**The End of Grand Strategy**

America Must Think Small

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Whatever else U.S. President Donald Trump has done in the field of international relations, he can claim one signal accomplishment: making grand strategy interesting again. For decades, American foreign policy elites in both parties embraced liberal internationalism, the idea that Washington should sustain and expand a global order that promoted open markets, open polities, and multilateral institutions. But Trump has repeatedly attacked the key pillars of liberal internationalism, from questioning the value of NATO to blowing up trade agreements to insulting allies. When, in July 2017, his [national security team met](https://apnews.com/4cef63caf6b34cb796bc4c196d47c143/How-Trump's-advisers-schooled-him-on-globalism) with him in a windowless Pentagon meeting room known as “the Tank” to educate him about the virtues of the liberal international order, Trump blasted them as “a bunch of dopes and babies,” according to *The Washington Post*.

Trump’s disruptions have forced foreign policy analysts to question first principles for the first time in decades. With bedrock assumptions about liberal internationalism dislodged, the debate over U.S. grand strategy has experienced a renaissance. New voices have entered the fray, ranging from far-left progressives to populist nationalists on the right. Advocates of retrenchment and restraint have received a fuller hearing, and unusual alliances have formed to advance common agendas.

Yet even as these debates have flowered, the very concept of grand strategy has become a chimera. A grand strategy is a road map for how to match means with ends. It works best on predictable terrain—in a world where policymakers enjoy a clear understanding of the distribution of power, a solid domestic consensus about national goals and identity, and stable political and national security institutions. In 2020, none of that exists anymore.

The changing nature of power, along with its diffusion in the international system, has made it much more difficult for the United States to shape its destiny. The rise of multiculturalism and the populist backlash against it have eroded shared narratives and a common identity. Political polarization has hollowed out the country’s domestic political institutions, meaning that each new administration takes office bent on reversing whatever its predecessor did. Antiestablishment fever has debased policy debate and loosened the checks on executive power that generate consistency.

We write as three scholars who do not agree on much when it comes to politics, policy, or ideology. We do agree, however, that these new factors have rendered any exercise in crafting or pursuing a grand strategy costly and potentially counterproductive. None will be effective, and none will be long standing. Rather than quarrel over contending strategic doctrines, academics, pundits, think tankers, and policymakers should focus on more pragmatic forms of problem solving. From military intervention to foreign aid, policy made on a case-by-case basis will be at least as good, and likely better, than policy derived from grand strategic commitments. To debate grand strategy is to indulge in navel-gazing while the world burns. So it is time to operate without one.

**POWER PROBLEMS**

A successful grand strategy must be grounded in an accurate perception of the global distribution of power. One that grossly exaggerates a foe or underestimates a threat is not long for this world, because it will trigger policy choices that backfire. Indeed, one reason so many have attacked the United States’ strategy of liberal internationalism over the past decade is that they believe the strategy failed to appreciate the rise of China.

Power in global politics is no longer what it once was. The ability of states to exercise power, the way they exercise power, the purposes to which they put power, and who holds power—all have fundamentally changed. The result is an emerging world of nonpolarity and disorder. And that is not a world where grand strategy works well.

Many things remain the same, of course. People still define their identities largely in terms of nationality. Countries still seek control over crucial resources and access to vital sea-lanes and clash over territory and regional influence. They still want to maximize their wealth, influence, security, prestige, and autonomy. But amassing territory is no longer the prize it used to be. Today’s great powers seem determined to do two things more than anything else: get rich and avoid catastrophic military contests. They understand that states move up the ladder of international power and prestige by building knowledge-based economies and by promoting technological innovation and connectedness within global networks.

Meanwhile, power is becoming more about the ability to disrupt, block, disable, veto, and destroy than it is about the ability to construct, enable, repair, and build. Consider the “anti-access/area-denial” (A2/AD) capabilities that [China is pursuing](https://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2012/10/14/why_chinas_anti-access_strategy_matters_100285.html)—mainly cyberwarfare techniques and antisatellite weapons—with the goal of raising the risks to U.S. forces operating in the western Pacific. Iran is believed to be doing the same thing in the Persian Gulf, using submarines, antiship missiles, and sophisticated mines in an effort to make the area a no-go zone for the U.S. Navy.

When power is used for constructive purposes, it is becoming increasingly issue specific, unable to translate from one domain into another. Military power rarely achieves national goals or fixes problems anymore; interventions usually only make bad situations worse. The yawning outcome gap between the first and the second Gulf wars makes this plain. Power simply isn’t as fungible as it used to be. No wonder, for example, that the Trump administration’s efforts to hinge security and intelligence cooperation on renegotiated trade deals have fallen flat.

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Finally, the diffusion of power throughout the international system is creating a nonpolar world. Many point to the [rise of China](https://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2012/10/14/why_chinas_anti-access_strategy_matters_100285.html) and other competitors to say that the world is returning to multipolarity (or to bipolarity within a more multipolar setting), but that view understates the tectonic shift currently underway. International relations will no longer be dominated by one, two, or even several great powers. Because economic and military power no longer yield influence as reliably as they once did, the top dogs have lost their bite. The weak and the mighty suffer the same paralysis and enjoy the same freedom of action. Moreover, new actors, from local militias to nongovernmental organizations to large corporations, each possessing and exerting various kinds of power, increasingly compete with states. Relatively few states represented in the UN can claim a monopoly on force within their territorial borders. Violent nonstate actors are no longer minor players. Ethnic groups, warlords, youth gangs, terrorists, militias, insurgents, and transnational criminal organizations—all are redefining power across the globe.

These changes in power are producing a world marked by entropy. A world populated by dozens of power centers will prove extremely difficult to navigate and control. In the new global disorder, even countries with massive economies and militaries may not be able to get others to do what they want. It is essentially impossible for modern states, no matter how militarily and politically powerful, to influence violent groups that prosper in ungoverned spaces or online. Not only do such actors offer no clear target to threaten or destroy, but many are also motivated by nonnegotiable concerns, such as the establishment of a caliphate or their own separate state. Worse still, violence is for many a source of social cohesion.

With traditional power no longer buying the influence it once did, global order and cooperation will be in short supply. International relations will increasingly consist of messy ad hoc arrangements. The danger comes not from fire—shooting wars among the great powers or heated confrontations over human rights, intellectual property, or currency manipulation. The danger comes instead from ice—frozen conflicts over geopolitical, monetary, trade, or environmental issues. Given the immense costs of warfare, great powers that cannot resolve their disputes at the negotiating table no longer have the option—at least if they are rational—of settling them on the battlefield. When political arrangements do materialize, they will be short lived. Like flocking birds or schooling fish, they promise to lose their shape, only to form again after a delay.

Grand strategy is not well suited to an entropic world. Grand strategic thinking is linear. The world today is one of interaction and complexity, wherein the most direct path between two points is not a straight line. A disordered, cluttered, and fluid realm is precisely one that does not recognize grand strategy’s supposed virtue: a practical, durable, and consistent plan for the long term. To operate successfully in such an environment, actors must constantly change their strategies.

**A NATION DIVIDED**

A sustainable grand strategy must also rest on a shared worldview among key political constituencies. If each new government enters office with a radically different understanding of global challenges and opportunities, no strategy will last long. Each new government will tear up its predecessor’s policies, shredding the very idea of a grand strategy. Containment endured because every U.S. president from [Harry Truman](https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/truman-doctrine) to [Ronald Reagan](https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/rd/17741.htm) largely adhered to its underlying vision of global affairs. Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama all embraced variations on liberal internationalism.

Such a consensus no longer exists. Over the last half century, across the West, there has been rising skepticism of the virtues, and even the reality, of nations—of “imagined communities,” in the words of the political scientist [Benedict Anderson](https://books.google.com/books?id=nQ9jXXJV-vgC&printsec=frontcover&dq=%E2%80%9Cimagined+communities%E2%80%9D+Benedict+Anderson&hl=en&newbks=1&newbks_redir=0&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjgn6jZ-4ToAhUOJt8KHb8yCwAQ6AEwAHoECAIQAg#v=onepage&q=%E2%80%9Cimagined%20c&f=false), each unified by a shared narrative. That skepticism arose from a good place: a growing awareness that dominant narratives can be repressive, that they often reflect the interests and experiences of the powerful and silence the voices of communities on the margins. Beginning in the early 1970s, in the Vietnam War’s dying days, multiculturalism began to hold sway, at least in the United States. More than just a strategy to manage diversity in a fair and inclusive way, the concept was grounded in mounting doubt that societies should be rooted in some common identity.

Some effects of this cultural revolution, such as the explosion of weeks and months designated to celebrate specific ethnic and racial heritages, strike most Americans as innocuous and even good. But one consequence is particularly problematic: Americans today lack a common national narrative. For good reason, few speak any longer of the assimilative “melting pot.” As the historian [Jill Lepore lamented](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2019-02-05/new-americanism-nationalism-jill-lepore) in these pages in 2019, historians stopped writing about the nation decades ago. Listen to any Democratic debate this presidential campaign season, and you will see how uncomfortable American politicians on the liberal left have become with the rhetoric of American nationalism.

Yet nationalism has proved an enduring force, as has people’s desire for a shared narrative to make sense of their world. Cultural conservatives in the United States have long mined this vein. They have sought to define a cultural core, manifest in such books as *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, in which the academic E. D. Hirsch, Jr., attempted to list the figures, events, and works that “every American needs to know.” They have waged war against bilingual education, and they have led a decades-long campaign—successful to date in [over half of American states](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Template:Official_languages_of_U.S._states_and_territories)—to declare English the official language. They have charged that the United States is coming apart at the seams, blaming new immigrants for refusing to buy into the national creed. Liberals have vacillated on American exceptionalism, as in 2009, when [Obama declared](https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2009-apr-28-oe-kirchick28-story.html), “I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism.” Conservatives, by contrast, have leaned into it. Unlike the Democrats, Trump is very comfortable with nationalist language—although he deploys it in a manner that excludes half the country.

**Among the victims of a fractured national narrative has been grand strategy.**

Among the victims of a fractured national narrative has been grand strategy. Grand strategy rests on a security narrative that sets out the main protagonists of global politics, tells a story about what those actors have done and will do, and depicts the global backdrop against which events will take place. Debates over contending grand strategies are typically debates over one or more of these narrative elements. Those advocating deep engagement, for instance, believe that American and global security are indivisible, whereas those calling for restraint believe the opposite. In the absence of the rhetorical tropes that a shared national narrative supplies, crafting a grand strategy that can resonate with diverse constituencies becomes impossible. It becomes harder to implement a particular strategy across various policy areas and to sustain that strategy over time.

One manifestation of the narrative divide in the United States is the stark polarization that has come to define American politics, and not just on hot-button domestic issues. Across a wide array of foreign policy questions—climate change, counterterrorism, immigration, the Middle East, the use of force—Americans are divided along party lines. That is no environment for a useful debate about grand strategy. For one thing, it eviscerates the utility of expert feedback. Political scientists have found that an expert consensus can alter public attitudes about issues on which the public was not already polarized, such as how to respond to China’s currency manipulation. When the public is already split along party lines, however, as it is on climate change, polarization renders an elite consensus worse than useless. Expert opinions from nonpartisan sources simply make partisans double down on their preexisting beliefs.

Political polarization also makes learning difficult. For grand strategy to improve, there has to be agreement on what failed and why. In a polarized political environment, the side that fears being held responsible will not accept the premise that its policy failed until long after the fact. Republicans, for example, insisted that the Iraq war was a triumph for years after it was obvious that the United States had lost the peace. To support their leader, partisans have a persistent incentive to bend the truth to fit their arguments, robbing the foreign policy discussion of the agreed-on facts that ordinarily frame debate.

Most important, polarization means that any party’s grand strategy will last only as long as that party controls the executive branch. Because Congress and the courts have granted the president a near monopoly on the articulation of the national security narrative, a single president can radically shift the country’s grand strategy. And so can the next president from the other party.

**THE PEOPLE VS. THE EXPERTS**

Grand strategy requires a robust marketplace of ideas, backed by sturdy institutions, to help policymakers correct course over time. Even an enduring grand strategy must cope with changes in the strategic environment, and even well-considered strategies will result in policy missteps that need to be reversed. The United States made its share of foreign policy errors during the Cold War, but the push and pull between the establishment and its critics and between the executive branch and Congress eventually reined in the worst excesses of American activism and prevented the overembrace of restraint.

Over the last half century, once-stable structures of authority have eroded, and the American public has grown increasingly skeptical of the federal government, the press, and every other major public institution. Americans’ distrust extends to the foreign policy establishment, and on this, it is hard to blame them. U.S. foreign policy elites [largely endorsed](https://harvardpolitics.com/world/regime-change-failure/) the use of force in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, and none of those interventions could be called a success. As revealed in “The Afghanistan Papers,” a collection of government documents [published by *The Washington Post*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/afghanistan-war-confidential-documents/)late last year, for over a decade, civilian and military leaders lied to the public about how the war in Afghanistan was going. The 2008 financial crisis and the Arab Spring caught foreign policy elites unprepared. Clearly, some healthy skepticism of experts is warranted.

Too much skepticism, however, can be corrosive. Calling into doubt the value of foreign policy expertise undermines a healthy marketplace of ideas on grand strategy. As the journalist Chris Hayes warned in *Twilight of the Elites*, “If the experts as a whole are discredited, we are faced with an inexhaustible supply of quackery.” Furthermore, new entrants are advancing their arguments in part by bashing the preexisting consensus on grand strategy. They are exploiting narratives about failed foreign policies of the past to argue that they could hardly do worse. As [Trump told voters](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a5eu1TPpSaE) at a campaign rally in 2016, “The experts are terrible. They say, ‘Donald Trump needs a foreign policy adviser.’ . . . Would it be worse than what we’re doing now?”

The death of respect for expertise is just one element of the biggest political story of the twenty-first century: the proliferation of right-wing populist nationalism as part of mainstream politics across the West. It is no flash in the pan, because its rise is rooted partly in economic dislocation but equally, if not more, in the politics of cultural reaction. And populism renders grand strategy moot.

At the heart of all forms of populism lies a simple image of politics. The populist leader asserts the existence of a morally pure people, set in contrast to corrupt elites, and he claims that he alone knows the people’s will. Populist politics therefore tilts authoritarian. In sweeping away supposedly corrupt elites and institutions, the populist leader weakens all forces standing in his way. Asserting his unmediated line to the people, the populist leader claims to represent them better than any political process can. Critics becomes enemies, constitutional constraints become obstacles to democracy, and the tyranny of the majority becomes a virtue, not a vice.

Populism is not hospitable to grand strategy. First, populism accentuates internal divisions. Polarizing by design, it narrows the sphere of the supposedly authentic people so that, within the nation as a territorial and legal entity, there can be no unity. Second, populist politicians regularly mobilize the people in righteous anger against enemies. When heated rhetoric is in the air, emotional responses to the crisis of the day threaten to overtake rational strategy. Strategy becomes less supple, as leaders have trouble pursuing conciliatory tactics in a climate of affront and retribution. Finally, populism concentrates authority in the charismatic leader. It disempowers bureaucrats and institutions that can check fickle rulers and block extreme decisions. Policy in a populist regime is thus a reflection of the leader—whether of his ideological commitments or his whims. If the populist leader does pursue something akin to a grand strategy, it will not outlive his rule.

**WE COME TO BURY GRAND STRATEGY**

Grand strategy is dead. The radical uncertainty of nonpolar global politics makes it less useful, even dangerous. Even if it were helpful in organizing the United States’ response to global challenges today, an increasingly divided domestic polity has made it harder to implement a coherent and consistent grand strategy. Popular distrust of expertise has corroded sensible debate over historical lessons and prospective strategies. Populism has eviscerated the institutional checks and balances that keep strategy from swinging violently.

The nation’s strategic thinkers, however, remain in the early stages of grieving for grand strategy. The raging debate over contending strategic options suggests that many are still in denial. The ire directed at the Trump administration for its lack of strategic thinking implies that many are stuck on anger. We ourselves differ on whether to mourn or to celebrate the demise of grand strategy, but we agree that it is high time we moved on to the final stage of the grieving process: acceptance.

Moving forward without grand strategy requires embracing two principles: decentralization and incrementalism. Highly uncertain conditions call for decentralized but mutually coordinated decision-making networks. The corporate sector has learned that managers must avoid the temptation to control every decision and instead figure out how to steer innovation, by shaping the environment within which choices emerge. Smart corporations decentralize authority and responsibility, encourage employees to address problems through teamwork, and take an informal approach to assigning tasks and responsibilities. Governments should organize their foreign policy machinery in the same way. Appreciating regional knowledge and trusting expert feedback is a better way to handle trouble spots and emergent problems and to defuse crises before they metastasize.

Organizational change must go hand in hand with a cultural one: toward prizing the virtues of bottom-up experimentation. Grand strategy wagers that careful planning at the center produces the best results. It presumes that the costs of being too flexible outweigh those of being too rigid. But that is unwise when change can occur rapidly and unpredictably. Incrementalism is the safer bet. It does not require putting all your eggs in one basket. It cannot achieve victory in one fell swoop, but it does avoid disastrous losses. It allows for swift adaptation to changing circumstances. In practice, it would mean devolving responsibility from Washington to theater commanders, special envoys, and subject-matter experts. In other words, it means taking the exact opposite tack of so many past administrations, which concentrated ever more decision-making in the White House.

Aspiring national security advisers should give up competing for the title of the next George Kennan. Crafting a durable successor to containment is neither important nor possible for the near future. Improving U.S. foreign policy performance is. Given the recent record of U.S. foreign policy, that goal doesn’t seem half bad.