Washington's Identity Crisis

The Art and Craft of Strategy

by Robert E. Hunter

A new journal of international affairs for a new century—this is timely, useful, and appropriate. It comes a decade after the end of the cold war, which for its part replaced a global system that for two generations had governed a large part of relations among the world's major countries. To be sure, the cold war was an aberration—nothing like it was seen before—but by its end it had sunk deeply into the consciousness of political leaders, analysts, and other commentators, so much so that few if any of these figures predicted its end, even though, in retrospect, that end has taken on the color of inevitability.

The years between the late 1940s and late 1980s provided a degree of certainty in international politics. The classic fluidity of relations among states gave way to a rigidity, at least in the basic outlines of the international political and economic system. The cold war was not without open conflict. Not everything that happened in international politics was subsumed within the overall framework, nor did the central competition between East and West extend to every corner of the world. But the cold war framework did take precedence as *the* organizing principle for international relations.

With those predictable guideposts and confines now gone, the success of U.S. foreign policy will depend in large part on a renaissance in strategic thinking. The nature of cold war conflict led to a narrowing of strategic focus that now must be reexpanded for the United States to have a clear and inclusive picture of the challenges and opportunities presented by today's world.

The Cold War Framework

Though it may not have seemed so to Americans at the time, in retrospect the cold war was relatively simple. With all necessary qualifications about those parts that did not fit the whole, in fact U.S. foreign policy was essentially governed by three basic goals: 1) to contain the power of the Soviet Union and that of its allies, associates, and acolytes; 2) to counter the scope and appeal of communism; and 3) to lead a growing global economy. All else was to be measured against the requirements imposed by these three goals. If they were found to apply—though in many places and cases they did not—then alternative principles, policies, and values had to be shunted aside or at least relegated to an inferior place.

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The cold war also represented the most sustained period of American engagement abroad in its history. Of course, the United States has always had a foreign policy, and it has been more or less constantly involved abroad since early in the twentieth century. Even during the interwar period, the United States was not in fact "isolated" from all events and engagements abroad. But except for Woodrow Wilson's abortive attempt to devise a lasting framework for both the United States and Europe after the First World War, it was only from the time of World War II that the United States began consciously to develop a grand strategy of involvement abroad and, in the process, a craft of thinking systematically about its role that was more than a short-term response to circumstances largely determined abroad. Even then, beyond the decisions required to conduct World War II—beginning with the "Europe first" commitment in the national battleplan—the United States still had only a fledging sense of longer-range purpose. That only began to develop with plans to create a United Nations, along with the Havana and Bretton Woods agreements to establish new institutions for organizing economic relations among states.

The great impetus for U.S. strategy-making, providing a more lasting sense of purpose than the finite goal of defeating the Axis powers, came from growing recognition of the twin challenges posed by the extension of Soviet power into Central Europe and the spread of communism, including its appeal in some West European states. Winston Churchill called the Marshall Plan of 1947 the "most unsordid act in the history of any nation," but it was also a strategic response to the vulnerability of European democracies to a rising, alien philosophy, backed by a major power that made no secret of its proselytizing intent. Through the North Atlantic Treaty, the European Recovery Program was soon buttressed by the formal engagement of U.S. strategic commitment, in response to a pervading sense that "recovery," both political and economic, might not succeed unless the peoples of Western Europe gained confidence that they could sustain their independence and freedoms in the face of the looming presence of the Soviet Union. With the onset of the Korean War, which seemed to prove that the Soviet Union would use military power to achieve its goals, the Western alliance put the "O" in NATO, the Soviet Union created a web of alliances in Central and Eastern Europe, and the cold war became militarized. Further evidence of the overarching nature of the East-West struggle came in the form of communism's triumph in China. And so the global political structure, at least as it engaged the great powers, became frozen.

All these events led the United States to assume new responsibilities and leadership—though few people at the time understood how "permanent" these were to become—including the need for a coherent strategy of engagement outside its borders. For the first time in its history, the United States had no choice but to create, articulate, embrace, gain foreign converts to, and build political support for a truly grand strategy. This challenge was made even more insistent by the development of history's most awesome military weapons, the atomic and then hydrogen bombs. Once the Soviet Union also began to acquire these weapons, the United States found itself directly and permanently vulnerable to foreign attack, to a degree it had never

before faced. Nuclear confrontation between Washington and Moscow ushered in an era without peer in human experience, in which all-out war could lead even to the destruction of life on the planet. Never before had the stakes in war been more consequential, or the need to prevent such a war from ever starting so critical.

Springtime for Strategic Thought

It is not surprising, therefore, that there was a great flowering of American strategic thought from the late 1940s onward. This began with seat-of-the-pants judgments made by talented and insightful "amateurs," such as George Marshall, Dean Acheson, and John J. McCloy, who, in the 1940s, created the great postwar international institutions. Gifted individuals from the disciplines of economics, mathematics, and the natural sciences, like Bernard Brodie and Oscar Morgenstern, took up the work of devising strategy for the nuclear age in the 1950s. They were succeeded in the 1960s and later by a community of American experts who had been trained in strategy as a discipline in itself. Indeed, a whole generation of strategic analysts, both in the United States and elsewhere in the West, emerged to meet the demands imposed by the awful, unprecedented dangers of the cold war.

At the same time, new institutions were created across America to conduct research into and devise responses to new challenges. Some of these institutions were seated in corporations, some within universities, and some as stand-alone bodies that came to be known, generically, as "think tanks." This new strategic community of experts and institutions developed links across the United States and into allied and other states abroad. A minor doctrine from the classic management of military power—deterrence of another state's actions—became vitally important, indeed the cornerstone of strategic thought and action on the part of both nuclear superpowers, so much so that they both worked to ensure that each understood the implications of this deterrent doctrine. Thus the United States developed the critical doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), and the Soviet Union implicitly embraced it. The two superpowers also pursued arms control together, less as a means of reducing weapons than as a shared experience in learning how to prevent conflict.

Of course, nuclear strategy and arms control did not develop by themselves as an exercise in pure, abstract reasoning. Intense interest also arose about other applications of military power, as well as about many of the world's regions, embracing a wide range of disciplines. In parallel, deeper inquiry was made into the workings of the global economic system, both for its own sake and as an essential element of providing, for the West, the sinews of defense.

In general, the United States became profoundly engaged intellectually in the outside world, as a function both of far-reaching inquiry, provoked at first by cold war threat and challenge, and of the exponential growth of direct experience. Communications and media led to an explosion in available information; travel abroad became more accessible, both to and from America; and a host of new journals was launched to provide outlets for analysis, in addition to the increasing reach of more popular media.

It is no wonder, then, that systematic and informed study and instruction in international politics and economics blossomed in America, as did interaction with different cultures and values. Much of this fed into the continued development and refinement of basic U.S. strategy and engagement abroad. This was, of course, uneven as regards different parts of the world. Genuine strategic analysis—as opposed to other disciplines like area studies and its offshoots—tended to focus on regions and problems judged most vital to U.S. interests. Thus most prominence in strategic thought was given to the Soviet Union, Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia, plus, from time to time, specialty areas like Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War. And while many Americans became interested in other regions that were not focal points of the cold war—like the Indian subcontinent, much of Africa, and virtually all of Latin America—disciplines of study about these regions rarely produced strategists, nor did the literature on them abound with strategic analysis. Thus in 1984, this author was tasked by the U.S. Bipartisan Commission on Central America to provide strategic analysis for that region, yet was hard-pressed to find a single American analyst who brought that particular perspective to bear.

One effect of this uneven approach to the world—with strategic analysis reserved largely for those areas judged most important in East-West competition—was the dearth of efforts to compare and contrast relationships and policies from one region to another. Strategy, as a discipline, tended to be "top down"—that is, a response to the cold war challenge—rather than "bottom up," an accretion of knowledge and elaboration of choices that derived from individual events and regions and was then developed, to the extent possible, into some systematic, conceptual whole. Regional studies had some currency, but there was little conversation among scholars, experts, and analysts from different regions or functional specialties—economists and military experts, social scientists and humanists—and even less of what might be called global studies and strategic analysis.

The failure of virtually all the experts to predict the end of the cold war thus came not just from the fact that its structure had become so compelling but also from the relative lack of systematic communication among different perspectives—whether regions, functional relationships (like economics), or disciplines. By the time the Berlin Wall fell in November 1989, the Soviet Union and its empire had long since passed the point when internal hollowing out, produced by social, economic, cultural, and political developments—most notably Gorbachev's *glasnost*—had passed the point of no return. But knowledge about impending events within the Soviet Union, which in retrospect was clearly there to be gleaned, was not properly organized and understood. In essence, there had been a general lack of the most basic aspects of a true grand strategy, the systematic and comprehensive integration of knowledge from multiple sources.

Beyond the Cold War

The years since the end of the cold war—whose final demise can perhaps be dated from the formal collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991—have found

the United States facing a very different world. Not all is unique: the return to a more fluid state of international politics reflects less a novelty than a return to a "normal" global politics. But some of the change is certainly without precedent in U.S. if not also in modern world history. Most important, the United States has found itself possessing more power—latent, incipient, if not always actualized—that covers more areas of human activity—political, economic, military, and even cultural—than has been true of any other state or empire for centuries: perhaps since the end of the Roman Empire.

At the same time, in part because of its immense power, both absolute and relative to others, the United States finds itself facing less of a direct military threat than before Pearl Harbor. Even what seemed to be the permanent threat of nuclear annihilation, the "nuclear balance of terror" with the Soviet Union, has largely dissipated—not because the weapons have been dismantled but rather because the context of conflict has disappeared. And while other countries besides Russia also have nuclear weapons, in no case have political relations between the United States and another state deteriorated, as yet, into circumstances where it can fairly be said that the United States faces a nuclear threat. (This eventuality, however, is the centerpiece of much contemporary analysis about weapons of mass destruction and even the possibility of nuclear terrorism at some point in the future.)[1]

The United States cannot escape the political and moral responsibilities conferred by power, even before will and intention are considered.

At first blush, this seemingly halcyon condition—great power and diminished imminent, direct threat—argues against the need for the craft of strategy. But such a posture ignores many questions, the most basic of which is how to preserve and extend the current situation of power and position—factors that are, in some measure, inextricably linked. This is not just a matter of what the United States does on its own, in terms of military forces, economic strength, effective democratic institutions, and a relatively cohesive society. It is also a matter of how the United States acts in relation to other states and entities. This concerns both how Washington will translate its power into influence and how it will sustain or create relationships with other centers of power, current or potential, that will enable the United States to remain relatively free from external threats—whatever form they may take.

Responsibility and Opportunity

Part and parcel with this perspective are the issues of responsibility and opportunity. Power, it is often argued, confers responsibility; this is another way of saying that the age of American isolationism is certainly past. The United States has become more deeply engaged in the world in a host of ways—political, economic, cultural, and in terms of all the various types of communications, both real (travel) and virtual

(electronic)—such that retreat from the world has become inconceivable. Just as surely, the impact and influence of the United States will be considerable, whether or not as a consequence of policy: "America" as a pluralistic entity plays a multiplicity of roles and helps to shape, in greater or lesser degree, the circumstances, perspectives, and behavior of others. Thus, like every great power in history, the United States cannot escape the political and moral responsibilities conferred by power, even before issues of will and intention are considered.

At the same time, many other states and international institutions—especially in, but not limited to, the West—have long since come to depend upon both an active, essentially benign, American engagement and U.S. willingness to lead. This expectation did not end with the cold war, a fact viewed by many Americans as both a blessing and a curse. Even where, among a collection of other states interested in preserving relative freedom from threat and conflict, the United States might prefer that some other state take the lead, so far this is seldom the case.

But the U.S. role in the world should not just be seen as a conservative preservation of the status quo. It is better viewed as an opportunity to shape critical aspects of relations among states and within institutions, such that both the United States and others can have reasonable expectations that the future will provide more benefits than liabilities in international life. In some limited areas, the United States has already attempted to do this: in the modernization of NATO, in efforts (with others) to develop an expansionist and more open global trading regime, and in continued peacemaking, including in places where there is no longer a cold war motive (e.g., the Middle East) or where U.S. impulses derive more from moral concerns than from requirements of power (e.g., Northern Ireland).

For the long term, probably most important is what the United States and other countries can and will do to create or modernize international institutions that can provide widespread benefits for their members. Institutional structures, practices, attitudes, and processes have a dual value: 1) to channel, reinforce, and perpetuate common interests and 2) to create an international environment that can bring lasting benefits to the United States, even if its present preeminence were to diminish.

Lessons for Strategy

For the United States, therefore, the craft of strategy—the creation of a basic framework for making informed choices about different courses of action—is just as important in the post–cold war world as it was before, if not more so. This does not relate to the narrow—though vital—dimension of nuclear strategy that dominated thinking and action during the time of U.S.-Soviet confrontation; but given that that factor is now absent, other areas of strategy take on their own importance. And it is in these areas—beyond the nuclear domain—that the requirements of strategic thought will be most important.

The challenge for the United States in developing a set of policies and practices for the twenty-first century is no less than to discover—or to rediscover—the basic art of thinking strategically about the rest of the world and to relate its many component

parts and different disciplines to one another, thus creating a better capacity to make choices among contending interests and possibilities. What follows is not an attempt to prescribe a policy focus for the United States in the years ahead, or even the precise dimensions for a grand strategy. It is rather a suggested approach to thinking about America's role abroad.

1. *Requiem for a paradigm.* It is important at the outset to understand that, unlike the cold war period, there will be no small group of overarching goals, no single paradigm, to provide direction for large elements of America's engagement abroad, or at least to set standards against which all policy must first be measured. Nor is any central theme in the offing, other than one that remains from the cold war period: that the U.S. retains an interest in leading a growing, global economy. There is, in fact, a "paradigm gap," an absence of unifying themes and perspectives that can link disparate regions as well as different disciplines together. This will continue to be the case for the foreseeable future, unless there emerges a new and globally oriented geopolitical competitor or a new philosophy to challenge that of liberal democracy. None appears in the offing: Russia would be years if not decades away from reassuming such a role if it were so inclined. Even if China becomes an assertive power, it is most unlikely to have the global ambition and reach of the former Soviet Union. And, while it cannot safely be argued that the age of contending ideologies, such as marked most of the twentieth century, is firmly past, none seems likely to appear, despite the continued existence of immense social and economic challenges. "Globalization" may prove disruptive in many countries and even across regions, but so far it does not seem to have the potential for spawning great contenders for power or organization of societies like communism and fascism.

Instead of being subject to judgment in terms of a few key goals or a central paradigm, therefore, choices regarding U.S. foreign policy will be far more complex than during the cold war; and choices about different regions will to a significant degree have to be made in terms of the particular conditions of those regions, without basic connections to events elsewhere that are imposed by some overarching global framework. The geopolitical world is, and will largely remain, fragmented—though this does not also mean that the parts will be isolated from one another.

2. *New thoughts for a new system.* This lack of a unifying paradigm does not relieve the United States of the burdens of making choices and tradeoffs, of deciding where to be involved and where to abstain, what resources to commit, what risks to run, or the particular instruments to be employed in advancing national interests. Indeed, if anything, there is a greater need for systematic thought than during the cold war, not because of the absolute level of challenge to U.S. security, prosperity, and position (nothing is likely to rival the intensity of threat posed by nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union) but because the lack of a basic paradigm requires greater craft in analysis, in more dimensions, than before. With complexity comes a heightened need for understanding to make sense of both the parts and the whole of U.S. foreign policy.

The situations confronting U.S. policymakers are diverse. Several stand out, including the future of Russia and the rest of the former Soviet Union; the direction and

scope of China's internal change and external ambitions; the spread of military technologies; the specter of terrorism; relations among the principal states of the Indian subcontinent; and continued challenges within the Middle East and its environs, ranging from the Balkans and Greece-Turkey-Cyprus through the zone of Arab-Israeli conflict to the Persian Gulf and Afghanistan. In general, new strategic equations are found throughout the regions listed above. Clearly, strategic analysis will be at a premium.

3. *Connecting the dots.* While each region will need to be understood in its own terms, it remains true that each cannot be isolated from others. In some aspects of engagement, especially in economic and financial involvement, there are many interconnections mandated by the growth of a global marketplace, the speed with which financial resources can be shifted, and the increased interdependence that technology has created for global commerce, in both tangible and intangible goods and services, capital, and—with limitations—labor. Even where regional developments in terms of issues like politics and security must be dealt with in their own terms, when it comes to making choices—and especially in regard to devoting time, attention, leadership, and resources—the United States must have some means for relating one region to another. This is true even beyond the natural interconnections and intercourse between contiguous regions and the new demands placed on analysis of, say, the emergence of a Eurasian strategic context that did not exist in full measure during the cold war. Interconnections will be more subtle and will require an enhanced understanding of the ways in which a policy or event in Country A will affect Country B halfway around the world.

These developments imply an increased burden on U.S. analysis and development of strategic perspectives not only within but also across regions. This has often proved to be a limitation in American pedagogy—where area studies can go to great depth but often do not apply systematic tools of strategic thinking or fully comprehend the burdens of making choices within a broader compass. While looking for a unifying paradigm is an illusion at one extreme, thinking of the world as largely atomized is an illusion at the other.

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4. *All dressed up and no place to intervene?* Clearly, the United States is not prepared simply to exploit its position as the only remaining superpower to impose its will. To a significant degree, the reverse has been true: the concept of a "peace dividend," which is about psychology and politics more than about economics or military instruments, has led the United States both to devote less of its gross domestic product to international affairs and to run fewer risks in the use of military power, especially when acting without allies. The latter has led to a "paradox of military supremacy"—evident, for example, in places like Iraq and the former Yugoslavia. In

the latter case, the United States, along with its NATO allies, judged that Kosovo was worth its engagement, but only if allied combat fatalities could be kept to an absolute minimum. Along with severe limitations on the use of economic resources in trying to shape the outside world and America's place in it, this reflects what could be expected in a democracy at a time when external threats seem, at least relatively, to be meager or at least not imminent.

But this argument implies more intense analysis about the use of those resources that are employed in foreign policy, and a sense of relationship and tradeoffs—especially to relate to one another the elements of the great classic triad of power and policy: diplomacy, economics, and military force. Yet this method historically has not been particularly prevalent in U.S. strategic thought. Certainly, during the cold war, the relationship of these three elements was that of a hierarchy, where military power (containment and deterrence) took primacy, while diplomatic and economic relationships were relegated to an inferior place. It is striking, for example, that there is now a common understanding that security in Europe, defined in its broadest sense, is a compound of political, economic, and military elements, including in Central Europe and with regard to Russia, as practiced by NATO and the European Union, as institutions. Yet a similar relationship characterized the period in the late 1940s before the cold war in Europe was rigidified. In the wake of the cold war's end, an earlier understanding of security as a comprehensive phenomenon has reemerged; but in order to make policy effective on the basis of such an understanding, in Europe and elsewhere, there also has to be systematic study, analysis, and strategic choice that takes this method fully into account.

NATO intervention in the Balkans paid a debt to the past as well as to the future.

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5. *Beyond the triad.* The relationship between different perspectives—including the role of economics, which is so often neglected—thus becomes critical. But so does the rebalancing of different elements of policy that go beyond the classic triad, as traditionally understood, to create a method of factoring in—that is, for choosing—other elements that are less palpable but are certainly consequential. For example, within analysis of a new range of opportunities for the United States abroad, no element is more remarkable for its rising importance—in pedagogy and in policy—than efforts to expand the number of countries that can be counted within the community of democratic nations. There is no doubt that the United States is a proselytizer in this regard: nor is this necessarily unique to America, since there is something inherent in democracy and its link to human aspirations that has universal appeal, even if its practical expression can take many forms. Allied to this effort is also the promotion of human rights, in at least two of its three central aspects: security of the person and political rights, if not also economic rights. Of course, in the case of both democracy and human rights, theory still runs well ahead of practice, and consistency is not dominant in U.S. policy any more than in other states that espouse a commitment and ambition in this area. But even with that qualification, it remains true that

both aspirations have a deep moral quality; and that, with its current position of power, the United States is better placed to emphasize this quality than has been true at other times, as it strikes a balance in the equation that historically has placed power and principle in opposition to one another. The challenge in terms of strategy is to factor this quality into overall perspectives and to develop means of making choices and—where possible—resolving dilemmas that inevitably arise between value and power objectives.

This point is consistent with the steady growth of a moral dimension to international politics, especially since the end of the Second World War, including a number of international conventions, beginning with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Thus in the former Yugoslavia, the Western countries, primarily through NATO, were finally motivated to act to stop conflict in Bosnia and Kosovo not because of any risk of escalation to a wider war but because of the compelling moral issues that the conflicts presented. There was a double cause: recognition, however long in coming, of a collective responsibility to help stop the most massive and brutal killing in Europe since World War II—a debt to the past—as well as an understanding that only by responding in this fashion could NATO itself gain the political and moral legitimacy and support it must have to perform other functions in trying to create a Europe "whole and free"—a debt to the future.

By the same token, U.S. strategic thinking also has to take account of other factors that do not relate easily to power, at least in a narrow sense. Thus there needs to be a method for responding to the interests and concerns of societies that were once lumped together, in a cold war expression, as the Third World, and generally treated as objects of great-power politics rather than as subjects in their own right. In particular, there is a need to develop a basis for providing support to countries in Africa and parts of Asia and Latin America that do not figure prominently in geopolitics but where human need is so great: in essence, advancing economic human rights. Other elements, such as the global environment, also need a place in the overall method of strategic thinking, so that their significance can be given due weight in analyzing policy choices.

In sum, a hallmark of American power, position, and values should be advancement of moral and other nonpower qualities in strategic analysis, not as an afterthought but as an essential element of thought, choice, and action.

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6. *Institutional involvement.* Developing a wide-ranging strategic method imposes requirements on American institutions. This includes the way in which international relations is taught in colleges and universities, the approach followed in research think tanks, and the dialogue carried out in journals and in the public and private councils that consider the U.S. role in the world. These are supplementary requirements: not replacing the old methods, but adding a strategic dimension that asks the most difficult questions and searches for answers that are not bound by old convention and

perspective. This is not easily done, and the craft of strategic thinking is not widely taught in the United States. This helps to explain why, more than ten years after the end of the cold war, the broad lines of future U.S. foreign policy are still fuzzy, why so much of current dialogue is still an extension of the past rather than a truly fresh look at new conditions, circumstances, relationships, and possibilities.

7. *Breaking bad habits.* Lastly, the American academic community has a special responsibility in its method of approach. During the cold war, a large part of that community became actively engaged in the world of policy—turning insights and analysis into practical recommendations for action. This certainly enriched understanding within government, but it also tended to atrophy basic skills of analysis and understanding about history, culture, psychology, economics, and politics that did not have policy and power as their end. It is necessary to increase the separation between basic strategic analysis and practical policy—especially policy made and conducted in a partisan environment—in order to permit a leap of understanding beyond a cold war framework or any other framework that is compelling, not so much because, on renewed investigation, it proves to be intellectually sound but because it has become habit. Thinking "outside the box" does not come from willing a creative approach to policy, but rather from approaching analysis in the first place without a policy objective in view, and certainly without active engagement in policy debate. In that way fresh perspective and insight can become available to those who translate this understanding into policy choices.

These ideas for rethinking the craft of foreign policy are not exhaustive. But they can help to illuminate the different environment in which consideration of America's role in the world needs to take place. They are steps toward a method of strategic thinking capable of underpinning the successful engagement of the United States abroad, in its own interests and—if America is wise—in the interests of a large and growing number of other states and peoples as well.

Notes

[1] See, for instance, Ian O. Lesser et al., "Countering the New Terrorism," RAND Corp., MR-9898-AF, 1998; and Martin Libicki, "Rethinking War: The Mouse's New Roar?" *Foreign Policy,* Winter 1999–2000, pp. 30–43.