Paret (eds. and trs.) of Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 177.
[5] B. H. Liddell-Hart, *The Strategy of Indirect Approach* (New York: Faber & Faber, 1967), pp. 335-336.
[6] Michael Howard, "The Forgotten Dimensions of Strategy," *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1979, p. 975.
[7] Richard Betts, "Is Strategy and Illusion?" *International Security* 25, no. 2 (2000), pp. 5, 7.
[8] Adam Elkus, "Must American Strategy Be Grand?" *Infinity Journal*, Winter 2012, p. 27.
[9] Arthur Lykke, Jr., "Defining Military Strategy," *Military Review* 77, no. 1 (1997), p. 183.

multinational objectives."[10] "Prudent" is the operative word: strategy is practical wisdom that guides actions to achieve defined results. Simply put, strategy is about problem-solving. It is a plan for harnessing resources and executing action to achieve a desired goal. As such, it is not a science.

Grand Strategy

What is the difference between *strategy* and *grand strategy?* A minority of scholars has treated them interchangeably: Barry Posen, in 1984, defined grand strategy as "a chain of political and military ends and means;"[11] and John Lewis Gaddis, in 2009, wrote that grand strategy is "the calculated relationship of means to large ends. It's about how one uses whatever one has to get to wherever it is one wants to go."[12] But if the terms are interchangeable, there is no need to talk of *grand strategy* at all. Most scholars differentiate between the two in that *strategy* is narrower, usually limited to military affairs, and concerned with means, not goals. What, then, is *grand* strategy? Liddell-Hart suggested

> While practically synonymous with the policy which guides the conduct of war, as distinct from the more fundamental policy which should govern its object, the term 'grand strategy' serves to bring out the sense of 'policy in execution.' For the role of grand strategy—higher strategy—is to coordinate and direct all the resources of a nation, or band of nations, towards the attainment of the political object of war—the goal defined by fundamental policy.[13]

This suggests several aspects to the idea of grand strategy distinct from strategy. *First*, grand strategy includes identifying and articulating the political goals at which strategy aims. Strategy—even the narrow, traditional kind—always includes some consideration of ends. However, traditional and Clausewitzian usage differentiates between political objectives, which are defined by policy, and military objectives, which are defined by strategy. Freedman notes that in contemporary usage, strategy means "maintaining a balance between ends, ways, and means," but also "identifying objectives" *and* harnessing the "resources and methods available for meeting such objectives." Strachan, similarly, subsumes into strategy "a declaration of intent"—that is, identifying goals—as well as indicating "the possible means required to fulfill that intent."[14] Peter Feaver defines it as "the plans and policies undertaken in order to balance national ends and means at the broadest national

[10] United States Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 1-02: Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington, D.C., 2009), p. 229.
[11] Barry Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 13.
[12] John Gaddis, "What is Grand Strategy?" Keynote address to the conference on "American Grand Strategy after War," Duke University, Feb. 2009.
[13] Liddell-Hart, *The Strategy of Indirect Approach*, pp. 335-336.
[14] Hew Strachan, "Strategy and Contingency," *International affairs* 87, no. 6 (2011), p. 1281.

level."[15] Christopher Layne defines it as a three-step process, the first of which is "determining a state's vital security interests."[16] Strategy, in this view, is not purely instrumental; not simply identifying means used to achieve an end designated by some person or process wholly external to strategy. Rather, identifying and prioritizing goals is part of strategy itself. *Grand strategy* goes even further. Because grand strategy included the goals towards which a nation aims, not just the military objectives of a campaign, it is "practically synonymous" with policy. The inclusion of ultimate or political goals in the idea of grand strategy is a departure from classical or traditional notions of strategy.

Second, grand strategy did not only expand upwards, so to speak, to subsume policy; it also expanded outwards. Venturing beyond its core field of military deployment, grand strategy came to include other instruments of foreign policy and even national power. (Indeed, it has broadened in application beyond foreign affairs entirely. It regularly is applied to virtually any kind of planned or orchestrated approach to future challenges, especially in a contest or competition against a sentient opponent, including in business, athletics, and chess.) Liddell-Hart included the management and development of the economic resources necessary to wage war, and the regulation of defense industries. He further included the "moral resources" or public support and will required for war, opening the door to the application of the concept of strategy to realms beyond war. "Fighting power is but one of the instruments of grand strategy—which should take account of and apply the power of financial pressure, of diplomatic pressure, of commercial pressure, and, not least, of ethical pressure, to weaken the opponent's will."[17]

Similarly, Howard recognized the importance of non-traditional domains—logistical, social, and technological—alongside the traditional operational domain that had to be taken into account in any comprehensive strategy. And Peter Layton distinguished grand strategy from its more humble progenitor by its broader scope, by its concern for developing the resources of national power, and by its integrative nature. Grand strategy is "more than the application of resources" to achieve desired ends. It is also "concerned with assembling the manpower, money, and material necessary to build and sustain the means needed" to achieve one's ends. Grand strategy uses all means possible: it is not just a "whole-of-government" approach, but a "whole-of-nation" approach. Grand strategy is "concerned with integrating the application of these diverse means with their creation and allocation into a coherent, cohesive whole."[18]

Third, because grand strategy involved more than the application of military resources, Liddell-Hart argued the concept was not relevant only in wartime. "Grand strategy looks beyond the war to the subsequent peace," he wrote. "If you

[15] Peter Feaver, "Debating American Grand Strategy After Major War," *Orbis,* Fall 2009, p. 548.
[16] Christopher Layne, "From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing," *International Security* 22, no. 1 (1997), p. 88.
[17] Liddell-Hart, *The Strategy of Indirect Approach*, p. 336, p. 366.
[18] Peter Layton, "The Idea of Grand Strategy," *The RUSI journal* 157, no. 4 (2012), p. 58.

concentrate exclusively on victory, with no thought for the after-effect, you may be too exhausted to profit by the peace, while it is almost certain that the peace will be a bad one."[19]

Fourth, the broader applications of strategy, and the consequent construction of *grand strategy*, have bred the expectation policymakers will provide a unifying theme or organizing concept around which to integrate and coordinate the ends, ways, and means, or the several instruments of national power. Thus, Hal Brands defines grand strategy as "the intellectual architecture that gives form and structure to foreign policy,"[20] and Posen as "a nation-state's theory about how to produce security for itself."[21] Martel defines it as a "coherent statement" of political goals and a "framework of organizing principles."[22] Grand strategy, in this view, is a central idea that animates and orders a state's foreign policy.

Taken together, these innovations have created a very broad, somewhat amorphous, but staggeringly ambitious idea: grand strategy as an all-encompassing idea for coordinating the resources of an entire nation to achieve its ultimate goals. If this is grand strategy, it is useless because it is impractical: no state in history has ever had an effective grand strategy, measured by this definition.

Objections to Grand Strategy

There are several objections to this idea of grand strategy. *First*, the grander versions of grand strategy, like Layton's, seem to presume an unrealistic level of knowledge, control, and coordination among policymakers over the entire field of human life. Betts rightly notes that there are considerable "barriers to prediction and control imposed by political and military complexity" that prevent the effective design and implementation of coherent strategy. He highlights psychological, organizational, and political barriers to effective strategy, but his strongest argument stems from epistemology and human finitude. Designing means to achieve a goal presumes knowledge about the laws of cause and effect in complex political and military situations. This sort of ambitious strategy would be possible for an omniscient, omnipotent being. For the rest of us, the record of human attempts to navigate the complexities of political and military change is more akin to a "crapshoot" or, worse, a "random walk," than a deliberate plan.[23] Strachan, similarly, raised concerns that grand strategy "can entertain ambitions and goals that are more visionary and aspirational than pragmatic and immediate," and questioned how a state can have an actionable plan towards aspirational goals in the unknowable, distant future. This was fostered, in part, by the stability and continuity of the Cold

[19] Liddell-Hart, *The Strategy of Indirect Approach*, p. 336, p. 366.
[20] Hal Brands, *What Good is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), p.3.
[21] Barry Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for US Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), p. 1.
[22] William Martel, *Grand Strategy in Theory and Practice: The Need for an Effective American Foreign Policy* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 32-33.
[23] Betts, "Is Strategy and Illusion?"

War: "The Cold War created the expectation that grand strategy had predictive, stabilizing, and long-term qualities" which have not endured in the post-Cold War environment.[24]

Second, Luttwak argues that there is a problem with taking military leadership as a template for leadership broadly. The "logic of war" is fundamentally different from the "logic of peace," because of the threat of imminent violence. Peacetime decision-making can prioritize efficiency; decision-making under conditions of violence prioritizes redundancy and surprise.[25] Applying a military concept to civilian pursuits presumes that civilian planners and leaders can and should act as if the conditions of war and military life are generally applicable: that they can marshal resources with the urgency of war; order subordinates with the authority of a general; and exercise mastery of command. "Strategy itself therefore helped erode the distinction between war and peace," according to Strachan.[26]

Third, grand strategy seems to focus primarily on ideas at the expense of execution. Adam Elkus criticized the tendency to focus too much on a "quest to define a master concept," the elaboration of "a vision and narrative" and a "political choice about America's ideal role in the world," rather than a plan for implementing foreign policy and identifying "means of getting from point A to B." In Elkus' preferred usage, a master concept is "policy," whereas strategy is the implementation of policy goals. He argues that articulating a master concept is more a function of ideology than strategy.

> A grand strategy thus cannot be about setting the grand idea. Rather, strategy must be about what—or more importantly, who stands in the way of the idea becoming reality and how he or she can be made to accept it. American grand strategy should be a technical and instrumental assessment of the gap between a presumed future vision of the ordering of the social world and the present.[27]

Fourth, the idea of grand strategy seems to conflate strategy and policy. Strachan argues for reintroducing the distinction between policy and strategy, even as he recognizes that that the conflation of the two has a long lineage. By conflating strategy and policy, Strachan fears we may lose the former entirely by reducing it to a statement of aspirational aims with no plan for how to get there. Without real strategy, traditionally understood, we are left with ambitious goals pursued with brute, often bumbling, force.

> Strategy 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. […] The state therefore has an interest in re-appropriating the control and

[24] Strachan, "Strategy and Contingency," p. 1,281.
[25] Luttwak*, Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).
[26] Strachan, "The lost meaning of strategy," p. 43.
[27] Elkus, "Must American Strategy Be Grand?" p. 27

> direction of war. That is the purpose of strategy. Strategy is designed to make war useable by the state, so that it can, if need be, use force to fulfill its political objectives.[28]

Strachan believes the solution is to reestablish the distinction between strategy and policy, but also recognize how they are inevitably intertwined. To some extent, the distinction has started to reappear under new labels: instead of recognizing the distinction between *strategy* and *policy*, traditionally defined, the British and American militaries have begun to draw a distinction between the "operational" level of war and the "strategic" level of war above it (and the "tactical" level of war below it). The operational level of war is the highest echelon of purely military endeavor, below the level of national policy, thus roughly equivalent to the traditional concept of strategy. The "strategic" level of war, in military parlance, is that at which the nation "determines…strategic security objectives and guidance and develops and uses national resources to accomplish these objectives."[29] Strachan commends the reappearance of some distinction between setting goals and identifying instruments to pursue them. But the language is incoherent. Using "strategy" to designate an echelon or level of war amounts to saying that the strategic level of war is the level at which strategy is made—which is both a useless tautology and an abuse of language. One can, of course, have a "strategy" in the traditional sense at any level—to take a hill, a city, or a capital—at the national or the tactical level of war. "Strategic" as a level of war has become simply a synonym for "national," which would be a far better term for the highest level of war. In any event, Strachan is right that a distinction must be preserved between strategy and policy, but perhaps not between *grand strategy* and policy. If grand strategy does not include consideration of the ultimate or political aims of national security, then it is unclear what differentiates *grand strategy* from *strategy*. Strachan's concern seems to amount to a rejection of the concept of *grand strategy* altogether.

Reconceptualizing Grand Strategy

These considerations argue strongly against the broadest and most ambitious versions of grand strategy. If the concept is impossible to execute or inappropriately militarized, too consumed with articulating a master concept, and indistinguishable from policy, then it should be abandoned. These criticisms help clarify what grand strategy can and cannot do. Betts' argument about the epistemological barriers to coherent strategy is especially potent against the idea that grand strategy should seek to coordinate "whole-of-nation" efforts, a notion that seems fanciful. It is true that grand strategy should concern itself with all the tools of national power, including economic tools that are needed for the purposes of foreign policy. But when "grand strategy" wanders into domestic economic and social policy (like education policy, tax policy, or environmental regulation) under the guise of developing the resources

[28] Strachan, "The lost meaning of strategy," pp. 48-49.
[29] United States Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 3-0: Doctrine for Joint Operations* (Washington, D.C., 2011), pp. II-2.

of national power, it starts to become unrealistic and to lose its core meaning. This is also precisely when grand strategy invites the charge of militarizing all of national life. Avoiding this expansion of the idea of grand strategy thus answers both Betts' and Luttwak's criticisms by confining grand strategy to matters of national security, narrowly conceived.

But these criticisms do not invalidate the concept of grand strategy altogether. Strategy, both grand and humble, is inescapable and, even, inevitable. Hal Brands rightly argues that grand strategy is, at the very least, implicit in the choices statesmen make in their budgetary and deployment decisions. Unless such choices are done by coin-flip, policymakers are making deliberate choices and tradeoffs and thus are operating off of some sense of relative priorities, towards some goals and not others: even if they do not articulate it as such, this is a strategy. Strategies can be made better and more consistent if they are thought through, articulated, and tested; but even those that are not are still strategies. And policymakers are better off trying to do strategy because other states are trying to operate strategically: whoever is successful will enjoy a competitive advantage over other states and adversaries in the international system.

More positively, strategy operates as a "conceptual center of gravity" that orders, prioritizes, and focuses—even simplifies—foreign policy efforts. Grand strategy, according to Brands, is "a contest against the complexity, disorder, and distraction that inevitably clutter the global scene."[30] It is an effort to impose intellectual order on the chaos of world events and the chaos of one's own bureaucracies. Such intellectual shortcuts are impossible to avoid: policymakers cannot know everything or even, in a time-constrained environment, all of the most important things; they cannot spend all their time immersed in the minutiae of data about the entire world every day. The "master concept" that Elkus criticized is probably a necessary crutch (although that does *not* mean the concept must be shrunk down to a single phrase or word). Instead of denying that we use such shortcuts or trying to avoid them, it is better to try to construct better ones. Strategy is certainly *more than* a master concept—Elkus is right to insist that a strategy necessarily includes a plan for implementation, something many aspiring grand strategists omit—but it is probably not less. If a strategy cannot be articulated as a coherent set of ideas, priorities, goals, tradeoffs, and plans, then it may not be a strategy.

And, in fact, Brands' rescue of the concept of grand strategy contains within it yet another evolution in the idea that balances strategy-as-master-concept with strategy-as-pattern-of-behavior. While Brands' definition of grand strategy as "intellectual architecture" seems to reduce strategy to an *idea* that animates foreign policy, in arguing for the impossibility of escaping strategy he focuses on strategy as the *revealed preferences of state behavior and policymakers' choices.* Many states do not publish grand strategy documents; yet they have strategies, Brands argues, whether they know it or not. Their behavior, unless purely random, is strategy in action.

This notion—of strategy as the observed patterns of state behavior and,

[30] Brands, *What Good is Grand Strategy?* p. 10.

therefore, the inferred goals towards which the state is moving and its scheme of priorities—has some advantages to it. One can observe a state's grand strategy by examining patterns in its behavior. Nina Silove defines grand strategy as "the long-term pattern in a state's distribution and employment of its diplomatic/political, military and economic means toward its overall ends."[31] While acknowledging that ideas are a major part of grand strategy, this definition does not reduce the latter to the former. There is more to grand strategy than words. This definition also gives us some means of observing and testing grand strategies (answering another of Betts' criticisms about the usefulness of the concept of strategy). Finally, the emphasis on behavior and choices returns some emphasis to policy implementation and resource prioritization, which Elkus, Strachan, and others have argued should be returned to the center of the idea.

It seems unlikely, however, that we can fully disaggregate grand strategy from policy, ends from ways and means. The idea of grand strategy certainly does, and should, carry with it some idea of ultimate goals, aims, or national interests at which foreign policy should aim (or else there isn't much to distinguish it from mere strategy). In fact, Strachan, the foremost champion of a firm distinction between strategy and policy, undermines his own call for a distinction between strategy and policy by acknowledging that the iterative process creates a blend—a "compromise between the ends of policy and the military means"—which he calls strategy. Strategy, then, *does* include (a compromise version of) policy goals.

> In the ideal model of civil–military relations, the democratic head of state sets out his or her policy, and armed forces coordinate the means to enable its achievement. The reality is that this process—a process called strategy—is iterative, a dialogue where ends also reflect means, and where the result—also called strategy—is a compromise between the ends of policy and the military means available to implement it.[32]

This seems right: policymakers set policy goals; military and civilian planners generate options for implementing those goals; a dialogue ensues, in which both goals and plans morph and change until the two (hopefully) meet in a formulae that explains how the plans will achieve the goals. While Clausewitzian purists may insist that only the plans should change while policy remains supreme and unmoved, the reality (as I had opportunity to observe in the interagency process and at meetings of the National Security Council) is different. Both goals and plans change, and the process of adapting goals and plans to each other, and the resulting scheme of implementation, is a good description of grand strategy. Grand strategy, then, does include consideration of ultimate ends, political goals, or policy.

By describing policy ends as "goals" I intend to distinguish them from what the military might call "operational objectives." The latter are specific, concrete, measurable objectives that can be achieved with finality—for example, to destroy a target or seize a piece of terrain. By contrast, broad goals—like protecting the

[31] Nina Silove, "Beyond the Buzzword: A Theory of the Concept of Grand Strategy," Unpublished manuscript, 2014.
[32] Strachan, "The lost meaning of strategy," p. 52.

homeland or championing liberalism—are perennial aspirations that have animated U.S. foreign policy for decades and will (rightly) continue to shape it for the foreseeable future, and which will never be "achieved" with any sense of finality. At the risk of confusion, because the pursuit of goals is the means of working towards the overarching goal of all policy—peace, order, and justice in America and the world—we could say that they are *strategic courses of action* towards the supreme goal. Describing policy ends as both goals and strategies may strike some readers as unnecessarily confusing (and some critics may complain that I am blurring the line between policy and strategy). But it illustrates the truth that any strategy has goals, implicit or explicit, contained within it; and, similarly, that almost any goal can be understood as a subordinate part of a larger strategy that subsumes it. For any goal, you can ask the question: why do I want to pursue this? That will lead you back in an infinite regress of explanations through an ever-ascending hierarchy of goals, for which each subordinate goal is a means, or a strategy, towards a higher one, until you reach an ultimate, self-justifying goal.

Looking Forward

We should reject the notion of grand strategy as "whole-of-nation" planning because it is impractical, offers no realistic guide to policymakers, has never been achieved by any state, and can lead to the militarization of domestic policy. Grand strategy is, partly—but only partly—a "master concept" or "intellectual architecture," a notion that must be complemented by the idea of grand strategy as patterns of observed behavior, choices, and tradeoffs. As a pattern of behavior, grand strategy necessarily incorporates a notion of priorities: what goals are most important, and where resources are most urgently needed. Grand strategy also includes the identification and articulation of the national, political goals at which foreign policy aims.

One final note on the nature of strategy. Strategy requires flexibility. Strachan notes that good strategy offers "options, not a straightjacket. […] Strategy occupies the space between a desired outcome, presumably shaped by the national interest, and contingency […] strategy may have to bend in response to events. Essential here is the need for flexibility and adaptability."[33] Any grand strategy proposed today is a snapshot of what U.S. grand strategy might look like in response to the challenges of today. As circumstances change, so too should U.S. grand strategy.



[33] Strachan, "Strategy and Contingency," pp. 1,295-1,296.