

## RESTORING OUR NATIONAL SECURITY

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**F**or the past twenty years, across administrations of both political parties, the United States has been operating largely unguided by strategy. We have been much too reactive to events and crises, and have allowed others to define the perception and outcomes of our engagement around the world.

Since the end of the Cold War, America's strengths have buffered us against many of the consequences of operating without a strategy, but it is a costly way to do business. It has caused us to fight wars we could have avoided, and to lose wars we ought to have won. It has resulted in tactical successes that do not add up to strategic victories and has cost our country soldiers' and diplomats' lives, national treasure, and global credibility. We have been slow to identify emergent threats and unwilling to prioritize competing interests; we have sent confusing and confounding messages to enemies and allies alike and have been incapable of articulating what we stand for—and what we will not stand for.

As a result, we have squandered opportunities to strengthen and support an international order manifestly in America's interests, as well as in the interests of all nations that want a peaceful, prosperous world.

The international system as we know it—and as we created it—is under assault from the forces of entropy that fill vacuums and corrode order when the United States is not actively engaged. These forces include predatory states that prize their own sovereignty but destroy that of others; ideologies that legitimate violence by the disaffected; and liberal societies that have become so upholstered by naïve perceptions of their own safety that they struggle to speak with clarity about their values or act decisively in their interests.

The challenges are substantial, and addressing them will require a significant effort from us. Yet we must not lose sight of the fact that the international order we built from the ashes of World War II is worth defending and strengthening. If we are to arrest the atrophying of America as the guardian of the international order, we must develop a security strategy appropriate for today's world and flexible enough to respond to alternative futures not yet defined.

We must be clear-eyed about the political, social, cultural, historic, ethnic, and religious realities that confront us, without foisting our norms and values onto others. We must be capable of placing our security above the many other things we also value, understanding that in the absence of security all else is moot. We must be willing to work with imperfect allies to stamp out the fires now raging in the Middle East and beyond. We must marry an unsentimental understanding of the real world with fierce resolve to help change things for the better. In short, we must take our own side in the fight because we have a generational responsibility to hand over to our children the same liberties we enjoy. It sounds difficult. It will be difficult. But our predecessors faced even more daunting challenges and prevailed.

The United States continues to have a wide range of means to reassert an order conducive to our security and that of our allies. We have more tools than just threats, military intervention, and economic sanctions. We have the power to intimidate, but

we also have the ability to inspire. The beauty of the American order is that most of the world wants us to succeed, and is willing to help us when we are clear about what we are doing, demonstrate that it is in the collective interest, and persevere to attain our goals.

#### **WHEN DIPLOMACY LED TO SUCCESS**

Since the end of World War II, America has been preeminent on the international scene, its power so expansive that we have largely been insulated from the consequences of a fraying world order. We have been so strong for so long that we have ignored the truth that losing wars can have real consequences: we shudder at the beheading of one American prisoner, and can scarcely imagine catastrophes of the magnitude of the Bataan death march or an enemy challenge that calls for a supreme national effort to retain our freedoms. We complacently believe there is an inevitable arc of history propelling the success of our humanist ideology, rather than understanding that it has been advanced with strategic decisions and sacrifices by preceding generations.

In this time of post-Cold War primacy, America has tended to rely too heavily on its power of intimidation. When the risks associated with using military force were higher and the tools of financial sanction less well-developed, our country engaged more intensively in setting rules and establishing norms of behavior, creating institutions and getting them to work, fostering cooperation, helping friends solve their problems, expanding the scope of peoples' aspirations, providing development assistance that improves governance, celebrating allies' achievements, and setting friends up to be successful in their international endeavors. These efforts employed a much wider range of tools, with diplomatic elements at the forefront, and achieved enduring successes.

The distribution of power since the end of the Cold War, with one country so clearly dominant, has been a historical aberration. Yet our strategic choices have not, so far, used this interregnum of

American hegemony to advantage. Institutionalizing cooperation was an important and successful way of reducing the cost of governing the international order. Now, America is mostly sullen in refusing to accede to international institutions and treaties, even when they are manifestly in our interest—as with the Law of the Sea Treaty, for example, and its codification of the freedom of navigation so crucial for a maritime power.

Internationally, our country has been acting with disdain for other peoples' problems, crowing about our exceptionalism while taking too little responsibility for what our indifference fosters. We see this most clearly in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan, where our resources and resolve have been inadequate to our objectives. The gap between our rhetoric and our actions is leading to cynicism on the part of our fellow countrymen regarding the broader world and generating, in return, a sturdy cynicism on the part of the global audience toward America. Even long-term friends of our country are hedging their bets, questioning the reliability of our historic partnerships. Others are turning elsewhere for leadership because of the large and growing gap between what we say and what we do.

We see now an accelerating decline in the management of the state system. The results are:

- Russia has violated the borders of nearby nations, exercising veto authority over the diplomatic, economic, and security interests of nation states in Russia's "near abroad" and attempting to carve a recidivist sphere of influence that is out of step with modern international practice on sovereignty.
- China is doing the same, demanding veto authority over the rights of its neighbors in the South China Sea. This behavior follows a classical Chinese "tribute" model that demands deference from "lesser" nations in Beijing's sphere of interest.

- In the Middle East, two brands of violent jihadists attack the state system using religious affiliation:
  - The Sunni brand (Al Qaeda and associated movements) declared war on the West in the 1990s. More recently, ISIS has declared a caliphate, bulldozed the border between Iraq and Syria, and is still winning a war in the geopolitical heart of the Middle East. It is now striking outward, regionally and globally, exactly as it said it would do.
  - The Shia brand (Hezbollah, Hamas, and others supported by Iran) declared war on the United States in 1983, arms and trains terrorist organizations, acts as kingmaker in Lebanon, and across the Middle East supports the revolutionary cause it espouses, also challenging state legitimacy. Iranian negotiators have achieved a good outcome from the nuclear talks. The unfortunate aspects of that agreement were a result, in no small part, of the perception that the United States needed a deal more desperately than the Iranians and of the belief among all involved that America would not exercise a military option.

We under-invest in both our nonmilitary and military means of dealing with these problems. Our diplomatic corps is starved for managerial attention to increase its reach and abilities and is discouraged from taking initiative by the policy process in Washington. The American military is experiencing a slow diminishment of competence, capability, and proficiency in nuclear deterrence, decisive conventional combat, and irregular warfare as a result of budget malpractice, lack of consistent political clarity and direction, and organizational inattention to the core tasks of producing combat-ready forces.

Forty years into an all-volunteer military force, our broader society is losing sight of the necessity of maintaining a war-fighting military. There seems to be little understanding or appreciation outside the military for the risks associated with diverting attention in military units from the grim and demanding business of proficiency in combat. We are currently weighing our force down with ancillary requirements to such an extent that soldiering is an interruption of administrative duties. To use the lexicon of British naval historian Andrew Gordon's history of the Royal Navy's decline, we prefer regulators to rat-catchers. History has not been kind to militaries that lose focus on war-fighting.

Our defense enterprise also suffers from problems that we aren't worried enough about. Among these are:

- border security, which is distinct from immigration, and badly compromised by a conflation of the two issues;
- nuclear rearmament and proliferation, respectively, back in fashion for the saber-rattling Russians and expansive Chinese, and a grave risk for the Middle East in the aftermath of the Iranian treaty;
- incorporation into all military activity of the space and cyber domains in which we will unavoidably have to fight in the event of future conflict.

#### **RELEARNING THE ART OF STRATEGY**

So how do we right this ship? How do we correct our strategic course and reconstitute a less brittle international order? Understanding, of course, that a quest for perfection is quixotic, how do we ensure that we are not knocked off balance when the next unforeseen crisis strikes?

One of the central reasons our strategy has become so vapid is the tendency—especially evident in the President's National Security Strategy since the end of the Cold War—to list so many

countries and issues that no genuine priorities are established. Rather than establishing principles for deciding which issues and events to devote effort toward, so-called strategy documents become Christmas trees festooned with ornaments. We understand the political pressures toward expansiveness; but the practice is an impediment to genuine understanding of our national purposes and how to attain them, which is the point of strategy. Rather than cataloguing every interest, strategy should consist of decision rules that allow for application to events as they unfold.

National security discussions also quickly telescope down to numbers and tactics; it gives the illusion of seriousness to appear to “get to the nitty-gritty.” This is a mistake: appropriate force-structure numbers must be a derivative of what needs doing. Tactics are easy and relatively straightforward. Strategy is much harder, requiring consideration of a wide variety of factors and constant adjustment to circumstances as they develop. Moreover, tactical energy in a strategic vacuum is a recipe for disaster.

As Professor Colin Gray has written, “All strategy has to be about the consequences of threat and action.” Strategy is a process, not an endpoint. It is a process of problem-solving in circumstances where much is outside one’s ability to control (in physics terms, an open, complex system), placing a premium on learning and rapid adaptation to develop integrated ways of achieving essential ends. The role of strategy is to reduce uncertainty to the degree we can and to be prepared to respond even when we are surprised.

The strategic process starts with defined political ends: if you don’t have those, then you can’t have a strategy. Political ends can change, but they must be realistic and coherent to drive strategy. They set the levels of ambition for what will be attempted and drive the level of resourcing (revenue, military size, and national will) required to attain them. Acting strategically requires that political leaders make clear what they will stand for and what

they will *not* stand for. We must mean what we say, to both allies and foes.

Political leaders who attempt to keep their options open by remaining vague or opaque about their ultimate ends actually limit their nation's ability to attain them and squander trust and resources in the execution—if their approach can be executed at all. Perhaps most importantly, confusion about the end state to be attained destroys trust that has been years in the making—and which is difficult to reconstitute. You can't "surge" trust. Growing and maintaining trust demands constant attention if we are to avoid the effect of entropy.

We need always to guard against the false confidence of predictability. In 1807, no one guessed that within a decade the Royal Navy would sail up the Chesapeake and burn Washington, DC; in 1907 no one guessed we would soon fight in Europe with gas masks and tanks and bombs dropped from the air. These examples make clear that the future is not foreseeable, however prescient we may think we are.

Given a reliably uncertain future, America cannot adopt one preclusive form of warfare. The paradox of war is that our enemies will always move against our perceived weakness. Thus our strategy must not—and must never—say what we will *not* do: no enemy should be reassured in advance that we won't employ ground troops, or that we will not fight beyond a certain date, or that we won't engage in certain types of fights.

A healthy military is a crucial component of restoring our national security. But it is not the totality. The military's role in the strategy process is to convey insights and lessons up the chain of command to political leaders and to wield deadly force to attain the nation's political objectives. Our military capability today needs to be woven, along with other elements of national power, into a strategy designed to succeed in the short term while buying time until we regain our fundamental political unity and will at home. Yet America's nonmilitary muscles have also atrophied,



tilting the balance of our engagement with the world and shifting into military channels activities better performed by civilian departments.

With fifteen years at war since 9/11, we are long overdue in developing the ability to integrate the whole of our national security operations. Civilian departments are too weak to keep pace with the military's contributions in areas like capacity-building for friendly governments; the National Security Council process is unable to raise questions at the right level, solicit and incorporate differing views, and delegate the effort to monitor performance and rebalance our efforts. These continuing impediments require us to be realistic about what we can accomplish.

#### **A STRATEGY OF SECURITY AND SOLVENCY**

Economics are integral to military power. In fact, they are dispositive: no country has ever long retained its military power when its economic foundation faltered. Seen from a broader perspective, America's current fiscal situation is our central national security challenge. Our fiscal house is in disarray and we are on an unsustainable spending path. Even if interest rates remain at the current historically low rates, the end of this decade will see us paying more tax dollars to service our debt—interest paid to Riyadh, Moscow, and Beijing—than we have available to fund all of the Defense Department.

We are living far beyond our means, unable to summon the will to put our entitlement spending on a sustainable footing. Instead we squeeze discretionary government spending and compound the error by treating defense and domestic programs equally. Even those political platforms that envisage more robust defense spending fail to marry those aspirations with the revenue streams to pay for them or the political coalition to produce them on a sustained basis.

The failure to set (and be accountable for) national priorities is not only a grave political failing by our leaders; it amounts to

intergenerational theft. Moreover, we appear to the world as incapable of governing ourselves, diminishing the inspirational power of the American order and increasing the real cost to us of maintaining that order.

Our national debt is the primary determinant of our strategic latitude. No national security strategy is possible if we fail to reduce our debt payments. The urgency of putting the country on a sound financial footing is thus paramount for our national security. As President Eisenhower said, “We must achieve both security and solvency.” The two, in fact, are inseparable.

### **BURDEN SHARING**

As we are not the only beneficiaries of the international order, we alone should not bear its security burdens. Popular fallacies abound that technology will do it all; that secretive special operations are sufficient; that allies will do the heavy lifting and dirty work; and that even if America opts out of tending the international order, it will continue to function in ways conducive to our interests. All of these beliefs are being disproven daily by global events, many with the grimmest possible consequences.

Those who oppose sustained international involvement because of its cost have the argument exactly wrong: only by coming together with allies and attending to the maintenance of the international order can we amass the resources necessary for the long-term management of our interests. Unilateralism may occasionally be necessary, when speed or secrecy require, but it is costly. It is also inconsistent historically with America’s greatest achievements, when we led alliances of responsible nations in worthy causes.

Preserving an international order conducive to our interests becomes much more affordable when working with, and through, our allies. That means any strategy America adopts must, foremost, be ally-friendly. Allies have enduring, shared values with us, reflected through institutional structures. Alliances coalesce when

we commit to solving common problems. They are an enormous asset for our country, demonstrating the breadth of our support and sharing the burden of our interests. These established relationships need restoring, and we need to draw more closely to our side both traditional and new allies who benefit from the American order. We must be able to rely on each other's commitment to build sufficient forces for the work at hand.

Our strategy must restore strengthened military ties with allies: NATO, Australia, Japan, South Korea, Middle Eastern nations (Jordan, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia)—all the traditional allies who may now question our reliability. We ought also to create new alliances, further extending the circle of cooperation as American leaders set out to do following World War II. From India to Mexico to Vietnam, Brazil, and beyond, if America makes clear that we are ready to lead and willing to help, others may join. None will join if we continue our strategy-free approach.

In addition to allies, we need coalition partners. Rather than continue to operate as though countries that are not with us are against us—in the formulation made by President George W. Bush in the fraught days after 9/11—the right American approach would be to flip the arrow: those countries that are not against us are for us. The central difficulty we see in coalition relations is prioritizing our interaction with allies. We can't wait for perfect partners—nor are we a perfect partner. We seem to have lost the art of compromise with allies. Our tendency is to withhold cooperation until they do what we want, dismissing out of hand the validity of their objectives and the legitimacy of their interests, an approach that is ultimately isolating.

The core of building alliances must be that we say what we mean and do what we say: America must make no empty threats. Our partners must be able to count on us. And they need to understand our priorities. Yet we send confusing and contradictory signals by being unclear about the basis for our interactions.

Political leaders need to explain and defend the shared priorities driving our involvement. Our interests are a justifiable basis for cooperation, even when partners conduct their domestic policies in ways we may disapprove of. We need to recover the humility of understanding that we, also, conduct our domestic policies in ways partners disapprove of, and yet we are fortunate they cooperate with us on international objectives of mutual interest.

### **FORCE CHARACTERISTICS**

We envision a strategy that plays to America's strengths. We will never be a country that speaks with one voice, or acts in unison, or in which the principal expertise in many crucial areas resides in government. The dynamism of our society exists beyond the Beltway, in the free markets and innovation centers of our civil society that adapt malleably to change. Washington will never be able to command civil society and match the decisiveness of authoritarian governments. But it can encourage, celebrate, and harness activity helpful to American causes.

More than any other nation, America can expand the competitive spaces in which our adversaries have to act: economic, diplomatic, geographic, informational, cultural, scientific, and more. Our strategic advantage lies in taking on our adversaries where they lack strength and seizing the initiative from them. Our reach extends far outside the realm of military operations and economic sanctions.

The priority challenges we would confront are: Russian belligerence, Chinese activities in the South China Sea, ISIS and Iranian aggressiveness, and drug-gang activity south of our border. Developing specific counterweights to these challenges would dictate the military alliances we develop. The goals would be to use the strength of our military alliances to help create constructive relations with Russia and China; to crush ISIS, Al Qaeda, and their franchises; to checkmate Iran's mischief; and to secure our borders.

Sustaining a world order fostering the interests of America and its allies will require maintaining strategic—including nuclear—deterrence, possessing decisive conventional capability, and making irregular warfare a core competency of our military. Deterring wars is, of course, preferable to fighting them. But deterrence only works when forces are adequate to the task.

We and our allies need the force structure to execute our commitments and carry out our war plans—and we no longer have it. The historic two-war standard ought to be, once again, the baseline force for a country with America's obligations, lest aggressors seek the advantage of striking while our forces are already engaged. It also merits mentioning that smaller numbers require an even higher quality of troops, at all levels, to include in its senior ranks.

Our national security strategy must also energize our intelligence community; with a smaller military and fewer overseas bases, we have less of a military shock-absorber than we once enjoyed. Successful military operations are more reliant than ever on fusion with intelligence, both for killing the enemy and for avoiding (to the degree possible) civilian casualties. Hence the need for the intelligence community to be our robust sentinels.

Another characteristic quality of a healthy military force is built-in, trained-in resilience, a force that can take surprises in stride and embrace uncertainty as part of war's nature. Resilience manifests itself in leaders who can respond to changing circumstances with creativity and innovation, because the enemy doesn't have to respect what we want. Resilience is also manifest in forces that are adaptable in their organization and equipment, agile in their speed of action, and employable across a wide spectrum of conflict.

These characteristics are seldom attained unless political leaders actively encourage sound military advice, even when it complicates their plans or contradicts their policies. The president ultimately gets the military advice he desires and deserves. As a

country, we have not measured the ultimate costs of the outcomes we seek. Determining whether an outcome is worth the cost is a political judgment of enormous moral gravity. In our free society, only elected leaders are entrusted with those decisions—for which we need also to hold them accountable.

**CONCLUSION**

We have been profligate in pursuit of our national security because we haven't been acting strategically. Humility about the real world married to a fierce resolve to better protect America can address these problems and meet this need. We can recover a firm strategic stance in defense of our values by tending to the mechanisms—above all, the relationships—that ensure an international order conducive to American interests. Shaping the future, rather than merely accepting it, requires leadership. As President Truman, the great builder of the post-World War II order, said, “Men make history and not the other way around.”