

The Domestic Bases of America's Grand Strategy

Justin Logan | 23 Mar 2010

Domestic politics is driving U.S. grand strategy. Although this phenomenon is poorly understood by both academic international relations scholars and the Washington foreign policy elite (FPE), it has important implications for the prospect of changing U.S. grand strategy, and therefore should be of interest to both groups.



The Gulf between the Academy and the Beltway

No one disputes that there is a rift between those who study international relations in the academy and those who make U.S. foreign policy. Most examinations of this disconnect center on: a) whether academics are asking policy-relevant questions; and, b) whether the theories and methodologies of the academy are too complex and arcane to be utilized by policymakers. [Joseph S. Nye Jr. recently assessed](#) the situation and concluded that "the fault for this growing gap lies not with the government but with the academics."

One problem with such arguments is that it just isn't true that academics are failing to produce policy-relevant scholarship. Academics are asking all manner of relevant questions about [civil wars](#), [terrorism](#) and [counterinsurgency](#) (.pdf), in particular, that are directly applicable to current American policy. As for those who argue that international relations theory is too theoretically or methodologically challenging for harried foreign policy decision-makers to keep up with, it would be difficult to imagine the same excuse being offered on behalf of Supreme Court justices and legal scholarship, for instance, or Treasury Department policymakers and economics research.

Indeed, the gap between policymakers and IR academics is more easily explained by the fact that the two groups simply disagree in important ways about U.S. grand strategy.

The Institute for the Theory and Practice of International Relations (ITPIR), a project at the College of William and Mary, has been conducting surveys of IR academics for years, and the results have been striking. In a [2004-2005 survey](#) (.pdf), one question asked "Do you think that the United States should increase its spending on national defense, keep it about the same, or cut it back?" Just short of half -- 49 percent -- answered, "Cut," while 41 percent chose, "Keep same." Just 10 percent answered, "Increase." When the researchers [asked the same question](#) (.pdf) in 2008-2009, 64 percent said, "Cut," 30 percent chose, "Keep the same," and only 6 percent called for an increase. Yet, on taking office in 2009, Barack Obama, the most liberal American president in at least 30 years, proceeded to increase the defense budget. Only a faint squeak of dissent could be heard in Washington.

Other questions in the survey highlight a similar dissonance: Roughly 80 percent of IR academics report having opposed the war in Iraq, while the war was wildly popular in Washington. In ITPIR's [2006-2007 survey](#) (.pdf), 56 percent of IR academics either strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement, "The 'Israel lobby' has too much influence on U.S. foreign policy." Just 20 percent either somewhat or strongly disagreed.

These are not the sort of views one hears aired in Washington. In short, beyond any methodological or epistemological disputes, security studies experts in academia disagree with basic elements of American strategy.

Grand Strategy as Sausage-Making

Part of the reason for this fundamental disagreement over basic principles is that the FPE has largely abandoned clear strategic thought, focusing instead on narrow tactical or operational questions. In lieu of a debate over strategy in Washington, the FPE focuses on news-cycle minutiae and the domestic politics of strategy. In a [2007 Foreign Affairs essay](#) on defense spending, Columbia University's Richard Betts lamented that, "Washington spends so much and yet feels so insecure because U.S. policymakers have lost the ability to think clearly about defense policy."

While it is difficult to prove whether policymakers have lost the ability -- as opposed to the will -- to think clearly about defense and foreign policy, it is clear that they have failed to do so. Take, for example, one exchange that took place in Washington on the subject of the Obama administration's decision to send additional troops and funds into Afghanistan:

During the summer of 2009, at a panel discussing U.S. policy in Afghanistan sponsored by the Center for a New American Security, [Boston University's Andrew Bacevich pressed other participants](#) to defend -- or at least state -- the strategic justification for the escalation in the Afghanistan war effort, as well as for the broader "War on Terrorism" of which it is a part. His call was met with furrowed brows and quizzical looks. One panelist -- who had co-authored the think tank's policy paper on the Afghanistan war -- complimented Bacevich for his contribution, saying it "starts asking these questions about where exactly our interests are." But he subsequently dismissed Bacevich's alternate strategy -- abandoning the war on terror -- for being "completely divorced from the political realities facing this administration."

John J. Mearsheimer, an influential security studies scholar, assessed the president's decision-making process involving the Afghanistan "surge" [this way](#):

In Afghanistan, as in Vietnam, it simply does not matter whether the United States wins or loses. It makes no sense for the Obama administration to expend more blood and treasure to vanquish the Taliban. The United States should accept defeat and immediately begin to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan.

Of course, President Obama will never do such a thing. Instead, he will increase the American commitment to Afghanistan, just as Lyndon Johnson did in Vietnam in 1965. *The driving force in both cases is domestic politics.* (Emphasis added.)

Or take, as another example, [the striking explanation](#) (.pdf) offered in 2009 by Leslie Gelb, the president emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations, describing why he supported the invasion of Iraq:

My initial support for the war was symptomatic of unfortunate tendencies within the foreign policy community, namely *the disposition and incentives to support wars to retain political and professional credibility.* (Emphasis added.)

Next page: Following the conventional wisdom . . .

At the time of Gelb's initial support for the Iraq war, he was president of the Council on Foreign Relations -- a position that, in theory, should allow the person who holds it to establish conventional wisdom, or at least offer him or her the luxury of not following it. If anyone should be immune from domestic political pressure, after all, it should be the president of CFR. And yet even as powerful and influential a policy maven as Gelb reports having felt the pull of "incentives" that induced him to

"support wars to retain political and professional credibility."

Academic perceptions of how American strategy is formed largely concur: Domestic politics are the most important drivers of U.S. grand strategy. In ITPIR's 2008-2009 survey, academics were asked to assess the importance of different foreign policy influences. Thirty-nine percent gave primacy to "preferences of domestic elites," 36 percent to "powerful interest groups," 15 percent to strategic interests, 9 percent to norms, and 2 percent to public opinion.

To understand why domestic politics has influenced U.S. grand strategy, it is important to think about who makes grand strategy and how. The FPE is a rarified environment full of not just ideas, but also of interests. And understanding the balance of power across these interests is important for understanding American strategy. My colleague Benjamin Friedman summed up the balance of power in the Washington national security establishment [this way](#) (.pdf):

In current national security politics, there is debate, but all the interests are on one side. Both parties see political reward in preaching danger. The massive U.S. national security establishment relies on a sense of threat to stay in business. On the other side, as former Defense Secretary Les Aspin once wrote, there is no other side. No one alarms us about alarmism. Hitler and Stalin destroyed America's isolationist tradition. Everyone likes lower taxes, but not enough to organize interest groups against defense spending.

Beyond the imbalance of interests exerting themselves on the FPE, other factors in domestic politics mitigate similarly in the direction of more strategic activism rather than less. American voters' [basic ignorance](#) of the outside world allows elites to pass off outlandish claims as plausible. [Voters' difficulty with risk assessment](#) prevents them from doing effective cost-benefit analysis. American nationalism helps create political environments around key decision points whereby proponents of activism can justify it with assertions about American beneficence and the world's need for its "leadership." Finally, the near-total security from foreign threats that Americans enjoy means that the median voter has no reason to carefully monitor U.S. foreign policy. In short, current U.S. grand strategy reflects a convergence of interests across the domestic inputs to strategy -- interests that are dramatically skewed toward activism.

Implications for the Prospects of Grand Strategy Change

Grand strategy happens to be one of the areas in which the academy has been producing work that could be helpful to the FPE. However, because the debate over grand strategy in the academy is free from the domestic political forces exerting themselves on the FPE, some of the options currently being seriously discussed are political non-starters in Washington. For instance, one of the main competitors in the academic debate on the subject has been "restraint," a strategy [formally proposed in 1997](#) but whose current leading exponent is Barry Posen of MIT. [Posen describes](#) restraint as a strategy in which Washington would "conceive its security interests narrowly, use its military power stingily, pursue its enemies quietly but persistently, share responsibilities and costs more equitably, watch and wait more patiently."

It is difficult to describe an approach that resembles actual American strategy less than this one. The reason for this is the role of domestic politics in U.S. grand strategy. Washington is on strategic auto-pilot, and it has been for some time. Serious changes to grand strategy will require either dramatic changes in U.S. domestic politics, or the rise of an external challenge that forces the FPE to think much more carefully about the formation and execution of U.S. grand strategy.

When it comes to the latter scenario, some scholars have stated that the end is already nigh. America has

had a good run, but [multipolarity is here](#), and with it, balance-of-power constraints that will cause Washington to start acknowledging tradeoffs and making hard choices. According to these scholars, strategic adjustment is coming. Others counter that the declinists have [misread the material balance of power](#), and that America has a lot of fight left in it. For now, the optimists have had the better of the debate.

As for domestic political changes, as early as 1993, [Kenneth Waltz hoped that](#) (.pdf) "America's internal preoccupations will produce not an isolationist policy, which has become impossible, but a forbearance that will give other countries at long last the chance to deal with their own problems and make their own mistakes. But I would not bet on it."

Almost 20 years later, who would?

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Photo: President Barack Obama attends a foreign policy meeting (White House photo by Pete Souza).

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