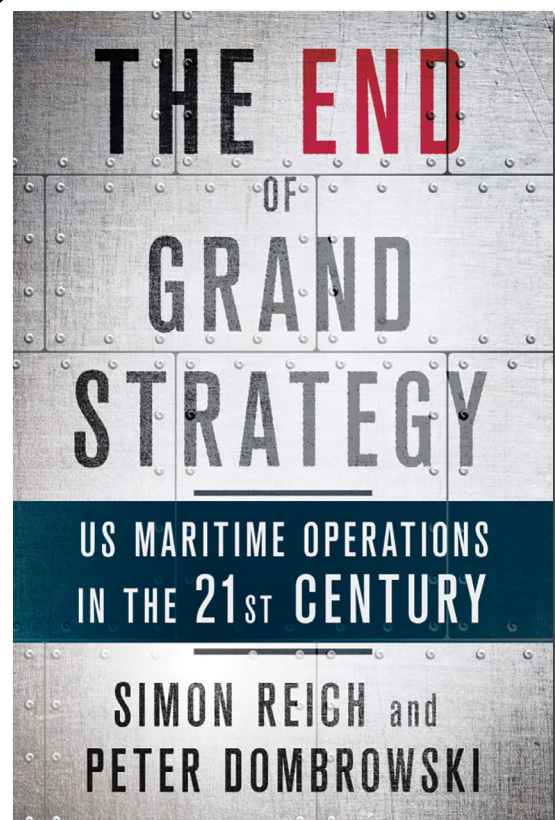


The End of Grand Strategy

U.S. Maritime Operations in the Twenty-First Century

Simon Reich and Peter Dombrowski,
Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 2018, 252 pages



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The *End of Grand Strategy*, though it uses maritime operations as the backdrop for discussing its major themes, is applicable to more than just the maritime domain. It bolts out the gate by challenging a fundamental precept—or maybe dogmatic principle—of U.S. military planners and decision-makers inside the Beltway, declaring, “The very idea of a single, one-size-fits-all grand strategy has little utility in the twenty-first century. Indeed, it is often counterproductive.”

Echoing the platitude—heard with numbing repetition these days—that today the U.S. faces “the most complex array of actors and capabilities any nation has ever faced,” the authors insist on the need to abandon grandiose, preventive (or preemptive) visions and accept the fact we are increasingly reactive toward the environment just

described. While the tired phrase cries out for a coherent, overarching strategy that can inject order into an increasingly chaotic milieu of hurdles, the authors suggest that is the wrong approach. Like it or not, American strategy is both “multifaceted and contingent.” Unfortunately, that usually means it is less than satisfying to many onlookers who crave a simpler and more elegant policy articulation.

Grand strategy, as evidenced by, for example, the American containment strategy employed against the Soviet Union during the Cold War, is a relic of the past, they contend, but one often clung to amidst troubling trends, considerable upheaval, burgeoning threats, new technologies, growing uncertainties, and the relative decline of the Westphalian system, the bedrock of interstate relations for nearly four centuries. Both

senior military professionals and policy wonks grasp at the notion of grand strategy because it briefs well and reflects continuity, despite often requiring a suspension of disbelief by those who should know better.

Simon Reich and Peter Dombrowski do acknowledge that many grand strategy proponents recognize certain frictions will negatively impact our ability to implement any given strategy, but the duo insist those same individuals, after paying homage to those hurdles, routinely go about ignoring them.

The authors identify three dominant grand strategies afoot in American foreign policy making: hegemony, sponsorship, and retrenchment. From each of those dominant preferences emerge two substrains:

1. Hegemony incorporates “primacy” (often reflecting unilateralism, assertiveness, coerciveness, and confrontation) or “leadership”—sometimes dubbed “cooperative security”—whereby the United States leads, due to the preponderance of assets involved, or simply by entitlement. Each of these substrains relies on American dominance.
2. Sponsorship encompasses both “formal” and “informal” strategies. The former are “specifically authorized by international law and protocols”; the latter are responses to requests by coalitions of states and/or key actors rather than being authorized by intergovernmental organizations.
3. Retrenchment also comes in two flavors—“isolationism” and “restraint.” Isolationism is a controversial approach; by contrast, restraint is less so, though it has many detractors as well. Isolationism reflects the current administration’s “America First” rhetoric and policies. By comparison, supporters of restraint usually advocate slenderizing American ambitions, putting some brakes on globalization, and using the military in a more sparing way; in short, a less draconian form of isolation from the world.

Throughout its pages, the authors admit their primary objective is not prescription but rather “to explain when these calibrated strategies are used, why they are used, and what happens as a result.” American professional military education preaches doctrinaire solutions like intergovernmental and interagency cooperation, but the reality often pales in comparison to the aspiration thanks to gargantuan bureaucracies within the national security complex; the tumult generated by mass media often more interested in capturing eyeballs

than facts; and the inevitable tensions between the executive and legislative branches. The elegant strategies conceived of by academics and policy makers rarely mesh well with the intricacies encountered at sea (or in other domains) by those charged with operationalizing those singular visions. As a result, we are often left with “contrarian, unproductive, costly, and occasionally debilitating circumstances” when our military attempts to implement those policies.

The book unfolds using various case studies to explicate each of the six aforementioned substrains of the three dominant grand strategies. In that regard—explaining—the book succeeds; however, the book also leaves the reader wanting. Identifying the problem(s), while not necessarily an easy task, is easier than divining a solution, especially in a complex environment. And in that way, the book is less than entirely gratifying.

In the book’s conclusion, arguably its most potent chapter, the reader is treated to a rather flawless exposition on the presumptuousness inherent in grand strategy, where the authors eviscerate what they see as America’s flawed assumption: that it “can impose its values and will globally through strategies that link America’s ways and means to its ends. So, regardless of its particular form, grand strategy in each [variant] is consistent with a robust and muscular national security culture.” That assumption also meshes with several liberalist viewpoints that assert, at least implicitly, that other states and actors long for American-style institutions and capitalism.

In the lexicon of American policy making, the term grand strategy is sanctified as a first step on the road to a successful policy outcome because it will inevitably lend organization and synchronization to the various actors, facilitating unity of effort in solving the problem. While a worthy goal and possible outcome, it presupposes the overarching strategy is appropriate—let alone capable—of solving the issue at hand. And therein lies the real problem. Grand strategy is “psychologically reassuring.” It cradles and nurtures the idea the American government

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can determine the country's future through a combination of its unmatched military dominance and its continuing role as the axis upon which the global economy revolves. However, the relative decline of both our military and economic supremacy should inform and temper American hubris.

There was a time—a cherished time for military professionals—when the zenith of military strategy was the capacity to vanquish another state's military. Today, by contrast (and more so with every passing year, it would seem), the threats are often ambiguous. Admittedly, the most dangerous threats remain interstate competitors with conventional and nuclear arsenals. But the most likely threats are those military operations other than war and the newly minted term “hybrid war”—that may never breach the threshold to precipitate conventional conflict.

These realities, when coupled with ill-conceived presumptions that newer, more indistinct threats to the United States can be defeated versus managed, comingle in innumerable, sometimes unpredictable ways. As such, any “grand strategy” purported as appropriate to deal with such a host of evolutionary possibilities is, at best, a fantasy; at its worst, an unmitigated disaster—and not just because it may not be a winning strategy afar; it may also lead to overreach and inestimable opportunity costs.

Advocates of ambitious grand strategies often suggest, or even tout, the flexibility of their prized approach in the face of changing circumstances. The authors cleverly leverage the metaphor of a house built to withstand an earthquake—it can sway but can only withstand so much pressure before capitulating to the forces arrayed against it. Theoretically, you could build “the mother of all houses” but at what cost? The idea of a single, relatively rigid grand strategy functioning properly in a global context demanding continuing adaptability just does not compute.

A static set of factors—core values linked to ways, means, and ends—inevitably collides with dynamic circumstances and the inflexible organizational structures required if the military is to function effectively on a daily basis. The military leadership is far more

aware than scholars or policymakers of that inherent problem.

Reich and Dombrowski are able to evade the thorny prescription problem by arguing “policy prescription is based on explaining how things actually work, not on characterizing how they should operate. Explanation [the purpose of their work] must precede prescription and not be skirted.” So, in essence, they leave the more difficult task to others following in their wake. Military planners, in a moment of candor, might be the first to agree that theories of grand strategy have little value because they fail to meaningfully link ways, means, and ends with their vision.

Ultimately, the authors argue we need to abandon the search for any single grand strategy. Instead, embrace the reality that already exists—a plurality of calibrated strategies (the ones highlighted earlier). To do so conveys several advantages:

1. It will signal to both policy makers and the public the limits of American power.
2. Any forthcoming debate—a healthy development—about the merits of a particular calibrated strategy would inform citizens about the degree to which America is influenced by global forces rather than always being the trendsetter (i.e., move away from exceptionalism).
3. Recognition of the need for a variety of strategies (as opposed to one) would likely temper expectations about what to reasonably expect from any particular military foray.
4. A deck of calibrated strategies would afford planners much greater latitude in light of the resources available.

All in all, this is a book with modest ambition. It does a solid job of explaining why the notion of grand strategy is outmoded in today's dynamic international complexity but declines to give any bold policy prescriptions that an interested reader would likely be seeking. In short, the book advocates strategic sobriety for an American national security culture still drunk on American exceptionalism. Think strategies, not strategy. There is no one true path to securing American interests in a complicated world. ■