FOREIGN POLICY

What is Grand Strategy and why do we need it?

April 8, 2009

Peter Feaver

The term, "grand strategy," may strike some as odd and perhaps a bit
high-falutin’. As near as I can tell, the last time the New York Times used
that term in a news story (as opposed to a book review) was back in 1999
when Judith Miller [used it](http://www.nytimes.com/1999/04/24/arts/grand-strategy-round-round-us-interes%20ts-kosovo-rekindles-debate-dormant-for.html?scp=7&sq=&pagewanted=print) to frame the debate over Kosovo. There was a brief mention to it in a [May 2001 op-ed](http://www.nytimes.com/2001/05/25/opinion/the-illusion-of-a-grand-strategy.h%20tml?scp=12&sq=%22grand%20strategy%22&st=cse) on Bush’s forthcoming defense policy review, which was largely a discussion of Andrew Marshall, the grand strategist of the Pentagon.)

Grand strategy is a term of art from academia, and refers to the collection
of plans and policies that comprise the state’s deliberate effort to harness
political, military, diplomatic, and economic tools together to advance that
state’s national interest. Grand strategy is the art of reconciling ends
and means. It involves purposive action — what leaders think and want. Such
action is constrained by factors leaders explicitly recognize (for instance,
budget constraints and the limitations inherent in the tools of statecraft)
and by those they might only implicitly feel (cultural or cognitive screens
that shape worldviews).

The classic exemplar is containment during the Cold War, and ever since the end of the Cold War there has been a quest to identify and brand the grand
strategy the United States is or should now follow. It used to be called
the ["Kennan sweepstakes,"](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/Ning/archive/archive/106/democraticenlargement.%20pdf) as analysts sought to produce the next great [X article](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/23331/x/the-sources-of-soviet-conduct) to chart America’s course.

The study of grand strategy — and arguing about grand strategy, for you
cannot study something without arguing about it — is experiencing a renaissance of sorts. Yale has pioneered an extraordinarily popular [Grand
Strategy Program](http://www.yaledailynews.com/articles/view/15232) headed by distinguished historians, John Lewis Gaddis and
Paul Kennedy, and distinguished practitioner Charlie Hill. Several graduates of that program have gone on to positions of responsibility in the Clinton, Bush, and now Obama administrations. Some of them might even [lurking here](http://foreignpolicy.com/contributors#inboden) in *Shadow Government.*

I am starting a [similar program at Duke](http://www.duke.edu/web/agsp/) and I find it is an excellent way to bridge theory and practice. Grand Strategy begins with theory: leaders’ theories about how the world works and what is or ought to be their states’ roles in that world. Yet it is embodied inpolicy and practice: government action and reaction in response to real (or perceived) threats and opportunities.  Grand strategy may be born in debates at the highest levels of national power, but it lives or dies in the collaborative action of myriad junior officials.

Grand strategy lends itself to vigorous interpretive academic debates, yet it is so realistic that practitioners, current and former, can and must contribute for it to be properly understood. It leads to constructively critical appraisals of leaders: helping students empathize with the leaders even as they critically evaluate their choices.

Grand strategy blends the disciplines of history (what happened and why?), political science (what underlying patterns and causal mechanisms are at work?), public policy (how well did it work and how could it be done better?), and economics (how are national resources produced and protected?). Students are especially drawn to grand strategy because it makes history more relevant, political science more concrete, public policy more broadly contextualized, and economics more security-oriented.

Indeed, the study of grand strategy may require a revolution of sorts in the way that we educate students. That, at least, is the thesis of a talk given by John Gaddis at Duke recently (and available [here](http://www.duke.edu/web/agsp/grandstrategypaper.pdf)). He argues, persuasively to my ears, that grand strategy is a useful way of blending academic history, academic political science, and the real-world experience of practitioners. He argues, less persuasively to my ears, that the United States does not do grand strategy well and hasn’t had a functioning one since the end of the Cold War.  But he is absolutely correct that we need to do a better job of training the next generation to engage critically in the hard work of designing, implementing, and revising American grand strategy.

Such students would be well-equipped to subject the Sanger review of Obama’s grand strategy to some critical scrutiny of its own. Such students would ask Sanger to consider the numerous continuities in the Obama foreign policy thus far, such as in [terrorism policies](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/18/us/politics/18policy.html?scp=8&sq=continu%20ity%20in%20obama%20security%20policy&st=cse) or [Iraq](http://foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/03/01/obama_crosses_then_burns_th%20e_bridge_bush_built_in_iraq) — continuities that are obscured to the casual observer because of the changed rhetoric but do not fool those who have eyes to see. The students would also press Sanger to distinguish more carefully between the optics and the operations of Obama’s grand strategy.

Sanger probably would have reasonably good comebacks — he did when my students grilled him on a visit to Duke’s American Grand Strategy program last fall — but he also would probably say, let’s wait and see. Obama’s grand strategy is still unfolding, and he still has time to reconcile the various contradictions. As he does so, armies of young armchair academic strategists will be arguing about it every step of the way. And I am glad they will, because some of them will be joining the Obama team (and whoever comes later) to put theory into practice.