



BEST PRACTICES IN GRAND STRATEGY DESIGN

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Policymakers often view grand strategy as an academic indulgence, with scholars enjoying the freedom to envision sweeping plans, while they themselves must face more immediate concerns. Although this skepticism is understandable, it is misplaced. This article demonstrates how practitioners drafting grand strategy documents can refine their instincts and elevate the effectiveness of their policies. It proposes a five-step framework to improve grand strategy formulation, including best practices in defining core strategic goals, identifying and analyzing strategic challenges, designing a coherent logic of action, and translating strategic ideas into coordinated policies. This approach builds on the academic literature on grand strategy in international relations, political science, history and business administration but uses real-world examples of how this literature can be used effectively in a policy context.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February of 2022 sparked the largest military conflict in Europe since World War II and revealed deep-seated vulnerabilities in Europe and the international system as a whole. In response to the war, a multitude of US allies wrote or rewrote the core strategic documents that articulated their strategies for a new geopolitical era. The European Union published the *EU Strategic Compass* in March 2022. France unveiled its updated *Revue Nationale Stratégique* in November 2022 and Japan its updated *National Security Strategy* in December 2022. The United Kingdom published the *Integrated Review Refresh* in March 2023, and in June 2023 both Germany and South Korea issued their national security strategies. For Germany it was a first—it had never published such a document before. The United States, of course, published its most recent in October 2022 and will publish an updated version during the new Trump administration.¹

All of these documents qualify as grand strategic documents.² Such documents outline a nation's long-term vision and objectives in terms of foreign policy, security, and overall strategy. Many of these strategic documents, however, display serious flaws. They

list copious goals as opposed to figuring out how to achieve the goals; list threats and challenges without prioritizing them; provide laundry lists of desired policies with hardly a hint as to how they might be implemented given existing resource constraints and in the face of active opposition from antagonists; and employ fluff, buzzwords, and inflated language instead of genuine strategic analysis.

Do these flaws matter? Grand strategy can, of course, take on a variety of shapes. Researcher Nina Silove distinguishes between “grand plans” and “grand principles,” both of which emanate from purposeful efforts at strategy development typified by the publication of strategic documents, in comparison to “grand behavior” (also called “emergent strategy”), which evolves organically over time as an organization responds to changing circumstances and new information.³ As a result, a nation's strategic documents might not constitute a true reflection of the grand strategy a state pursues. Instead, they might serve as mere messaging devices—as “vessels for communicating with audiences at home and abroad.”⁴

I largely disagree with this argument. While these strategic documents, of course, do not reveal the totality of a state's objectives, interests, resources,

1 The US, in contrast to many of its allies, has a congressional mandate to publish an NSS on a regular basis.

2 To be clear, whether practitioners use the terminology of grand strategy does not matter. Many politicians purposefully avoid the term, as they (mistakenly) assume it means having a fixed plan for navigating international affairs over the long term.

3 Nina Silove, “Beyond the Buzzword: The Three Meanings of ‘Grand Strategy,’” *Security Studies* 27, no. 1 (2018): 32. For some examples of other views on this topic, see Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, Norran M. Ripsman, and Steven E. Lobell, *The Challenge of Grand Strategy: The Great Powers and the Broken Balance Between the World Wars* (Cambridge University Press, 2012); Peter Feaver, “What Is Grand Strategy and Why Do We Need It,” *Foreign Policy* 8 (2009); James Goldgeier and Jeremi Suri, “Revitalizing the US National Security Strategy,” *The Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (2015): 35–55. On emergent strategy, see Ionut Popescu, *Emergent Strategy and Grand Strategy: How American Presidents Succeed in Foreign Policy* (JHU Press, 2017).

4 Rebecca Friedman Lissner, “What Is Grand Strategy? Sweeping a Conceptual Minefield,” *Texas National Security Review* 2, no. 1 (2018).

and capability, the documents do portray key elements of national strategic thinking (or the absence of it) present in a state at the moment of publication. After all, most governments expend significant resources—involving multiple state agencies—developing these documents over months and sometimes even years. The writing of the documents involves the highest echelons of a government’s leadership team—at minimum these officials will need to put their seal of approval on the final version. As a result, the ideas and principles discussed in these documents are highly likely to reflect the basic principles and internal logic (or the lack thereof) that guide a government’s foreign policy. Indeed, the fact that these strategic documents are public significantly boosts their authority. A democratic head of government cannot openly contradict a key strategic document without questions being raised internally and externally.

In short, these documents matter. They illustrate—in full or at least in part—a state’s theory “of how the world works” and consequently influence state actions and the distribution of state resources.⁵ Hence, if these strategic documents are based on flawed logic or convey inconsistent ideas, thinking about grand strategy in the whole of the government cannot be clear.

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Why is this problematic? Why should democratic governments try to do grand strategy well rather than poorly? Any democratic government’s core responsibility is to provide for its citizens and to this end use taxpayers’ money as efficiently and effectively as possible. Any democratic government ought to be held accountable if it fails to do so. A well-crafted grand strategy is more likely to achieve these core duties than is a poorly designed one. Moreover, a lack

of grand strategy or “secret” grand strategy keeps processes untransparent and denies democratic accountability. Furthermore, if the threat of use of military force, or its actual use, is to be legitimate, then grand strategy is necessary; without it the use of force is merely random violence.⁶ Or as scholar Richard Betts put it: “Without strategy, power is a loose cannon and war is mindless.”⁷ Finally, bad strategy is bad for the United States, its allies, and alliance dynamics as a whole. Bad strategy weakens collective defense efforts, damages the credibility of US leadership and US alliances, and impacts global stability by emboldening US adversaries.

The objective of this article is to identify best practices in grand strategy design. Some policymakers might think that grand strategy is an academic convenience—that scholars have the luxury of imagining grand plans but busy policymakers do not. This skepticism is understandable but misguided.

This article shows how practitioners involved in the process of writing grand strategy documents can add substance to their instincts and improve the quality of their policies. Indeed, similar to musicologists—who can judge the quality of a symphony by evaluating the composition through a combination of analytical, historical, cultural, and theoretical frameworks—we can judge a strategy document by using best practice frameworks from history, international relations, political science, and business administration.

In this article, I review the literature on best practices in grand strategy design and identify five key building blocks that any grand strategy development process ought to include. Next, I illustrate how many of the grand strategic documents recently published by the United States and its key allies fall short of this standard. Finally, I explain the consequences these mistakes can have for domestic politics, bureaucratic processes, and international statecraft, and how these mistakes can be avoided.

What Is a Grand Strategy?

The formulation of a grand strategy is generally considered the highest form of statecraft.⁸ Such a document summarizes the core objectives of a state

5 Barry Posen speaks of “a nation-state’s theory about how to produce security for itself.” See Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for US Grand Strategy* (Cornell University Press, 2014), 1.

6 Andrew F. Krepinevich and Barry D. Watts, “Regaining Strategic Competence,” *Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments*, 2009, viii, <https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/2009.09.01-Regaining-Strategic-Competence.pdf>.

7 Richard K. Betts, “Is Strategy an Illusion?,” *International Security* 25, no. 2 (2000): 5–50. See also Betts, “The Grandiosity of Grand Strategy,” *The Washington Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (2019): 7–22.

8 Hal Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy?: Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Cornell University Press, 2014), 1.

and describes how these can be achieved in the most efficient way.⁹ As such, grand strategy is in essence about overcoming obstacles that stand between where a nation is and where it wants to be by using all tools a state has at its disposal. This characteristic makes a grand strategy “grand”—as it sits above strategies that deal with lower levels of statecraft, for example, cyber strategy, defense strategy, and so forth. This feature also distinguishes a grand strategy from a simple “plan,” the latter of which assumes a sequence of events that allows a state to move confidently from one step to the next. Grand strategy *always* presupposes disruptions by actors that have different and potentially opposing interests or by events that are out of a state’s own control.¹⁰

A grand strategy differs in many ways also from foreign policy. A grand strategy operates on a global level and its time frame is long term—usually ten to fifteen years. It focuses on the highest purpose of state action—that is, the core strategic objectives of a state. In contrast, foreign policy encompasses all interactions of a government with the outside world.¹¹ These interactions typically have a regional, national, or even local focus—and only very rarely do they involve a global reference frame. The time frame of foreign policy is medium to short term, and its objectives are limited to specific areas, such as development aid, humanitarian missions, or trade.¹² In a figurative sense, we can imagine a grand strategy as a conceptual framework within which the foreign policy of a state unfolds or which provides a structure to foreign policy.¹³ A grand strategy describes the macropolitical course of a state. Foreign policy then implements this course on a micro level. Ideally, grand strategies are thus the crucial link between short- and medium-term state actions and long-term ambitions.¹⁴

What Makes Grand Strategy “Good”?

No theory of grand strategy creation exists.¹⁵ But there are best practices. The quality of grand strategy can and

should be judged at two different points in time. First, as I mentioned with the metaphor of a musicologist evaluating a piece of music by using a combination of analytical, historical, cultural, and theoretical frameworks, a grand strategy document can be evaluated by looking at its composition. Second, the outcome of a grand strategy can be judged once time has passed. In the latter process, many other variables, of course, need to be considered. Was the grand strategy appropriately implemented? Did the instruments work as planned? Other questions of this sort must be asked.

The focus of this article is to develop the criteria of how to judge the composition of a grand strategic document. Literature in the fields of international relations, political science, and history provides some criteria for judging the quality of a grand strategy. Scholars such as Richard Betts, Hal Brands, and William C. Martel, for instance, emphasize in their work the importance of coherence and consistency when designing grand strategy.¹⁶ John Lewis Gaddis and William D. James, in turn, focus on proportionality as a critical yardstick to judge grand strategy.¹⁷ James defines proportionality as “the sustainable balancing of means and ends, based on a prudent calculation of the state’s interests or objectives that are commensurate with the state’s aggregate power (economic strength, technological prowess, and military capabilities), its geographic location, and the nature of its security environment.”¹⁸ Building on the insights of Richard Rumelt, a professor of business strategy, analysts Andrew F. Krepinevich and Barry D. Watts develop a list of ten “common strategy sins” that impinge on the quality of grand strategic thinking at the government level. Indeed, over the last few decades the academic field of business administration has been the most prolific in developing and testing criteria to judge the quality of strategy design.¹⁹ Building from these different fields of academic literature, I propose the following five steps that form the basis of “good” grand strategy.

9 Silove, “Beyond the Buzzword”; Hal Brands and Patrick Porter, “Why Grand Strategy Still Matters in a World of Chaos,” *National Interest* 10 (2015); Bastian Giegerich and Alexandra Jonas, “Auf Der Suche Nach Best Practice? Die Entstehung Nationaler Sicherheitsstrategien Im Internationalen Vergleich,” *S&F Sicherheit und Frieden* 30, no. 3 (2012): 129–34.

10 Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford University Press, 2015), xi.

11 Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy?*, 3.

12 William C. Martel, *Grand Strategy in Theory and Practice: The Need for an Effective American Foreign Policy* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 30, 34.

13 Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy?*, 1.

14 Brands and Porter, “Why Grand Strategy Still Matters in a World of Chaos.”

15 Richard Rumelt, *The Crux: How Leaders Become Strategists* (Profile Books, 2022), 17.

16 Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy?*, 189; Martel, *Grand Strategy in Theory and Practice*, 32; Betts, “The Grandiosity of Grand Strategy,” 9. See also Frank G. Hoffman, “Grand Strategy: The Fundamental Considerations,” *Orbis* 58, no. 4 (2014): 472–85; Daniel W. Drezner, “Does Obama Have a Grand Strategy? Why We Need Doctrines in Uncertain Times,” *Foreign Affairs* (2011): 57–68.

17 John Lewis Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy* (Penguin, 2019), 175.

18 William D. James, *British Grand Strategy in the Age of American Hegemony* (Oxford University Press, 2024).

19 See, for example, Rumelt, *The Crux*. Best practices in business strategy translate, of course, not one-to-one into grand strategies of states. Nevertheless, learning about these best practices can help in better understanding what “good” strategy-writing entails.



Step 1: Define Core Strategic Goals

Any grand strategy development process needs to start with defining a state's core strategic goals. These goals should reflect the highest purpose of state action—the absolute priorities of a government. These goals are set for the long term, which can mean years or even decades. National security presents itself as any state's core strategic goal. States operate within a world where the potential for war exists continuously. National security is thus any state's most precious priority, and grand strategic thinking should not be diluted by prioritizing other goals of lesser importance. And what does national security entail? The term generally encompasses the preservation of a state's sovereignty, safety, and territorial integrity.²⁰ Nevertheless, the concept also includes the necessary means to achieve the ends—that is, the capabilities to defend a state's sovereignty, territorial integrity and safety. These capabilities encompass the size, health, and skill levels of a state's population, as well as its economic resources, agricultural output, access to raw materials, and military strength.²¹

Interestingly, autocratic states often choose a different core strategic goal. If we look at China, for example, many analysts agree that the ultimate priority of the Chinese Communist Party is to maintain power. National security in this context is thus a question of “regime security” and not national security.²²

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It is essential to clearly define these core strategic goals. Without this clarity, confusion can arise about what a state aims to achieve. Unlike private enterprises, which typically focus on profit as their primary

strategic objective, states have distinct goals that may vary significantly. States can prioritize economic growth over national security—such as Germany did for the past few decades—or democracy over national security, such as South Africa did in the immediate aftermath of apartheid. What priorities characterize states today? The UK Integrated Review Refresh 2023 defines the United Kingdom's core strategic goals as “the sovereignty, security and prosperity of the British people.”²³ The US National Security Strategy 2022 states that its goal is “to protect the security of the American people; to expand economic prosperity and opportunity; and to realize and defend the democratic values at the heart of the American way of life.” Both definitions of strategic goals are clear and concise. The UK puts sovereignty before security and prosperity, whereas the US identifies security as its primary goal followed by prosperity and democracy.²⁴

Step 2: Identify and Analyze Core Strategic Challenges

At the core of any strategy is the task of overcoming problems.²⁵ As such, the second step of grand strategy development requires identifying and analyzing the most important challenges that stand between a state and its core strategic goals. If a state fails to identify and analyze these challenges, no strategy is being developed.²⁶

What is the smartest way to identify strategic challenges? It is sensible to start by compiling a broad list of challenges. All potential issues should be considered, not just the ones that initially come to mind. If the list becomes too extensive, grouping the challenges can be helpful. Some issues may relate to internal versus external obstacles; others may be political versus technological; some may be regional, while others are global. For large challenges, it is wise to break them into smaller subproblems. Next, the challenges need to be filtered based on their importance. Importance here means the degree to which the challenge either

20 Posen, *Restraint*, 1.

21 Posen, *Restraint*, 4.

22 *Internal Security & Grand Strategy: China's Approach to National Security Under Xi Jinping*, “Statement Before the US-China Economic & Security Review Commission, Hearing on “US-China Relations at the Chinese Communist Party's Centennial,” Panel on “Trends in China's Politics, Economics, and Security Policy,” 3 (January 28, 2021) (statement of Sheena Greitens).

23 UK Integrated Review Refresh 2023, 16, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/641d72f45155a2000c6ad5d5/11857435_NS_IR_Refresh_2023_Supply_AllPages_Revision_7_WEB_PDF.pdf.

24 US National Security Strategy 2022, 7, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>. The UK and US documents also list other “secondary” goals.

25 Kevin P. Coyne and Somu Subramaniam, “McKinsey's Strategy Theory Initiative: “Bringing Discipline to Strategy” *The McKinsey Quarterly* (1996): 4; Hugh Courtney, Jane Kirkland, and Patrick Viguier, “Strategy Under Uncertainty,” *Harvard Business Review*, (November–December 1997); Posen, *Restraint*, 77.

26 Richard P. Rumelt, *Good Strategy/Bad Strategy* (Crown Business, 2011), 41–42.

threatens a state's core values or its very existence. If the identified challenge does not qualify, it gets dropped from the grand strategic design process.

What is the most effective way to analyze the identified core strategic challenges? At the heart of this process lies a diagnosis—a thorough examination of the nature of each challenge. Why does this challenge exist? What are its underlying causes, triggers, or drivers? Why have certain challenges emerged as particularly significant? What forces are influencing them? A key aspect of this diagnosis is to avoid looking for single-cause explanations and instead aim to understand the challenges from multiple perspectives. The different schools of thought in international relations (IR) research—such as a realist, liberal, or constructivist perspective—can be useful in this context. Each school offers a different approach to explain why a particular strategic challenge exists, and each school provides a different kind of lens to view a given situation. The lenses taken together can build up a more accurate picture. An alternative approach is to use a “levels of analysis” framework.²⁷ This approach entails first looking at the challenge from the level of the “individual” (that is, the people involved) and asking: What are their backgrounds, their affiliations, their ambitions, their ideologies—and how do these characteristics shape their actions? Next comes the “state” level, which is an analysis of domestic politics including the critical domestic actors and their interests, the prevalent norms and taboos, and the institutions and bureaucracies involved. Finally, one looks at the “system” level: What has been the impact of regional or global crises? What are the systematic forces, such as geography, the size and kind of the economy, technology, and military power?

US diplomat George Kennan provided an example of how to undertake such a diagnosis. In his “Long Telegram” of 1946, he identified three drivers for the Soviet Union's hostile attitude toward the West: (1) inferiority complexes, (2) a Marxist-Leninist ideology, and (3) a political compulsion for Stalin to justify ruthless suppression at home.²⁸ Kennan could not, of course, prove that these three drivers were the correct or only ones at the time of his diagnosis. He made a judgment call based on his deep knowledge

of Russia. Any diagnosis will face this constraint, and will ultimately represent an informed guess or evaluation. But if this evaluation is conducted by the best analysts, it will present the best guess possible.

The 1987 US National Security Strategy also does a good job in identifying and analyzing US core strategic challenges. This document thoroughly describes the political, social, economic, and military situation in the USSR and highlights how and why the Soviets were increasingly using economic instruments as well as state propaganda, along with its military might, to achieve its strategic objectives.²⁹ Why is such a detailed diagnosis of strategic challenges so important? Only if a state examines its strategic challenges in detail can appropriate solutions to address them be found. As mentioned above, strategy is a form of problem-solving and you cannot solve a problem you have not understood.³⁰

Step 3: Designing a Logic of Action

The third step in grand strategy development concerns the design of an overarching logic of action. This step outlines an overall approach for overcoming the diagnosed strategic challenges. Like the guardrails on a highway, this logic of action directs and constrains policy without fully defining its content.³¹ This approach channels action in a certain direction without defining exactly what shall be done.

Ideally, designing a logic of action consists of two successive steps. First, strategy designers develop several possible logics of action based on differing assumptions. Second, these competing logics of action get thoroughly debated and tested and the best one is chosen.

A good real-world example of such a two-step process of designing a logic of action was President Dwight Eisenhower's famous 1953 “Project Solarium.” Eisenhower wanted to revise US grand strategy and make it fit for the post-Stalin age. He created three task forces to separately examine how US-Soviet relations can move forward. Each one of the three groups was staffed by twenty-one members including subject-matter experts, diplomats, and military officers, with each group working in isolation for approximately six weeks of intense twelve- to fourteen-hour days. Task Force A worked on a logic of action that foresaw the continuation of US containment policy with no further increases in

27 See, for example, Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (Columbia University Press, 2018).

28 Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics: New Edition* (Princeton University Press, 2017); David J. Singer, “The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations,” *World Politics* 14, no. 1 (1961): 77–92; George Kennan, “Long Telegram,” <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/coldwar/documents/episode-1/kennan.htm>. See also Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy?*, 21–22.

29 US National Security Strategy 1987, 6–7, <https://history.defense.gov/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=INzbifmEQcc%3d&tabid=9115&portalid=70&mid=20231>. More recent US NSSs have shown less competence in analyzing core strategic challenges.

30 Rumelt, *The Crux*, 137.

31 Rumelt, *Good Strategy/Bad Strategy*, 84.



defense spending.³² Task Force B proposed a logic of action based on the deterrence power of nuclear weapons. This group recommended drawing a “line of no aggression” around the Communist Bloc and other areas the US perceived as necessary to its security. Entry or expansion beyond the line would result in an atomic attack on the Soviet Union.³³ The key selling point of the proposal was a reduction in military spending compared to current levels. Finally, Task Force C advocated for the most aggressive approach of all. This group proposed a “roll back” method, whereby the United States would “prosecute relentlessly a forward and aggressive political strategy in all fields and by all means: military, economic, diplomatic, covert, and propaganda.” Through aggressive means, communism would be swiftly eradicated and democracy “restored.”³⁴

To prepare their analysis, each team had unrestricted access to the expertise and information of the US government. On presentation day, President Eisenhower witnessed an intense exchange on the strengths and weaknesses of each logic of action.³⁵ The debate forced each team to spell out all underlying assumptions and make all trade-offs explicit and thus recognize unconscious biases. The exercise helped the US to settle on a new strategic logic.³⁶ More recently, a variety of scholars have engaged in a similar intellectual exercise debating and testing the competing logics of possible US grand strategic postures.³⁷ In Europe, these exercises are rare but do also exist.³⁸

How do strategy designers come up with competing logics of action? Ideally, these alternatives are not given but are imagined. They are constructed, not chosen.³⁹ What might be helpful in this process? Historians would point to analogies, the examples

and lessons of others, other states, other times.⁴⁰ Of course, history might also constitute a burden holding one’s mind in a rut.⁴¹ Political scientists would once again point to international relation theory.⁴²

And what criteria should decide which logic wins? At times objective criteria can define the choice; under intense scrutiny the assumptions of some logic of actions hold up better than others, while some logics deliver simply more bang for the buck. Often, however, the individual choice taken will reflect policymakers’ view of how the world works.⁴³ The choice will again be a judgment call based on personal preferences; on perceptions of the major problems of international politics; on ideas of world order; on views of the roles that military, nuclear, economic, technological and soft power can and should play in a state’s power portfolio.

Why is it so important to undergo such a competitive process to design an overarching logic of action? Such guiding policy drastically decreases the risk that policies will be inconsistent and incoherent, or at odds with one another and cancelling one another out. Adopting such guardrails helps reveal and organize the interactions among policy measures and actions. To have punch, actions must be coordinated and build upon one another; they cannot be incoherent or inconsistent.

Step 4: Translating Strategic Ideas into Concrete Actions

Finally, the most competitive logic of action needs to be translated into specific real-world actions such as concrete policies and resource commitments.⁴⁴

32 William Z. Slany, ed., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954*, vol. 2, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1984, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v02p2>. On containment, see, for example, John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

33 "Project Solarium," Series: Eisenhower and the Nuclear Arms Race in the 1950s, Eisenhower National Historic Site, Minuteman Missile National Historic Site (October 20, 2020), <https://www.nps.gov/articles/projectsolarium.htm>.

34 "Project Solarium."

35 Michele A. Flournoy and Shawn W. Brimley, "Strategic Planning for US National Security: A Project Solarium for the 21st Century" *Joint Force Quarterly* 41 (second quarter 2006).

36 For a good discussion on this point see Walter Hudson, "Solarium at 70: Project Solarium's Influence on Eisenhower Historiography and National Security Strategy," *Strategic Monographs* 4, 2023, <https://digitalcommons.ndu.edu/strategic-monographs/>.

37 See, for example, Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, "Don't Come Home, America: The Case Against Retrenchment," *International Security* 37, no. 3 (2013): 7–51; Posen, *Restraint*; Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, "Competing Visions for US Grand Strategy," *International Security* 21, no. 3 (1997): 5–53.

38 Marina E. Henke, "Europe Needs a Grand Strategy," *Engelsberg Ideas* (March 5, 2024).

39 Rumelt, *Good Strategy/Bad Strategy*, 129; Rumelt, *The Crux*, 32.

40 Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (The Free Press 1988), 251.

41 Rumelt, *The Crux*, 50.

42 Paul C. Avey, Jonathan N. Markowitz, and Robert J. Reardon, "Disentangling Grand Strategy: International Relations Theory and US Grand Strategy (November 2018)," *Texas National Security Review* 2, no. 1, (2018): 1.; Christopher Layne, "From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America's Future Grand Strategy," *International Security* 22, no. 1 (1997): 86–124; Posen and Ross, "Competing Visions for US Grand Strategy."

43 Layne, "From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing," 88; William Inboden, "Statecraft, Decision-Making, and the Varieties of Historical Experience: A Taxonomy," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37, no. 2 (2014): 307.

44 Hoffman, "Grand Strategy," 480.



At times objective criteria can define the choice; under intense scrutiny the assumptions of some logic of actions hold up better than others, while some logics deliver simply more bang for the buck.

When choosing these concrete actions, a state ought to use all means of statecraft at its disposal, including political, diplomatic, military, economic, and technological resources. Good grand strategy not only recognizes a state's strengths and weaknesses and seeks to use the most efficient available tools, but it also involves considering one's capabilities and competencies in comparison to others (most notably one's antagonists). States must ask: Where do my strengths lie compared to others? Good grand strategy also uses such asymmetries by cleverly leveraging

a state's strengths against the weaknesses of the other side when possible or necessary.⁴⁵ Good strategy development also takes into account that no country exists in a vacuum.⁴⁶ Other actors in international politics also think and act strategically. The goals of third-party states and their respective cost-benefit calculations, as well as these states' strategic thinking, risk tolerance, and strategic culture, must be understood.

A grand strategic document does not need to point to all the actions that will be taken as events unfold, but enough clarity about action must be achieved to bring concepts down to earth.⁴⁷ As mentioned above, coordination among actions creates leverage. This approach allows states to get the greatest return or result from a given input. When resources are limited, smart and tightly coordinated policies are especially essential. If resources are more plentiful, a less stringent level of integration may be sufficient.

45 Andrew W. Marshall, "Long-Term Competition with the Soviets: A Framework for Strategic Analysis," *RAND Corporation* (1972); Mie Augier, "Thinking About War and Peace: Andrew Marshall and the Early Development of the Intellectual Foundations for Net Assessment," *Comparative Strategy* 32, no. 1 (2013): 1–17.

46 Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (Penguin UK, 2012), 404–5; Krepinevich and Watts, "Regaining Strategic Competence," 33.

47 Rumelt, *Good Strategy/Bad Strategy*, 87.

While missing a specific logic of action, the 2022 US National Security Strategy nonetheless succeeds in translating strategic ideas into actionable policy steps at an adequate level of abstraction. This document states that to achieve the US core strategic goals of security, prosperity, and democracy, the US government will pursue the following three lines of effort: “(1) invest in the underlying sources and tools of American power and influence; (2) build the strongest possible coalition of nations to enhance [US] collective influence to shape the global strategic environment and to solve shared challenges; and (3) modernize and strengthen [the US] military so it is equipped for the era of strategic competition with major powers, while maintaining the capability to disrupt the terrorist threat to the homeland.”⁴⁸ The reader thus can clearly understand the priorities of US policy action: in the domestic realm; in building international coalitions; and in modernizing the military.

Step 5: Testing and Updating

A good grand strategy deals with the edge between the known and the unknown. To use the language of science, any new grand strategy is thus, a hypothesis, and its implementation is an experiment. Indeed, asking for a strategy that is guaranteed to work is like asking a scientist for a hypothesis that is guaranteed to be true. It’s simply impossible.⁴⁹

But as results appear, good leaders can learn more about what does and doesn’t work, and can adjust their grand strategies accordingly. Most grand strategic assumptions, considerations, and calculations require constant updating. Any state would thus do well to always display a healthy skepticism toward the validity of any given grand strategic idea and refrain from intransigence with regards to any particular strategic concept. Instead, regular adjustment—and at times even a complete rethink of the entire grand strategic logic—is essential.⁵⁰

Mistakes in Strategy Development and their Consequences

The five steps described above might seem reasonably easy to implement. In the real world, however,

recently published grand strategic documents by the United States and its allies often do not follow these best practices. Instead, we see examples of flawed strategic design with potentially serious consequences. In what follows, I do not aspire to provide an exhaustive analysis of these flaws but rather present a limited number of examples to illustrate this phenomenon.

1. Ill-Defined Strategic Goals

Several of the recently published strategic documents published by the US and its allies display flaws when it comes to the definition of core strategic goals.

Several states present long lists of goals. Germany tops the list with nine core strategic goals (each one including even more strategic “subgoals”).⁵¹ Other states set goals that are vague or fuzzy, such as the goal the European Union sets for itself of becoming a “security provider,” without ever defining what that term entails.⁵² Many of these strategic documents also list goals that ignore strategic trade-offs. Germany, for instance, lists as its first strategic goal “protecting the people, sovereignty and territorial integrity of our country, the European Union and our allies,” and as its fifth strategic goal “fostering prosperity and social cohesion in our country by protecting our social market economy.”⁵³ Little thought is spent on the fact that protecting Germany, the European Union, and all German allies is a hell of a task. Moreover, it is an impossible task without any accompanying serious increase in defense spending, which would, of course, divert resources away from social programs aimed at promoting social equality, like healthcare, education, and social services. As a result, both goals cannot be reached simultaneously unless serious trade-offs are considered.

In addition, states mix up goals and means. For example, France declares as its core strategic aim to be “a balancing power on the international stage by 2030.”⁵⁴ Power, however, is generally viewed as a means to an end. It serves as a tool or resource that enables a state to achieve its actual core strategic goals, such as national security. A state can, of course, seek power purely for the influence, prestige, and control it provides. In this sense, power becomes a self-fulfilling goal, in which holding and expanding power becomes the primary objective, regardless of other achievements. Such an attitude, however,

48 US National Security Strategy 2022, 11.

49 Rumelt, *Good Strategy/Bad Strategy*, 243.

50 See also Betts, “The Grandiosity of Grand Strategy,” 10.

51 German National Security Strategy 2023, 21, <https://www.nationalesicherheitsstrategie.de/National-Security-Strategy-EN.pdf>.

52 European Union Strategic Compass 2022, 15, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7371-2022-INIT/en/pdf>.

53 German National Security Strategy 2023, 21.

54 French National Strategic Review 2022, 27, <https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/files/rns-uk-20221202.pdf>.

is rather unhealthy and generally reserved for non-democratic states. A strict reading of the distinction between ends and means would also be at odds with a strategic goal of “an open and stable international order;” as mentioned in the Integrated Strategic Review of the United Kingdom.⁵⁵ Order should be better thought of as a tool (or means) for states to pursue core strategic objectives such as peace and prosperity. Similarly, disorder is best thought of as a tool for states to achieve a different set of core strategic goals such as the consolidation of domestic power, the weakening of adversaries, or the gaining of economic leverage.

Why is it problematic to present long list of strategic goals, keep strategic goals vague, and ignore strategic trade-offs? Political leaders like freedom of action, so the more specific the document, the more they feel bound to a certain course of action. Nevertheless, the setting of vague and numerous goals can risk diluting focus, thus making it difficult for a government to prioritize and work effectively. The result is often a thin allocation of time, funding, and personnel, which reduces the likelihood of meaningful progress in any area.

Clarity of strategic goals is also required for government employees and citizens to understand what needs to be achieved and where to direct their efforts. Without clarity, resources get wasted on inefficient actions. Unclear goals or the ambiguity of goals can also lead to procrastination.⁵⁶ When people do not know which steps to take, they often tend to postpone tasks.

Overlooking or ignoring strategic trade-offs can blind a state to the benefits or downsides of choosing one course over another, which makes it difficult to understand what is being sacrificed in the pursuit of the goals. False expectations can be raised among the population. Citizens begin to believe that they can have it all: social welfare *and* security.⁵⁷ Moreover, discounting strategic trade-offs can lead to inefficient half measures. History provides many examples, such as during the Vietnam War when countless

US officials wanted to maintain the reputation of the United States as a reliable ally and treaty partner (and perceived this as a critical element of US grand strategy), yet at the same time did not want to engage in a major war. These officials wanted victory in Vietnam but did not want to unleash the full fury of the US military.⁵⁸

Clarity of strategic goals is also required for government employees and citizens to understand what needs to be achieved and where to direct their efforts.

Finally, why is it dangerous to confuse ends with means? This mistake can lead a state to focus on processes and methods rather than outcomes. Resources get invested in processes but not in the actual goal itself. When the process takes center stage, there is also a growing tendency to not adjust or change the process, even if new approaches would be more appropriate.

2. Ill-Defined Strategic Challenges

Many of the strategic documents published since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine also display flaws when it comes to the definition and diagnosis of a state’s core strategic challenges.

Several states present long lists of threats and challenges, and thus neglect the work of clustering and filtering them by degree of importance. Germany again features prominently by listing at least nineteen challenges (in addition to a variety of “sub-challenges”), including “activities of foreign intelligence services and other actors” and “serious and organized crime.”⁵⁹ Similarly, the EU lists a long and unfiltered list of challenges involving almost every world region.⁶⁰

55 UK Integrated Review Refresh 2023, 16.

56 David S. Ackerman and Barbara L. Gross, “My Instructor Made Me Do It: Task Characteristics of Procrastination,” *Journal of Marketing Education* 27, no. 1 (2005): 5–13; Allan K. Blunt and Timothy A. Pychyl, “Task Aversiveness and Procrastination: A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Task Aversiveness Across Stages of Personal Projects,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 28, no. 1 (2000): 153–67; Johannes Hoppe, Bastian Ignaz Preissler, and Katrin Förster, “A Cross-Lagged Panel Design on the Causal Relationship of Task Ambiguity and State Procrastination: A Preliminary Investigation,” *North American Journal of Psychology* 20, no. 2 (2018).

57 Research shows that when people understand the trade-offs associated with a decision, they are more likely to be satisfied with the outcome, even if the result is not perfect. In contrast, if these trade-offs are hidden, and if the reasons behind decisions are not comprehensible, frustration and anger grow, which can often manifest in opposition to the decisions. See, for example, Amy Gutmann and Dennis Frank Thompson, *The Spirit of Compromise: Why Governing Demands It and Campaigning Undermines It* (Princeton University Press, 2014).

58 See, for example, Leslie H. Gelb, “Vietnam: The System Worked,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 3 (1971): 140–67; Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War* (University of California Press, 2001).

59 German National Security Strategy 2023, 22–27.

60 European Union Strategic Compass 2022, 17.

Several documents also fall short in the diagnosis of threats. Indeed, the EU and South Korea leave such diagnosis completely out. Japan and Germany show a tendency to anonymize certain threats by using phrases such as “some nations are illegally stealing information,” and “some nations are trying to expand their influence,”⁶¹ or “international and financial relations are also ever more informed by considerations of power and influence.”⁶² Other documents provide a very superficial threat diagnosis. The United States’ NSS, for instance, states: “[Russia and China] concluded that the success of a free and open rules-based international order poses a threat to their regimes and stifles their ambitions. In their own ways, they now seek to remake the international order to create a world conducive to their highly personalized and repressive type of autocracy.”⁶³ This latter example corresponds to a monocausal explanation, which risks leading to an insufficient understanding of the situation and thus ineffective solutions.

Why is the prioritization of challenges important? This step ensures that limited resources are focused on the most significant risks. Trying to tackle all threats at once can be overwhelming and unproductive. Why is it necessary not only to list challenges but also to diagnose them? Only if such understanding exists can appropriate solutions be developed. Without a clear diagnosis, the treatment can be misdirected, or the wrong problems get addressed, thus potentially causing more harm than good.

3. Recommended Actions Are Incoherent

As mentioned above, good grand strategy is logically structured. First, core strategic goals get defined, then the strategic challenges that stand in the way of achieving these goals are identified and analyzed, and then a logic of action is conceived, including actionable policies and resource commitments.

Across the board, recent strategic documents fall short in this aspect. All documents lack a discernable logic of action. What we see instead is an often-arbitrary list of measures without any logical connection to the identified strategic challenges. The worst offender is arguably the EU, which lists, for example, a rapid deployment capacity of 5,000 troops without specifying

for what exactly this capacity would be used.⁶⁴ For its part, France recommends a list of actions (ten of them to be precise), many of which do not follow from the analysis in the paper (for example, “an economy contributing to a defense mindset”).⁶⁵

Such incoherence inhibits the creation of leverage or the ability to get what a state wants vis-à-vis other states. In addition, there is very little possibility to check whether the proposed measures are effective in terms of the objectives they are intended to serve. Democratic accountability is thus denied. Key challenges also remain potentially unaddressed or inadequately handled.

What Now?

Design flaws in recent grand strategic publications are ubiquitous. Some states might be genuinely unaware of what “good” grand strategy development entails. Leaders may mistakenly treat grand strategy as an exercise in goal-setting rather than problem-solving, or they may mix up grand strategy work with identity-building processes.⁶⁶ Alternatively, bad grand strategy might be the result of active avoidance of the hard work of crafting a good grand strategy.⁶⁷ As mentioned above, good grand strategy involves focus and therefore choice by tackling specific questions. What is a state’s core strategic goal? What threats are the most alarming? What means are the most efficient?

These choices mean setting aside some goals, threats, and means in favor of others. Many governments might shy away from making these decisions for fear of causing political consternation. Not everything or everyone will be able to get heard or make the list. States are scared to say “no” to whole populations of hopes, dreams, and aspirations.⁶⁸ Instead, governments intend to resolve conflict by adopting all the options on the table. At times, governments might also shy away from talking about problems because they want to project an image of strength domestically or internationally. Some also want to avoid formally labeling individual countries as strategic threats because it could result in a deterioration of bilateral relations or have other negative externalities.

61 National Security Strategy of Japan 2022, 7, <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/221216anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf>.

62 German National Security Strategy 2023, 24.

63 US National Security Strategy 2022, 8–9.

64 European Strategic Compass 2022, 30.

65 French Strategic Review 2022, 37.

66 Nathalie Tocci, “The Making of the EU Global Strategy,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 37, no. 3 (2016): 461–72; Nathalie Tocci, “From the European Security Strategy to the EU Global Strategy: Explaining the Journey,” *International Politics* 54 (2017): 487–502.

67 Rumelt, *Good Strategy/Bad Strategy*, 58.

68 *Good Strategy/Bad Strategy*, 62.

Whatever the reasons for these flaws, writing “good” grand strategy is particularly important in times of great geopolitical uncertainty and crisis as we face today. As a result, it’s well worth it for policymakers to strive to hone their instincts and draw lessons from the best practices of grand strategy design. Likewise, the public has a role to play by urging their governments to invest the necessary effort and exhibit the courage and determination required to develop grand strategies to achieve the best outcome possible. 🇺🇸

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69 For the image, see https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:White_House_lawn.jpg