Redefining and Rethinking U.S. ‘Grand Strategy’ since World War II:
Some Historical-Institutional Insights

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Grand strategy has become a thriving area of interest in recent years among both scholars and policymakers. Yet, some basic conceptual and theoretical issues remain under-developed and academics could make a potentially important contribution both to the study and practice of grand strategy by developing a more rigorous definition of the term and developing more well-rounded explanations for grand strategic change. This paper contributes to both of these areas of study first by developing a new, albeit well-established, conceptualization of grand strategy that limits it to the military dimension of foreign policy. Though the recent trend has been to broaden the notion of grand strategy, I argue that a more precise definition that separates it from both strategy and foreign policy could have payoffs for both its study and practice. Second, the paper aims to rethink U.S. grand strategy since World War II by looking specifically at its main components and why they have been resistant to change, especially after the end of the Cold War. It suggests a historical-institutional approach could help make sense of why there was such dramatic change after World War II but only evolutionary change ever since. Rethinking U.S. grand strategy along these lines helps account for the impediments to change since the end of the Cold War and some of the challenges that policymakers face today.

Over the last two decades, scholars in the U.S. have had great interest in grand strategy. Several important books and articles have attempted to define the concept and study its determinants by looking at the respective role of domestic vs. international factors and security vs. economic considerations. At the same time, a vigorous debate emerged about what type of grand strategy the U.S. should pursue in the post-Cold War period. While this debate encompassed a spectrum of

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alternatives, it essentially revolved around two poles: whether the U.S. should retrench and act with restraint in the wake of the Cold War in order to husband resources and power for future great power competition, or double-down to secure and take advantage of American strength in the absence of a rival. The question of U.S. grand strategy and the relevance of the debate over its future only sharpened with the September 11 attacks.⁴

Grand strategy has not only been a topic of academic concern. Beginning in 1986 with the Goldwater-Nichols Act, the President is required to articulate and submit annually to Congress a comprehensive vision of U.S. foreign policy in the form of a formal National Security Strategy (NSS). Though intended to be a broad statement about overall U.S. foreign policy, the NSS has become for many the equivalent of declaratory U.S. grand strategy.⁵ It is a ‘big think’ document that is supposed to outline U.S. capabilities and worldwide interests and commitments, and assess whether or not current capabilities are adequate to properly pursue the country’s interests and fulfill its commitments. In many ways it is designed to force policymakers to produce something akin to the notion of containment, which developed out of Kennan’s “X” article and NSC-68 and ultimately served as the most systematic and coherent statement about U.S. grand strategy during the Cold War. Since the end of the Cold War, however, policymakers have struggled to formulate a similar guiding principle and there is a sense that U.S. foreign policy has been rudderless in part because it has lacked a clear grand strategy. Presently, the rise of China, the nuclear crisis in Iran, and the Arab Spring, along with a deep financial crisis in the U.S. that has put significant constraints on defense spending, poses a set of challenges that demands, perhaps more than any time in recent years, the need for clear grand strategic thinking.

Yet, for all the attention grand strategy has received in both academic and policymaking circles, it remains an area of research where much work remains. As this paper underlines, basic conceptual, explanatory and policy questions remain unclear. At the conceptual level, there has been a general drift in the meaning of the terms strategy and grand strategy to the point where they often blur with foreign policy in general. These terms are now so all-encompassing that they are rather weak conceptually. The result is that strategy, grand strategy, and foreign policy have become conflated and scholars often speak past each other. This conceptual weakness also creates ambiguity in policymaking. In order to both study and formulate grand strategy properly, it is first necessary to provide some conceptual order to the topic. In terms of explanation, interest in grand strategy has centered on the question of change and what factors ultimately underlie grand strategic shifts. The literature has largely focused on the

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⁵ Documents like the Quadrennial Defense Review and the National Military Strategy of the US supplement and help flesh out the specifically military aspects of the NSS.
influence of the international environment, the prevailing balance of power, domestic politics, and political economy. While this literature has helped elaborate why and how grand strategy changes, it has sometimes ignored the factors that account for policy stability. In the last six decades, the international environment changed dramatically, most notably with the end of the Cold War; bipolarity ended; American politics swung back and forth between democrats and republicans, liberals and conservatives; and economic shocks and shifting trade patterns upset and reshaped the world economy. Yet, as Layne and others show, there has been remarkable continuity in some aspects of U.S. grand strategy since approximately 1940.\(^6\) This raises important questions about why those aspects have remained stable over time and more generally about the impediments to change. Finally, the debate over policy and U.S. grand strategy remains unresolved and is as relevant as ever as the U.S. attempts to adjust to a changed strategic environment with increasing budget constraints.

This set of problems raises three important questions: What is grand strategy? What are the determinants of grand strategy? What should be the grand strategy of the U.S. today? The paper aims to contribute to answering the first two questions, with the hope that doing so will shed some light on the third. The first section defines grand strategy and situates it relative to military strategy and foreign policy. In contrast to much of the current literature, which includes a variety of dimensions within the purview of grand strategy, the paper restricts grand strategy primarily to the military dimension of foreign policy that connects military means with overall policy ends. In broad terms, it is a theory about how military power can be used to achieve foreign policy aims. More specifically, grand strategy is concerned with how the threat and use of military force, along with the posture, disposition, and doctrine of the armed forces, can be employed to achieve a state’s foreign policy interests and goals, and meet its international commitments. This definition sharply distinguishes grand strategy from strategy and foreign policy, and provides it with a clearer set of responsibilities. The section provides a historical and conceptual argument for this definition and suggests that rethinking the concept grand strategy along these lines can help resolve some of the tensions in the literature and the policymaking process.

The second section turns to the task of rounding out the determinants of grand strategy by looking at the impediments to change that policymakers face. It begins by first establishing the elements of U.S. grand strategy that have remained relatively stable since World War II. This period of time marked a clear departure from past policies and inaugurated the outlines of a new grand strategy in which U.S. military power came to play a much larger role in the conduct of foreign policy. Following World War II, the U.S. devoted considerable resources to building military power. It maintained a large peacetime military force, created a vast network of permanent overseas bases, established NATO, and relied more on the threat and use of force to achieve policy objectives. This was a considerably different approach than before war and one that largely survived the Cold War and its end.

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The paper then draws on a historical institutional approach to explain how these elements of grand strategy became institutionalized and locked-in once they were established. I argue that World War II and the emerging Cold War acted as a critical juncture, creating a window of opportunity to break with past policies and construct a new grand strategy. During this time, U.S. foreign policy aims became global in nature and the military took on a newfound importance in achieving them. Grand strategy accordingly shifted from one of hemispheric defense to one of global containment. Once established, this new grand strategy became deeply entrenched in U.S. government institutions, policies and belief systems. This critical juncture had what historical institutionalism calls path dependent effects. Path dependence is the process whereby original causes give rise to effects that act as positive feedback loops to reproduce the same effects in later periods. The result is that “institutions” that are shaped by a particular set of circumstances have enduring consequences and shape later thinking and behavior. This approach helps explain the stability of U.S. grand strategy and why even with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War policymakers struggled to change course. The key is that later grand strategic decisions were over-determined by past ones. As Condoleezza Rice said about the policymaking process in the wake of the Cold War, “we were harvesting decisions that had been taken fifty years before.” The point is not that policymakers lack all agency and that grand strategy can’t or won’t change, but that there are immense institutional barriers to doing so and the status quo is often easier to simply maintain.

Strategy, Grand Strategy and Foreign Policy: Some Conceptual Order

Grand strategy is a widely used term, but its meaning is often overly broad and can be difficult to pin down. The main problem lies in the fact that strategy has blurred into grand strategy and grand strategy has blurred into foreign policy, creating both confusion and redundancy in the use of the three concepts. There are of course obvious and important relationships between the three and in practice it might be impossible and could potentially be harmful to separate them fully. However, their conflation has also created both analytical and policymaking problems, and it is necessary to make some clear distinctions for the study and practice of grand strategy to progress. The section attempts to restore the concepts to their traditional meanings, arguing there are both historical and conceptual reasons for doing so.

Grand strategy is a fairly modern concept that was coined in the twentieth century in part to account for the increasing convergence and integration of military strategy with broader national policy. Its origins, however, can be traced back to the Greek concept strategy (strategia or strategiké), which was used to describe “the art or skill of the general (the strategós).” Strategy referred specifically to decision-making in war, but included all that was under the purview of the general, incorporating everything from battlefield command to overall planning for defense of the realm. Over time this

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comprehensive meaning was separated into different levels of war—tactical, operational, and strategic. The tactical and operational levels are located on or close to the battlefield, while strategy refers to a higher level that coordinates the lower levels during war. This traditional view of strategy is restrictive and specifically relates military means with military ends. Writing in this vein, Mearsheimer defines strategy as “how all the major units of an army and its supporting tactical air forces are deployed and moved about the theatre of operations to achieve the overall campaign objective. Strategy, in other words, is concerned with the ways in which the different battles that comprise a campaign fit together to produce the desired military outcome.”

Beginning in the nineteenth century, however, a different view of strategy emerged as students of military history placed greater emphasis on the relationship between military strategy and the broader political purposes of war. Clausewitz played an important part in this change. He defined strategy as “the use of engagements for the object of war”; the ‘object’ being political in nature.

Indeed he is perhaps most widely known for arguing that “war is merely the continuation of policy by other means.” Clausewitz marked a revolution in the study of war and politics for many reasons, but his articulation of a broader notion of strategy was particularly important. Strategy in his conception was no longer bounded by the battlefield or war. Instead strategy was broadened and crept further and further into overall policy planning in both war and peace. By the time Liddell Hart wrote about strategy in the twentieth century, he defined it as “the art of distributing and applying military means to fulfill the ends of policy.” Contemporary definitions have likewise followed this trend. They provide a less restrictive view of strategy, which more broadly relates military means with political ends.

At the same time that the meaning of strategy was changing, Liddell Hart and others developed a new concept, grand strategy, to account for an even higher level of war. Hart wrote: “the role of grand strategy—higher strategy—is to coordinate and direct all the resources of a nation, or band of nations, towards the attainment of the political objective of war—the goal defined by fundamental policy.” He argued that “fighting power is but one of the instruments of grand strategy—which should take account of and apply the power of financial pressure, of diplomatic pressure, of commercial pressure, and, not least, of ethical pressure, to weaken the opponent’s will.” Moreover, “while the

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10 For a comprehensive overview of this change in meaning see Heuser, p. 3-28.
12 Ibid., p. 28.
Hart’s discussion is confusing, which in part has led to some of the confusion about grand strategy. It had the potential to return strategy back to military planning and the conduct of war, while allowing grand strategy to perform the role of bridging and coordinating military strategy with the political, economic, and diplomatic dimensions of a state’s foreign policy in both war and peace. In this view, grand strategy would be anchored firmly in the military sphere and be primarily about the role that military force plays in achieving foreign policy objectives. For many, this is in fact the case. Mearsheimer, for example, defines grand strategy as “the relationship between military means and international commitments.” It is concerned foremost with identifying the principal threats to the state; rank-ordering overseas defense commitments to meet those threats; and developing and maintaining the military forces necessary to meet those commitments. He warns explicitly that grand strategy is “not concerned with how a nation integrates the diplomatic, economic, and military tools at its disposal to support its interests abroad”—that is the role of foreign policy. Art takes a similar approach. He writes:

A grand strategy tells a nation’s leaders what goals they should aim for and how best they can use their country’s military power to attain these goals. Grand strategy, like foreign policy, deals with the momentous choices that a nation makes in foreign affairs, but it differs from foreign policy in one fundamental respect. To define a nation’s foreign policy is to lay out the full range of goals that a state should seek in the world and then determine how all of the instruments of statecraft—political power, military power, economic power, ideological power—should be integrated and employed with one another to achieve those goals. Grand strategy, too deals with the full range of goals that a state should seek, but it concentrates primarily on how the military instrument should be employed to achieve them. It prescribes how a nation should wield its military instrument to realize its foreign policy goals.

Yet, by bringing in all of the tools of statecraft on behalf of grand strategy, Hart opened it to a much wider conceptualization, which might make sense in war, but in peace is merely a mirror image of foreign policy as Mearsheimer and Art warn. This led to another more widespread perspective on grand strategy that includes not just a military dimension, but also political, economic, and diplomatic dimensions as well. This broadening was based on the view that the more restrictive approach to grand strategy is too narrow. Several prominent definitions capture this evolution of the concept:

- “A political-military, means-ends chain, a state’s theory about how it can best “cause” security for itself. Ideally, it includes an explanation of why the theory is expected to work. A grand strategy must identify likely threats to the state’s security and it must devise political, economic, military, and other remedies for those threats.”

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16 Hart, p. 322.
17 John J. Mearsheimer, Liddell Hart and the Weight of History, p. 17.
• “The crux of grand strategy lies in policy, that is, in the capacity of the nation’s leaders to bring together all of the elements, both military and non-military, for the preservation and enhancement of the nation’s long-term (that is, in wartime and peacetime) best interests.”

• “The full package of domestic and international policies designed to increase national power and security. Grand strategy can therefore include policies varying from military expenditures and security alliances, to less frequently discussed policies, such as long-term investment in domestic industrialization and foreign aid to nations with common security concerns.”

• “An economic, political, and military means-ends chain designed to achieve security.”

• “The purposeful use of military, diplomatic, and economic tools of statecraft to achieve desired ends.”

These definitions are considerably different from the narrower ones offered by Mearsheimer and Art, as they push the boundary of grand strategy well beyond the military sphere. They task grand strategy with formulating and coordinating almost all the dimensions of a state’s foreign policy. Layne in one instance even goes as far as giving grand strategy the responsibility of establishing the overarching interests and goals of the state, as well as its self-conception. He writes: “distilled to its essence, grand strategy is about determining a state’s vital interests—those important enough to fight over—and its role in the world.” Yet, in determining state interests, and designing and directing the full range of tools to achieve those interests, grand strategy has come to take over what has traditionally been the purview of statecraft or foreign policy. Indeed, according to Gray, grand strategy must now be considered synonymous with “statecraft.” But if the two are the same, then only one is needed; either grand strategy or foreign policy is redundant and therefore unnecessary.

The conceptual evolution of both strategy and grand strategy has led to their blurring with foreign policy in general. Betts argues that some conceptions of strategy and grand strategy now overlap with general ‘policy’ so much “that it is hard to distinguish them.” While, Strachan contends that this blurring has created an “existential crisis” for strategic studies as the term strategy “has acquired a universality which has robbed it of meaning, and left it only with banalities.” One might argue the same for grand strategy. Importantly, however, this is not just a semantic academic debate, but a real problem for U.S. national security. Kagan explains: “American military doctrine does not recognize a distinction between the terms "national strategy," "national security strategy," and "grand strategy,"

and it, too, tends to conflate strategy and grand strategy." This conflation has led to fundamental problems in recent policymaking, according to Strachan, by replacing strategic planning with simply setting policy goals.

The restrictive views of both strategy and grand strategy may be too narrow for some scholars, but they are certainly easier to define and separate from one another and provide the basis for a more effective division of labor between strategy, grand strategy and foreign policy. The study of grand strategy is at a crossroads where, if it is to be relevant, it must push strategy back down to the level of war, while pushing responsibility for determining state interests and goals, and coordinating the full range of policy dimensions back up to the level of foreign policy. This conceptual order charges foreign policy with defining the overall interests, commitments and goals of the state in international affairs, and determining how to meet those responsibilities by coordinating the full range of political, military, economic, and diplomatic tools at the state’s disposal. It reserves for grand strategy the role of coordinating all the dimensions of military power for the purpose of achieving foreign policy goals and acting as the crucial bridge that links strategy in war and other general military policies with the overall policy goals of the state. Grand strategy, therefore, ought to be concerned with answering the question: how can the full range of military instruments best be used to fulfill the overall foreign policy interests, commitments, and goals of the state? Strategy, on the other hand, is foremost about the use of armed force and the conduct of war. Policy in this model flows from the top down, but at the same time is fundamentally informed by the lower levels, which is why grand strategy is viewed as a bridge. While policy from the top-down frames what is desirable for military power to achieve, the lower levels must spell out plans of action for what military power is ultimately capable of achieving.

Based on this ordering, the paper restricts grand strategy primarily to the military dimension of foreign policy that connects military means with overall policy ends. In broad terms, grand strategy is a theory about how military power can be used to achieve foreign policy aims. More concretely, it is concerned with how the threat and use of military force, along with the posture, disposition, and doctrine of the armed forces, are employed to achieve a state’s foreign policy interests and goals, and meet its international commitments. This definition is consistent with the view that grand strategy is a theory about how to cause security, but it also includes the specific means that are to be related to policy ends. War, or the threat of war, concerns the threat or use of force; posture includes the number of soldiers under arms and the amount and types of weaponry; disposition refers to how available military forces and weapons systems are positioned, both nationally and internationally; and doctrine states how forces and weapons are used to threaten or make war. How these various means are designed to combine and achieve larger policy aims is grand strategy. The distinction between strategy, grand, strategy, and foreign policy, and the dimensions of grand strategy are diagrammed in appendix 1.

Central to the conception put forward here is the allocation of limited resources and the fact that policymakers are often faced with difficult tradeoffs. How overall state resources are allocated to the military is a function of national policy and what role grand strategy can and should play in achieving

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29 Strachan, p. 33-54.
foreign policy aims. For example, states like the U.S. that devote immense resources to creating military power expect the military to play an outsized role in foreign policy, and it does. At the same time, how resources are allocated within the military dimension is also crucial—this is the purview of grand strategy. Examples include decisions about whether to keep large forces under arms or devote resources to developing new technologies; whether to assign resources to one branch of the armed services or another; whether to train and prepare for major wars or for counter-insurgency and nation-building; and whether to position available troops and weapons domestically or in one or another region around the world. How these types of questions are answered requires the rank-ordering of foreign policy interests, commitments, and goals, and decisions about how to allocate scarce military resources to achieving the aims that are most vital.

The conceptual ordering proposed here helps clear up the literature on grand strategy in several ways and may offer some clarity to the policymaking process. First, it provides a way of clearly distinguishing grand strategy from strategy and foreign policy. By re-anchoring grand strategy back in the military sphere and showing how it relates to strategy and foreign policy, scholars and policymakers alike can focus more specifically on how military power is and can be used to support and achieve larger policy aims. It not only helps refocus the study and practice of grand strategy, but also restores strategy to its proper role and re-tasks foreign policy with overall agenda setting. Second, it defines grand strategy by reference to the concrete indicators of military power. This provides a clearer way of determining a state’s grand strategy, and also accounting for both large and smaller changes in its orientation. Finally, it puts planning back in grand strategy. Some of the literature on grand strategy (as well as the U.S. National Security Strategy) has replaced planning with setting policy goals. Strategy and grand strategy, however, are not fully equivalent with policy. Grand strategy in particular is a theory that informs plans of action for how to achieve policy goals by use of military instruments.

CHANGE AND STABILITY IN U.S. GRAND STRATEGY

The conceptual shift proposed here not only provides a different view on what grand strategy is, but also changes the way we can think about U.S. grand strategy and its history. What have been the overarching aims of U.S. foreign policy throughout its history? What role has military power played in achieving those aims? Given the widespread view that the World War II period marked a point of departure for the U.S., what changed in U.S. foreign policy and grand strategy, and why? Finally, what are the enduring features of U.S. grand strategy from that period that remain intact today? This section turns to the task of answering these questions.

American Foreign Policy and Grand Strategy Before and After World War II

According to Leffler, the U.S. learned several hard lessons from World War II: “no more surprise attacks, no more aggression.”\(^{31}\) To check the ability of another power to do so again the U.S. had to “prevent the development of power relationships dangerous to the security of the United States and international peace.”\(^{32}\) For policymakers this required the U.S. to achieve a position of preponderant power and thwart others—namely the Soviet Union—from achieving a similar position. Preponderance is a concept drawn from the transcripts of U.S. policymakers at the end of World War II and usefully employed by Leffler to describe the development of U.S. national security interests in the early Cold War years. It implies achieving “overwhelming” or “indisputable” strategic superiority defined by Paul Nitze as “more power than to win military victory in the event of war.”\(^{33}\) The purpose was for the U.S. “to maintain itself in the best possible position relative to potential adversaries.”\(^{34}\) Preponderance is defined as a position of control over or access to a large enough portion of the raw materials, resources, industrial infrastructure, overseas bases and skilled labor of Eurasia in order to prevent another state from being able to dominate the world.\(^{35}\) Leffler argues preponderance was largely achieved by the end of the war given the dominant geopolitical position of the U.S. in Eurasia, the economic and technological strength of the country, and its considerable ability to mobilize those strengths to create military power.\(^{36}\) The question for policymakers was how to maintain and if possible expand this position. Both Leffler and Layne argue that preponderance has been the grand strategy of the U.S. since roughly 1940.\(^{37}\) Provided foreign policy and grand strategy are re-conceptualized according to the previous section, however, preponderance is better seen as one of the overarching foreign policy goals of the U.S. in the postwar period, the end that grand strategy was intended to preserve and prolong.

Preponderance as an overarching goal of U.S. foreign policy necessitated a new view of foreign policy interests and commitments. Whereas U.S. interests mostly centered on the North American continent and the Western Hemisphere prior to the war, in its aftermath they became truly global in nature.\(^{38}\) American interests expanded from places like Europe and East Asia to the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia. Areas of interest not only expanded exponentially, but there was no systematic effort to distinguish vital from non-vital interests on the periphery, meaning distant and previously


\(^{32}\) NSC 20/4.


\(^{34}\) Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power*, p. 41.

\(^{35}\) Ibid, p. 3, 12, 15-16.

\(^{36}\) Ibid, p. 2-3.


minor places took on newfound importance. This expansion of interests led to a seemingly limitless set of international commitments that the U.S. had long avoided.

After the war policymakers needed to update how America’s various political, military, economic, and diplomatic instruments could be used to achieve its newly expanded aims. The question for grand strategy specifically was how to use America’s military power in order to maintain and if possible expand its preponderant power, both directly and also indirectly by supporting the other instruments of power. Layne identifies the military goals that any grand strategy had to achieve to accomplish this: maintain regional stability, prevent new poles of power, prevent closure/stop hostile great powers from dominating Western Europe, protect economic interests, and ensure Western European access to the periphery. Given that the U.S. had largely achieved a preponderant position, it is not surprising that these grand strategic goals were for the most part status quo oriented. To achieve them required a grand strategy that would maintain America’s position and expand it if possible.

Containment emerged as the concept to capture the theory of U.S. grand strategy that was formulated in the early Cold War years. Kennan originally conceived of containment as a general foreign policy approach that would rely on economic and political instruments, diplomatic pressure, foreign aid, and psychological persuasion to support allies and undermine adversaries. Early in the Cold War, however, containment became concerned primarily with how military power could be used to defeat the Soviet Union, much to the dismay of Kennan. It was a global grand strategy that called for a large and powerful forward-deployed military presence across the world, which would confront and if necessary defeat Soviet advances to secure America’s preponderant position. Containment was at a minimum defensive in that it was designed to preserve America’s position, but it was also offensively inclined to take advantage of opportunities to rollback the Soviet position when and where possible. This was a clear departure from prewar grand strategy and one that required an enormous shift in the military means necessary to execute it. Looking at the underlying means (the allocation of resources to the military, the size and positioning of the armed forces, the extent of military relations with other states, and the role of the use of force) provides a way to fully appreciate both how much U.S. grand strategy changed in the World War II period and what the concrete foundations of U.S. grand strategy were during the Cold War.

40 Politically, the U.S. pushed for the emergence of pro-American states by supporting political freedom and competitive elections in places like Eastern Europe, while at the same time supporting more authoritarian regimes in places like Central and South America, Africa, and the Middle East. The Truman Doctrine was a critical component of this in the early Cold War years. Economically, America’s significant trade and financial leverage was used to push policies that favored free markets and trade liberalization. Similar to the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall plan was a critical component in terms of economic planning. Diplomatically, the U.S. constructed a series of overlapping alliances and international organizations to support American interests and at the same time isolate and weaken the Soviet Union.
41 Layne, The Peace of Illusions, p. 31.
42 Mitrovich.
Prior to the war and throughout American history, U.S. grand strategy aimed primarily at expansion across the North American continent and hemispheric defense, relying more on geography than military power to achieve these objectives. Instead, military forces were rather modest and only scaled up in the event of conflict, as was the case in the Spanish-American War and World War I. Even after World War I with increasing tensions in Europe in the 1930s, the U.S. military remained both small and largely inactive. Atkinson writes:

> When the European war began in earnest on September 1, 1939, with the German invasion of Poland, the U.S. Army ranked seventeenth among armies of the world in size and combat power, just behind Romania. It numbered 190,000 soldiers. (It would grow to 8.3 million in 1945, a 44-fold increase.) When mobilization began in 1940, the Army had only 14,000 professional officers. The average age of majors—a middling rank, between captain and lieutenant colonel—was nearly 48; in the National Guard, nearly one-quarter of first lieutenants were over 40 years old, and the senior ranks were dominated by political hacks of certifiable military incompetence. Not a single officer on duty in 1941 had commanded a unit as large as a division in World War I. At the time of Pearl Harbor, in December 1941, only one American division was on a full war footing.\(^{43}\)

Military forces were not only modest, but also based largely in the vicinity of the homeland. The first permanent overseas presence was not established until 1903 when Guantanamo Bay was leased as a coaling station, and by 1938 the U.S. had only 14 overseas bases almost all of which were located nearby in the Caribbean and the Pacific, and used as coaling and water stations for the navy, not for force projection.\(^{44}\) Military relations with foreign countries were defined by temporary alliances and military aid during war, as in the two World Wars, and the U.S. refrained from participating in any permanent security alliances or international institutions in peacetime. Finally, force was used abroad mostly in securing trade routes, and protecting citizens and state property, and with the exception of the Spanish-American war was conducted by naval and accompanying forces, not large land units.\(^{45}\)

World War II required a massive mobilization of force and had a transformative effect on U.S. grand strategy because unlike after World War I when the U.S. military was demobilized and largely returned to its prewar footing, the same process did not occur after World War II. In order to achieve the newly revised goals in foreign policy, a considerably greater role was accorded to the military to achieve those objectives and policymakers did not return the military to its traditional peacetime footing. A grand strategy of containment required a significant expansion in military means. This process began as early as 1940, as Layne shows, but the significant decisions that led to a permanent peacetime shift came in the war’s aftermath.

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NSC 68 is often read as a transformative document that redefined America’s goals and interests in the postwar period. Most historians agree though that NSC 68 did not pose a challenge to postwar policies as much as it largely reaffirmed the goals that had been set out previously in NSC 20/4 and elsewhere. What the document did break with, however, was the idea that American security could be guaranteed without allocating significantly more resources to the military and maintaining a large peacetime military force. As Leffler explains: “What was new about NSC 68 was that Nitze simply called for more, more, and more money to implement the programs and to achieve the goals already set out. He envisioned higher taxes, and he thought that domestic social and welfare programs might have to be curtailed. Most important, he emphasized the need to build up U.S. military capabilities. More arms were needed to implement strategic undertakings; more arms were needed for military assistance; more arms were needed to support U.S. foreign policy and “to defeat local Soviet moves with local action.”

The allocation of resources to the military was “historically unprecedented”, certainly for the U.S., but also for the world. Beginning in 1950 the budget tripled from its postwar level to roughly $400 billion in 2000 dollars, more than thirty times its prewar level. In comparison, this was eleven times more than Germany spent in its buildup to World War II between 1934 and 1938. While military outlays subsided after the Korean War, they continued to average $317.7 billion in 2000 dollars from 1954 to 2002. This amount represented an increasingly smaller portion of both government spending and GDP as both swelled during this time period, but nonetheless marked the most severe discontinuity in American defense spending in the country’s history. The size of the military jumped from 190,000 active duty personnel before the war to an average of 2.56 million between 1951-1991. Moreover, whereas the U.S. had 14 overseas bases at the beginning of the war, this number jumped to 3,000 overseas military installations during the war. After the war, this number was reduced to roughly 800 and remained at that level throughout the Cold War. Large bases were established and expanded in Europe and Japan to house several hundred thousand troops in these two critical regions. Bases were also secured along critical lines throughout the world including shipping routes through and points along the Pacific Rim, air routes connecting American interests across the Africa/Eurasia periphery, and air routes protecting the Arctic.

At the same time that the U.S. expanded its own military means, it also took a much more active role in allying with and developing the military means of like-minded countries. The most notable development in this area was NATO, which became the cornerstone of containment and preserving America’s position in Europe. NATO represents the first time the U.S. entered a military alliance during peacetime outside the western hemisphere. SEATO and CENTO were similar, if less grand and successful, attempts to solidify positions in Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Separate bilateral

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defense treaties were signed with Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. At the same time that the U.S. established this new network of alliances across the globe it also established military aid programs both through and outside of these formal relations providing a total of over $200 billion (non-adjusted) in direct military assistance between 1946 and 2004 to 170 different countries.\textsuperscript{50}

The expansion of overseas bases, the substantial numbers of U.S. forces stationed abroad, and America’s network of alliances together made the threat and use of force credible almost anywhere in the world, which was necessary if containment was to work. America’s newfound military power enabled it to bring pressure to bear on both adversaries and allies to promote its preponderant position. This military power, however, was not just idle but used for major deployments and wars in China in 1945, in Korea in 1950 and Vietnam beginning in 1964. It was also the backbone that made America’s position tenable in crises like those in Berlin and Cuba.

World II and the early Cold War years represented a critical turning point in transforming the role of the military in American foreign policy. Containment became the U.S. grand strategy early and required a massive expansion of the military means available to policymakers. The expansion of military means and the role of the military in American foreign policy remained the cornerstone of containment throughout the Cold War. There were periods of important “strategic adjustment” over the course of the conflict, like modifications to the role of nuclear weapons or rapprochement with China. But the basic means and ends of American grand strategy remained remarkably stable with containment serving as the thread connecting the two.

\textit{American Foreign Policy and Grand Strategy after the Cold War}

Containment was designed to confront the specific challenge posed by the Soviet Union to America’s post-World War II position of preponderance. It was a global grand strategy against a global enemy. U.S. defense expenditures reflected in large measure those of the Soviet Union, and American military forces were located in particular points of geopolitical importance for the competition between two countries. NATO was constructed as the Warsaw’s Pact’s other, and the rest of America’s security alliances supported countries that shifted the calculus of power between the U.S. and the Soviet Union in the direction of the former. Moreover, almost every crisis and war that arose during the Cold War in places from Korea to Vietnam to Cuba was considered vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, not on its own terms. The threat or use of force, therefore, served an overarching purpose, even if it didn’t always do so faultlessly. With the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, however, the U.S. no longer faced this single adversary that could potentially threaten its preponderant position across the globe. What role would military power now play in overall U.S. foreign policy? And what would the grand strategy of the U.S. be without the Soviet Union?

Given the nature of the threat posed by the Soviet Union, the U.S. military was accorded an enormous role in U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War. Many argue that U.S. foreign policy had in fact

become overly ‘militarized’ in this period. The militarized nature of U.S. foreign policy, however, had served the purpose of meeting the challenge posed by the Soviet Union. The Cold War was a multidimensional struggle with ideological, political and economic elements, but it was at its material core a struggle over military supremacy. This in some ways necessitated that grand strategy—containment and its immense military means—drive foreign policy. Moreover, the militarized version of containment never did lead to financial ruin or the garrison state that so many critics had feared. With that military threat now eliminated and no obvious similar threat on the horizon after the Cold War, however, the overall role of the military in U.S. foreign policy needed to be re-evaluated. After all, without serving the specific purpose of grounding containment to maintain preponderance, did military power need such a place of prominence in U.S. foreign policy?

Although there was no potential peer competitor threatening to achieve preponderance in Eurasia, many argued the U.S. still had a “vital interest in preventing hegemonies in Europe and East Asia” that might arise in the future. This was most evident as policymakers drafted and debated the Defense Policy Guidelines, both privately and publicly, in 1991-1992. Though the language from the original draft document was toned down, the defense strategy for the 1990s eventually stated formally that the U.S. would strive “to preclude any hostile power from dominating a region critical to [U.S.] interests, and also thereby to strengthen the barriers against the re-emergence of a global threat to the interests of the U.S. and our allies.” This line of reasoning suggests the U.S. could have scaled down its goals from maintaining global preponderance against a superpower to maintaining regional balances in critical areas like Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia. The role of military power in achieving foreign policy aims could have been scaled back and containment could have been reformulated from a grand strategy that had targeted a global threat to one that was more regionally focused.

54 Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney, “Defense Strategy for the 1990s: the Regional Defense Strategy,” (January 1993), p. 3, http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nukevault/ebb245/doc15.pdf. The original draft stated: “The first objective is to prevent the re-emergence of a new rival, either on the territory of the former Soviet Union or elsewhere, that poses a threat on the order of that posed formerly by the Soviet Union. This is a dominant consideration underlying the new regional defense strategy and requires that we endeavor to prevent any hostile power from dominating a region whose resources would, under consolidated control, be sufficient to generate global power…We must maintain the mechanisms for deterring potential competitors from even aspiring to a larger regional or global role.” Dale A. Vesser to Secretaries of the Military Departments, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Program Analysis and Evaluation, and Comptroller of the Department of Defense, “FY 94-98 Defense Planning Guidance Sections for Comment,” February 18, 1992, Secret, Excised Copy. National Security Archives (Declassified February 26, 2008), p. 2. http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nukevault/ebb245/doc03_full.pdf.
This is not in fact what occurred after the Cold War. Layne and Leffler argue that the goal of preponderance remained stable over this time period. A subtle but important shift took place at the level of overarching U.S. foreign policy goals, however, and this has had considerable consequences at the level of grand strategy. Preponderance had been a goal defined specifically by U.S.-Soviet dynamics after World War II. It was on balance a defensive goal—to preserve America’s superior position relative to the Soviet bloc so that America could not be threatened by a more powerful enemy. After the Cold War, however, preponderance lost its significance in part because it was assured; there was no threat to America’s preponderant position. Preponderance was replaced by the goal of primacy, a similar but nonetheless different goal.\(^{55}\) Whereas preponderance was defined by a specific struggle with the Soviet Union for control over Eurasia’s material and industrial power and human capital, primacy is more vaguely about being number one by as large a margin and for as long a time as possible. It is a goal defined by the absence of a rival, and is on balance more offensively inclined as the purpose is to extend America’s position relative to all others. The grand strategy connecting America’s post-Cold War military power with primacy, however, has been much less clear than it was previously.

Many commentators in fact complain that the U.S. hasn’t had a grand strategy since the end of the Cold War. Henry Kissinger wrote at the end of the 1990s that “America’s dominance has expressed itself less as a strategic design than as a series of seemingly unrelated decisions in response to specific crises and driven less by an overarching concept than by domestic pressure groups.”\(^{56}\) Kissinger is not alone. Dan Drezner summarizes this view in the introduction to a recent edited volume on grand strategy by suggesting “strategic planning for American foreign policy is dead, dying, or moribund.” He cites several prominent individuals who agree with this view including Aaron Friedberg who says “the U.S. government has lost the capacity to conduct serious, sustained national strategic planning”; and Richard Haass who argues the U.S. has “squandered” its post-cold war opportunity, concluding, “historians will not judge the United States well for how it has used these twenty years.”\(^{57}\)

Given the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the absence of a peer competitor and the shift in the goals of U.S. foreign policy, containment (at least its Cold War formulation) lost its logic and as so many complain was never replaced by a new grand strategy. Even though there was no longer a theory like containment to guide American grand strategy, however, the entire underlying infrastructure of containment remained intact. Large defense expenditures continued even though the size of active duty personnel was reduced from 2.1 million in 1989 to 1.4 million by 1998. The vast network of overseas bases was kept and in some instances expanded into new areas like Eastern Europe and Central Asia. In 2009, the Department of Defense maintained 837 sites classified as overseas or in overseas territories.

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\(^{55}\) Again primacy (also frequently referred to as preeminence) is often framed as a grand strategy itself. But to aspire to be more powerful than others is not a grand strategy. Based on how grand strategy is conceptualized here primacy is better seen as a goal, as the end that grand strategy is meant to connect military means with. Even grand strategies that call for restraint or selective engagement in the use of American military power do so for the purpose of maintaining primacy.


with more than half of those still located in Germany, Japan, and Korea. NATO and other bilateral defensive alliances endured and even expanded. And the pace of foreign interventions actually increased after the Cold War. As Betts notes “the role of military force in American foreign policy has been as great since the Cold War as during it” and there has been “surprising continuity in the militarization of foreign policy” across both democratic and republican administrations. There were for sure debates about all of these issues—curtailing spending, getting rid of bases, ending NATO, etc. Yet, for the most part adjustments in these areas were minor. The main building blocks of America’s Cold War grand strategy remained in place.

The continuity in these aspects of U.S. grand strategy raises an important question: why was there such stability over a period of great international change? Many theories of strategic choice stress the updating of policies based on policymakers’ assessments of the international environment. If this is indeed the case, then one would assume more significant change in grand strategy after the Cold War. Given that this did not occur, policy continuity needs to be explained. One way to account for this continuity is to argue that American grand strategy had its own domestic logic during the Cold War, apart from U.S.-Soviet competition. This is in fact the line of argument that Layne pursues, suggesting that “Washington’s ambitions were not driven by the Cold War but transcended it.” He argues that U.S. grand strategy would have been the same even in the absence of its rivalry with the Soviet Union, primarily because of domestic preferences for an ‘Open Door’ international economic system that could only be secured by the presence of U.S. military power abroad. He contends that the only reason the U.S. did not pursue this approach after World War I was because “there was no hostile great power that threatened to dominate the Continent,” and Britain, France and Germany remained powerful enough to oppose a permanent American presence. Both of these factors changed after World War II—the threat posed by the Soviet Union to America’s access provided a compelling reason for an American military presence, while a power vacuum in Western Europe provided less resistance. By this logic, however, it was the threat posed to America’s Open Door policies and not the policies themselves that shaped U.S. grand strategy. Without the perceived Soviet threat in the early Cold War years or French and British fears about a reconstituted Germany, it is not clear the U.S. would have pursued the same grand strategy.

There is also a gap between the immediate postwar period when American forces remained in Europe to finish the task of pacifying the Continent, and 1949-51 when more lasting decision were made about long-term increases to defense spending, permanent overseas bases, and an institutional commitment to collective security in the form of NATO. Between 1945-1949 the U.S. faced significant domestic pressure to dismantle its overseas military presence (and did in fact go a long way toward doing just that), and many in Europe feared that the U.S. would exit Europe much the way it had after World War I. The initial hesitancy about making major overseas military commitments is consistent

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60 Layne, *The Peace of Illusions*, p. 3.
with an explanation that puts rising U.S.-Soviet tensions at the center of a new long-term grand strategy, even if its contours were being shaped as early as 1940. Finally, after the Cold War, America’s Open Door access to Europe (and probably the rest of the world as well) was less in question than perhaps at any point in its history. If securing the Open Door was indeed the primary motivating factor behind the U.S. military presence in Europe and elsewhere, then we should expect to see retrenchment in the absence of a significant threat to the openness of the international economic system. So why did American forces remain abroad? Why did NATO persist?

EXPLAINING U.S. GRAND STRATEGIC INERTIA

World War II acted as a catalyst that transformed American foreign policy goals and interests, requiring an increased role for the military in foreign policy and a fundamentally new grand strategy. America’s Cold War grand strategy centered on the notion of containment vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, and was underpinned by long-term increases in defense expenditures and the size of peacetime military forces, an expansion of overseas bases, and a commitment to permanent security alliances. Though important shifts occurred throughout the Cold War, the overarching framework remained in place throughout the conflict. Afterwards, the infrastructure of this grand strategy remained in place, but a significant gap was left by the obsolescence of containment. There was no longer a theory connecting how America’s military means were to be used to achieve its foreign policy ends. In the absence of clear foreign policy goals and a grand strategic theory, inertia became the driving force behind postwar grand strategy. The literature on historical institutionalism provides a potentially important explanation for why this has been the case.

Historical Institutionalism

Historical institutionalism is an approach central to Political Sociology, as well as, American Politics and Comparative Politics, but one that is seldom used in International Relations. It looks at the role that “institutions” play in shaping and constraining the behavior of actors. March and Olsen define institutions broadly as “a relatively enduring collection of rules and organized practices embedded in structures of meaning and resources that are relatively invariant in the face of turnover of individuals and relatively resilient to the idiosyncratic preferences and expectations of individuals and changing external circumstances” They are “humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction” by

Institutions are by definition historical in nature—they arise either abruptly or over time and then exert their causal influence in later periods. This is different from many international relations theories, which are constrained temporally in order to provide what are called “synchronic explanations.” Synchronic explanations are those that help provide an understanding for how variation in a dependent variable (x) is related to variation in an independent variable (y) at a particular time (t). In other words, they shed light on how changes in a given variable at a certain time affect outcomes at that same time. In the context of this paper, a synchronic approach might look at contemporaneous economic, cultural or security factors to try to explain grand strategy. Institutional explanations in contrast are “temporal” or “sequenced” and draw on history as a source of theoretical explanation. They attempt to explain how x at time t is related to y at time t and then over time how y at time t affects y at time t, t, t, etc. The result is that “an effect created by causes at some previous period becomes a cause of that same effect in succeeding periods.”

Institutionalist explanations often look at critical junctures that give rise to path dependency. A critical juncture is “a period of significant change, which typically occurs in distinct ways in different countries (or in other units of analysis) and which is hypothesized to produce distinct legacies.” It can result from both a relatively small event that occur at the right time and thus has larger effects than might otherwise be expected or it result from a large event that has more predictably large consequences. Path dependence refers to the process whereby outcomes become positive feedback loops or self-reinforcing mechanisms that reproduce their effects and generate “branching patterns of historical development.” The key insight here is that “outcomes in the early stages of a sequence feed on themselves, and once-possible outcomes become increasingly unreachable over time.” Once a particular path is chosen it is not impossible to shift branches but the costs of doing so increase.

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A Historical Institutionalist Explanation of U.S. Grand Strategy

Using the literature on historical institutionalism provides a way to help make theoretical sense of the trajectory of U.S. grand strategy from the early years of the Cold War to today. World War II and the early Cold War years acted as a critical juncture and provided a window of opportunity to reorder U.S. foreign policy and grand strategy with a distinct legacy that remains today. This reordering moment led to a considerable expansion of American foreign policy aims and allocated greater resources and responsibility to military power to achieve those aims. Over the course of the conflict the role and foundations of military power became progressively more entrenched in the structure of government institutions, policies and belief systems. Moreover, these institutions, policies and belief systems became increasingly costly to change over time and as a result there were important long-term consequences for U.S. foreign policy and grand strategy that stemmed from decisions made early after World War II. The role of the military and its substantial means were so deeply institutionalized in the American national security system by the end of the Cold War that they took on a logic of their own, irrespective of original purpose or a changing international security environment.

An important question that needs to ground any discussion of World War II as a critical juncture is why did it act as an external shock to the American conception of national security in a way that World War I had not? Both were world wars that threatened to substantially reorder international politics and required the U.S. to send significant forces abroad. There were several important differences, however, that caused the U.S. to learn different lessons. Upon entering World War I there was no significant threat to the American homeland and the war was largely a stalemate between several European great powers that would remain intact in one form or another afterward to keep a relative balance in Eurasia. The U.S. could safely return to the security of its oceanic barriers without great fear that its existence or way of life would be threatened from abroad. Thirty years later this was not the case. The U.S. entered World War II after suffering a major attack on American territory. Moreover, there was a real possibility that Germany and Japan could establish hegemony over Eurasia and East Asia, respectively, and that they would be able to use those positions to threaten the continental states. The capacity to project force over long distances was greater with the development of fighter jets, strategic bombers, aircraft carriers, and nuclear weapons, making potential threats to the U.S. even more credible. The fear after the war was that the Soviet Union could pose a threat similar if not greater than Germany and Japan in the near future. U.S. policymakers could no longer assume the country’s security could be assured based on a grand strategy of hemispheric defense and it was this realization that made the World War II/early Cold War experience so critical for reshaping foreign policy and grand strategy.

The most sweeping change that came during this reordering moment was the increased role that military power came to play in U.S. foreign policy. Many commentators have traced America’s foreign interests to periods well before the Cold War. Kagan argues that American foreign policy interests have always centered on democracy, open markets, and human rights, and that there has been a commitment throughout American history to actively promoting those interests abroad, by force if
necessary.\textsuperscript{71} The Open Door tradition has long argued that U.S. foreign economic interests were well-established in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century and that the country had begun to go abroad to secure those interests by then. But by any measure, the beginning of the Cold War was the first time in American history that the U.S. would devote substantial resources and assign tremendous responsibility to the military to achieve its foreign objectives in peacetime. Together, the decisions about defense expenditures, basing and alliances had lasting consequences as they became a new blueprint for the architecture of foreign policy, which started with military power at the foundation.

By the end of the Cold War, the role of the military in foreign policy and its substantial means were deeply rooted as described in the section above. Whereas the post World War II period required policymakers to scale up the military and depended on generating the public and political support necessary to do so, the end of the Cold War provided a potential opportunity to scale down the military, which would have required dismantling or reorienting the Cold War institutions that had been built up over the preceding forty years. Dismantling Cold War institutions would have included slashing the military budget, reducing personnel, cancelling major weapons programs, closing down a large number of domestic and foreign bases, ending several long-term security alliances, and changing the way policymakers thought about the role of the military in foreign policy. There were in fact debates about almost all of these issues and there were eventually adjustments to many. But on the whole, there were major institutional hurdles and large constituencies opposed to significant change.

This would not only have been an enormous undertaking, but as Dueck notes there was not necessarily a compelling reason to do so. The end of the Cold War, unlike World War II, did not act as a shock to the American national security system—it was not a critical juncture. “There was no sense of disaster, no sense that previous policies had failed to keep America prosperous and secure. Since the Cold War had ended—successfully—without the occurrence of a general war, Americans did not really feel the need to reassess the policies that had preceded the events of 1989-1991.” To the contrary, those events only seemed to reinforce maintaining the status quo.\textsuperscript{72} After all, why change or even question the framework that had just won the Cold War.

Conclusion: To What End?

This paper attempts to begin the process of redefining grand strategy and rethinking the trajectory of U.S. grand strategy as a way of offering some insights into the contemporary impasses in both the study and practice of the subject matter. The paper concludes here by suggesting several possible payoffs from this approach. First, redefining grand strategy can help us ask better questions about the specific role of military power in foreign policy, how means are connected to ends, and where the onus of policy agenda setting ultimately falls. Second, rethinking U.S. grand strategy since the end of World War II from a historical institutional perspective can help us better understand the impediments


\textsuperscript{72} Dueck, Reluctant Crusaders, p. 127-128.
Redefining grand strategy along the narrower lines proposed is meant to help make it more manageable both to study and to formulate than the current broader definition allows. In doing so it is foremost meant to provoke thinking about **what specific role military power currently plays in foreign policy**, and more deeply about **what role it can or even should play in the future**. The 2010 National Security Strategy for example says “our Armed Forces will always be a cornerstone of our security,” and that the use of force remains a last option of sorts where diplomacy and other tools fail. It lists a variety of goals like promoting a nuclear free world, Arab-Israeli peace, a responsible Iran, and security and reconstruction in the aftermath of conflict. But nowhere does the document spell out what the military, as the cornerstone of security, will actually do to achieve these goals. Focusing on grand strategy as a theory of what role military power plays in foreign policy might lead toward greater emphasis on bridging this gap.

By looking below the theory level of grand strategy to include its concrete footings—posture, positioning, doctrine, military relations and the use of force—the definition provided here aims to spell out what are the actual means of military power in order to better determine whether or not they bear any relation to being able to meet policy ends. The enormous gulf between military means and policy ends was at the center of Lippmann’s critique of U.S. foreign policy sixty years ago and many scholars continue to make the same critique today. Dueck suggests that the crux of the problem for U.S. grand strategy is the distance between the desire for “limited liability” in foreign affairs and an expansive vision of a liberal world. The problem is that policymakers have ambitious aims, but are unwilling or unable to devote the resources necessary to achieve those aims. The result is that either aims need to be scaled back or greater resources need to be devoted to building the military power necessary to achieve them. By fully spelling out the underlying means of military power, the proposed definition is meant to push scholars and policymakers to better focus on exactly what a country’s means are and whether or not they can be matched to policy ends. If so, then the question for practitioners is how. If not, then policymakers need to either rethink means or ends, or both.

The gap between means and ends has been a consistent problem with the formulation of the NSS as policymakers have largely ignored its intended purpose. Instead, of outlining U.S. capabilities and worldwide interests and commitments, and assessing whether or not current capabilities are adequate to properly pursue the country’s interests and fulfill its commitments, the document has become a policy wish list of sorts. As McDougall argues, “insisting that the National Security Strategy document address resources and means instead of just goals” could go long way toward promoting better grand strategic thinking.

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74 Dueck, Reluctant Crusaders.
75 Though partly separate from the debate over grand strategy, this is actually the debate that has been waged between realists who are in favor of the former and so-called neoconservatives, some of whom have suggested the need to triple defense expenditures and increase the size of active duty personnel.
The proposed definition is not only designed to promote greater consideration of military means, but also overall policy ends. Separating grand strategy from foreign policy is meant to push agenda setting and ends formulation up to a higher level where the full resources at the disposal of the state are considered when thinking about how to achieve national security and prosperity. Grand strategy is by no means devoid of goal-setting and policy formulation, but these processes are contingent on overall foreign policy aims. If grand strategy has focused overly on goals, as McDougall suggests above, it might be because of ambiguity at this higher level. The problems with post Cold War U.S. grand strategy might not about grand strategy per say, but the failure to articulate a clear overall foreign policy agenda. The U.S. has massive military means, but without clear ends in sight it has not always been obvious how to put those means to good use. Instead, military power has been used in an ad hoc and sometimes inconsistent manner. The critical lesson from America’s Cold War experience is that when foreign policy goals are clearly articulated and there is a sustained effort by policymakers to match military means to those goals, then formulating a coherent grand strategy is quite possible. This does not mean that the grand strategy the U.S. had during the Cold War always allowed the country to maximize its security, but that it at least made this prospect more likely. The point is that good grand strategy is preceded by good foreign policy, and it is not clear this has been the case.

Finally, though there was an important debate about U.S. grand strategy after the Cold War and most experts expected significant changes, policymakers faced immense institutional hurdles when attempting to do so. Impediments like the deeply entrenched role of the military in formulating and executing U.S. foreign policy, bureaucratic inertia at the Pentagon, overseas basing agreements and local economic dependencies, and NATO and other security alliance commitments made major change extremely difficult, if not impossible. Baseline spending and adjusted annual increases help explain why defense expenditures remained largely flat from the height of the Cold War to the mid 1990s. As Fordham argues, any reasonable analysis of the “vast disparities in post-Cold War military spending” between the U.S. and potential adversaries “reflected not conscious planning in Washington and allied capitals, but inertia.”

Mearsheimer suggest that “inertia” is also at the roots of why U.S. forces have remained in Europe and Northeast Asia. He writes: “Both NATO and the American alliance structure in Northeast Asia are institutions with deep roots that helped win a spectacular victory in the Cold War, and the United States could not walk away from them overnight.” Mary Sarotte provides an important explanation for why and how this occurred with respect not just to NATO but to the possible construction of a whole new security architecture for Europe. She argues that instead of choosing among a number of possible alternatives, policymakers both in the U.S. and Europe opted for a “prefab model”—“taking the West’s prefabricated institutions, both for domestic order and international economic and military cooperation, and simply extending them eastward.” The result was to reproduce central features of the Cold War: “Rather than bringing an end to the history that had

77 Fordham, p. 376.
culminated in the Cold War, [Bonn and Washington] had perpetuated key parts of it instead. As British Foreign Minister Hurd concluded, they did not remake the world. Rather, the struggle to recast Europe after the momentous upheaval of 1989 resulted in prefabricated structures from before the upheaval moving eastward and securing a future for themselves. Americans and West Germans had successfully entrenched the institutions born of the old geopolitics of the Cold War world—ones that they already dominated, most notably NATO—in the new era. These same types of impediments and modes of decision-making remain in place today and have made “flexibility” an elusive though desirable goal in formulating national security policy.

A larger project is needed to look more specifically at the types of institutions that are at the root of U.S. grand strategy and how they are resistant or not to change. What is needed is a full-fledged empirical study of where policymakers have attempts to make changes and why they were successful or not. For now, the paper only suggests that this is an important part of explaining grand strategy and one that has not been fully considered.

80 Sarotte, pp. 201.
Figure 1: Foreign Policy, Grand Strategy, and the Levels of War

- Foreign Policy
  - Political
  - Military (Grand Strategy)
  - Economic
  - Diplomatic

- War
  - Posture
  - Disposition
  - Doctrine
  - Foreign Military
    - Alliances/Relations

- Strategy
- Operations
- Tactics