



# SMALL WARS JOURNAL

---

smallwarsjournal.com

## Theory, Policy, and Strategy: A Conceptual Muddle

Adam Elkus and Mark Safranski

It is impossible not to notice that elements of the current acrimonious debates over theory, operations, and practice are proxies for larger political differences over the use of force and its relationship to American national interests. So why are these fundamental policy disagreements being expressed through debate over technical points of military doctrine?

The answer lies in the uncertain, even negligent, muddle that has substituted for a clear paradigm to guide US grand strategy. Because policymakers have failed to define clear US interests, goals, and objectives, attempts have been made to derive grand strategic principles from theoretical debates or operational concerns. While these debates have been intellectually stimulating and often very useful to developing US national security and military doctrine, they cannot sustain US grand strategy. While strategic drift might be inevitable in country where much of strategy is determined by the cleavages of domestic politics, the cost of meandering can be measured in lost opportunities, treasure squandered, and lives lost. Policymakers must make a stand for a strong strategic paradigm to guide US operational methodologies.

### Defining Strategy Down

The making of US strategy has always been problematic. The important role of domestic politics, lobbies, and political partisanship in the formation of foreign policy and national defense often results in strategic incoherence. In a duality that diplomatic historian Walter McDougall called “Promised land, Crusader state”, the American public is often split between an idealistic desire to remake the world, realist concerns of access to strategic resources and balances of power, and a reflexive isolationism that flares up every once and a while to frustrate policymakers’ grand strategic designs.<sup>1</sup> Winston Churchill noted with some exasperation that “the Americans will always do the right thing... after they've exhausted all the alternatives.”

Strategic drift is a traditional American problem, but one that has been exacerbated by the lack of a clear paradigm and the existential threat of a hegemonic adversary. As a result, conceptual confusion has emerged over the meaning of changes in the international system, the threat posed by enemies that frustrate established American defense concepts, the residual shock of September 11, and a profoundly venomous atmosphere of political partisanship, all of which contribute to an intellectual fog that works against achieving clarity when formulating policy.

---

<sup>1</sup> Walter McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: the American Encounter with the World since 1776*, New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1997.

Policymakers also increasingly lack the education, experience, and cognitive frames of reference to conceive both strictly military and political-military frameworks for strategic action possessed by the celebrated statesmen of the early Cold War.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> tier policymakers who were, in Acheson's words, "present at the creation" had largely been the products of liberal educations at elite universities who had cut their teeth in the twenties and thirties in international finance, law and diplomacy. A preface that was followed by critical high level service in the thick of exigent military and intelligence operations of the Second World War. In short, the Kennans, Bohlen, McCloy, Dulles, Lovetts, Harrimans, Nitzes, and their contemporaries had been thoroughly tested by bitter and varied experience before they set their hands to a grand strategy for constructing and defending a more liberal postwar world order. Narrow specialization has increasingly been emphasized in the years since, to the detriment of broad historical and philosophical knowledge. Experience in wrestling with the massively complex, interrelated and interdependent problems of war on a theater or global scale is also rare. It should be unsurprising then, that there is no larger, coherent intellectual framework of strategic action akin to NSC-68 among Washington policymakers.<sup>2</sup> Or that a lazy consensus has developed by default around important issues of war and peace.

In the absence of a governing grand strategy, defense planners and theorists have tried a number of abstract and practical methods to graft conceptual frames onto the jello-like blob that passes for the body of US foreign policy and defense planning. These methods, while a valuable part of any form of strategic planning, are too narrow to encompass the abstract realm of strategic decision. In fact, some concepts can be used by policymakers for ends strikingly divergent from the intentions of their creators. We can identify four distinct trends in sub-strategic planning:

- Deriving strategy from the strategic environment,
- Reacting to changes in the character of warfare,
- Threats-based planning,
- Extrapolation of operational approaches to the strategic level.

Defense theorists and foreign policy writers are increasingly looking to the strategic environment to determine the US's posture. The structure of the debate consists of a dissertation on changing political, economic and technological trends in the global system and how the US can best adapt to them. It is impossible to count or list how many books fitting this description have been published over the last fifteen years, or the many official attempts at futurism by the intelligence and national security communities.<sup>3</sup> With the international state system in a state of tumultuous change, many have attempted to pinpoint the primary factor moving world events and offer advice as to how the US can best respond.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> NSC-68, largely drafted under the supervision of Paul Nitze and approved by President Truman in 1951, provided the outline for the American governmental response to the strategic challenge of Soviet Communism. In other words, NSC-68 put policy flesh on the bones of the Containment strategy, <http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsc-hst/nsc-68.htm>

<sup>3</sup> The best known unclassified example being the *Global Trends 2025*, the most recent of a series of reports from the National Intelligence Council, [http://www.dni.gov/nic/NIC\\_2025\\_project.html](http://www.dni.gov/nic/NIC_2025_project.html)

<sup>4</sup> For an example see Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World*, New York: W. Norton & Co, 2008.

However, there is no consensus among international relations scholars, political geographers, and political economists about change (or lack thereof) in the global system. There are many visions of state change, and no way to conclusively prove any of them. Moreover, how should policymakers prioritize which change is most important? It seems risky to utilize overly academic conceptions of an abstract, complex, and poorly understood phenomenon as a means of designing strategy. Lastly, change itself is not a guide to action. To make an everyday analogy, knowledge that a recession is in progress alone doesn't tell you how you ought to manage your finances.

Policymakers and defense analysts also are attempting to determine strategy and force structure from changes in the character of war. Theorists increasingly examine how the US can best adapt to the tectonic socioeconomic and technological structural changes that drive the changing tactics and operations of both conventional and guerrilla warfare. Since the end of the Cold War there have been hundreds of new typologies of war published in civilian and military journals, each with their own implications for current strategy.<sup>5</sup> Most arguments of this type make either the implicit or explicit claim that strategic change has altered the character of warfare—and sometimes, the nature of war. But theoretical debate about “new” forms of conflict is acrimonious and scattered. Never-ending debates rage over different typologies of war and academic characterizations, many of which are forcing mechanisms for institutional change or convenient means to characterize ill-understood phenomena. Just like the state change debate, the military theory debate is likely to continue for some time. Moreover, knowledge of change in warfare alone—assuming everyone agrees on the kind of change that has occurred—is also unlikely to produce a plan of action.

A related reactive methodology is the Cold War system of threats-based planning. Threats-based planning involves looking at differing types of enemies, their objectives, and how the US can best adapt its strategy to their challenges. Threats-based planning is popular with the public and politicians because it is concrete and easily understood. If there is an Islamic militant somewhere in the Middle East with the power to bomb Los Angeles International Airport, shouldn't we do something about it?

Protection of the US homeland is a core element of grand strategy. But threats-based planning worked much better when there was a single dominant threat. Today there are many different threats and setting priorities requires a prior articulation of basic US interests and objectives. Antulio Echevarria and Huba Wass de Czege also write that a strategy exclusively defined by threats “has the distinct disadvantage of yielding the initiative to outside forces” and places “defense planners in the position of having to make difficult resource choices in the absence of the underlying rationale that a clear threat would provide.”<sup>6</sup>

The current strategic consensus, while containing elements of the previous methods listed above, is fundamentally rooted in the extrapolation of operational methodologies to the strategic level,

---

<sup>5</sup> For an example, see Martin Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*, New York: The Free Press, 1991.

<sup>6</sup> See Dr. Antulio J. Echevarria III and Brigadier Gen (ret) Huba Wass de Czege, *Toward a Strategy of Positive Ends*, Carlisle Barracks: Strategic Studies Institute, 2001, p. 11.

namely neoclassical counterinsurgency and counterterrorism.<sup>7</sup> The formlessness, indirection, and conceptual confusion that characterizes current US foreign policy provides no real solutions for policymakers, so it is natural that daring and inventive operational art increasingly captures the policy imagination. But talk, for example, of things such as “counterterrorism strategies” reveals confusion about the difference between the various levels of war.<sup>8</sup>

Operational doctrines are not meant for navigating global politics. These are narrow frameworks meant for achieving excellence in on the theater level, and any attempt to extrapolate them to the level of strategy will increase the level of confusion and misdirection already present in American foreign policy. Lastly, as neutral tools they can be used by policymakers for a variety of different contingencies, some of which can lead to “mission creep.” Operations need a guiding strategic framework to be successful.

Each methodology chronicled above is a valid element of strategic and operational planning. Change (or lack thereof) in the international environment or the character of war should inform our planning. Current threats must be dealt with, as the enemy gets a vote. And operational excellence is the key to implementing our will on our adversaries. But these methodologies alone cannot give direction to our wandering grand strategy. The first three are fundamentally reactive, stressing adaptation to external forces. And the operational-strategic hybrid represented by the concept of the word “counterterrorism strategy” cannot provide direction to larger questions of strategy.

## Conclusion

The concept of national interest may be discredited in the academy these days due to its rigid application in neorealism. But even the most dogmatic constructivist international relations academic must recognize the importance of objective, especially in matters of war and peace.

In the short-term it is imperative for a larger linkage of strategy and operations to occur. The current debate over the “contested commons” is a welcome example this kind of discussion.<sup>9</sup> There are also some structural solutions to the poverty of strategy. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton’s new concept of the Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR) has the potential of returning the State Department back to the glory days of policy planning represented by the Cold War-era Policy Planning Staff of George Kennan and Paul Nitze. The Secretary of State can also help develop strategic thinking by creating military command and general staff-style schools for diplomats to build and nurture internal talent.

But the basic problem remains that policy elites increasingly lack the experience and cognitive frameworks to create strategy, and in the absence of a clear threat it is likely that the short-term considerations of domestic politics and international crisis management will win out over long-

---

<sup>7</sup> For an example of one take, see John Kerry, “A New Strategy Against Extremism and Terrorism,” *Talking Points Memo*, July 31, 2008. [http://www.johnkerry.com/blog/entry/a\\_new\\_strategy\\_against\\_extremism\\_and\\_terrorism/](http://www.johnkerry.com/blog/entry/a_new_strategy_against_extremism_and_terrorism/)

<sup>8</sup> See Mark Safranski, “The Kilcullen Doctrine,” *Zenpundit*, May 29, 2009. <http://zenpundit.com/?p=3116>.

<sup>9</sup> See Michele Flournoy and Shawn Brimley, “The Contested Commons,” *Proceedings*, July 2009. [http://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/story.asp?STORY\\_ID=1950](http://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/story.asp?STORY_ID=1950)

term strategy. It is difficult for democratic systems to produce grand strategy because of the role of interests and lobbies, the tendency of politicians to erase the doctrines of their predecessors regardless of their utility, and the paucity of basic knowledge of strategic concepts, coalition warfare, and strategic history. American history tells us that change will come only when a powerful individual and the right constellation of political-economic forces succeed in making their imprint on US foreign policy. There is little reason to suspect that our era will be any different.

*Mark Safranski is the editor of [The John Boyd Roundtable: Debating Science, Strategy and War](#) and was a contributing author to [Threats in the Age of Obama](#), by Nimble Books. His articles have been published by [Small Wars Journal](#), [HNN](#) and [Pajamas Media](#). Mr. Safranski blogs at [zenpundit.com](#) and is an occasional contributor to [CTLab Review](#), [Progressive Historians](#) and [Chicago Boyz.net](#).*

*Adam Elkus is an analyst specializing in foreign policy and security. He is currently Associate Editor at [Red Team Journal](#). His articles have been published at the [West Point CTC Sentinel](#), [Athena Intelligence Journal](#), [Small Wars Journal](#) and other publications. Mr. Elkus blogs at [Rethinking Security](#), [Dreaming 5GW](#), and [The Huffington Post](#). He is currently a contributor to the [Center for Threat Awareness' ThreatsWatch](#) project.*

This is a single article excerpt of material published in Small Wars Journal.  
Published by and COPYRIGHT © 2009, Small Wars Foundation.

Permission is granted to print single copies for personal, non-commercial use. Select non-commercial use is licensed via a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license and per our Terms of Use. We are in this together.



No FACTUAL STATEMENT should be relied upon without further investigation on your part sufficient to satisfy you in your independent judgment that it is true.

Contact: [comment@smallwarsjournal.com](mailto:comment@smallwarsjournal.com)

Visit [www.smallwarsjournal.com](http://www.smallwarsjournal.com)

Cover Price: Your call. [Support SWJ here.](#)