

Policy Dialogue Brief

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The Stanley
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46th Strategy
for Peace
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Airlie Center
Warrenton, VA

A Grand Strategy to Reinvigorate US Leadership

The September 11 terrorist attacks, the invasion of Iraq, and the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime have raised critical questions about the security of the United States and its role in the world. These pivotal events have prompted a reexamination of the main threats to the United States, the most effective responses, and the United States' understanding of how the international system works.

Beyond the immediate challenges facing the United States—combating violent extremists, reconstructing Iraq, and addressing the Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs—there are basic questions under debate, such as how and when to use military power, what sort of changes should be sought in other countries (and at what cost), and the relative value or hindrance of international institutions and support. The adoption of fundamental approaches to guide such decisions is the function of grand strategy.

The Bush administration enunciated a strategy in 2002 emphasizing the swift and unchecked application of American power—especially military—against any threat. Yet public debate over an appropriate US security strategy was still gathering steam three years later. In October 2005 the Stanley Foundation's 46th Strategy for Peace Conference brought together former US officials, scholars, and other national security experts at Airlie Center in Virginia to discuss possible alternatives to the existing US National Security Strategy of 2002.

Conference participants did not arrive at a fully elaborated grand strategy in their two days of discussion, but they did raise a number of ideas that should be reflected in a new and more comprehensive strategy. By and large, they wanted to preserve the existing international order in which economic, political, and military activity are kept

within certain limits—in other words, keep globalization on a positive track. They acknowledged that the current system is under stress and that careful management will be needed to ensure the widest possible participation and compliance. The group discussed the challenges *and* opportunities associated with rising powers such as China and India. Participants were wary of what American primacy could accomplish and were concerned about unintended consequences of its use. In order to make US power more effective, the conference addressed rebalancing federal budgets and personnel so that diplomacy and homeland defense receive heightened priority.

Key Premises for a New US Grand Strategy

Participants wanted to avoid making hurried judgments about the content of a new national strategy. They tried to be disciplined and ensure that whatever the substance, it should provide that which truly makes grand strategy *grand*. A new strategy would need to point toward the nation's real desired ends rather than second- or third-order effects. The goals it sets should lay a foundation for making difficult policy choices. And it should provide everyone in our military and diplomatic services with clear objectives for their work.

Any strategy will rest on a set of assumptions about the nature of international security. In other words, what is the essential reality and dynamic of the things we are trying to affect? Even if they are left unstated, such assumptions are necessary in order to ensure that proposed strategic objectives are achievable and that one's policy approaches are effective. This is why the contending schools of academic international relations and their theoretical frameworks have

This brief summarizes the primary findings of the conference as interpreted by the rapporteur, Rich Stazinski, and Program Officer David Shorr. Participants neither reviewed nor approved this brief. Therefore, it should not be assumed that every participant subscribes to all of its recommendations, observations, and conclusions.

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cropped up in recent policy debate. For example, if the neorealists are correct that power has its own irresistible imperatives, then strategic goals and expectations must conform with the alignment of economic and military power in the international system.

One conference participant warned against looking at international security as something policymakers can engineer. As this participant said, you cannot buck a system that has evolved over hundreds of years. He said the more achievable aim should be to affect “probabilities, rates, and intensity, and not cause.”

While the majority of participants did not embrace realism, recent events made them keenly aware of the temptations that come with overwhelming power as well as its sheer clumsiness as an instrument. Paraphrasing Colin Powell’s “Pottery Barn Rule,” one participant said about American involvement and responsibilities: “It’s not just you break it, you own it; you *touch* it, you own it.” Another participant viewed this impact as a major blind spot for Americans, who see themselves as benevolent and above the fray and are “unable to recognize our impact as a player.”

There was considerable wariness about overambitious aims. One participant noted that global engagement brings global exposure, echoing Walter Lippmann’s classic warning that the United States must maintain strategic “solvency,” with sufficient means to accomplish its ends. As another participant put it, “moral clarity without limits leads to overstretch.”

On the other hand, participants acknowledged that threats to US security come from many directions. The difference from the Cold War, one participant suggested, was a shift from squaring off against a cobra to being surrounded by bees. This requires a policy that is much more anticipatory and preventive. Voicing frustrations within the uniformed military over the current strategy’s shortcomings, he said commanders and planners can trace back from every threat they face and “draw the connections to where that problem came from, out there somewhere in the world that we’re not doing anything about.”

There were also differing views regarding the essential touchstones of a security strategy. One basis for strategy is to minimize the threat of direct harm to the American people. Another is to preserve the nation’s ideals and institutions. One participant pointed toward an even more basic purpose: that throughout the history of the nation-state, the primary motive has been the preservation of the state itself.

Assessing the 21st-Century Global Environment

Participants surveyed the strategic environment and identified key—and interrelated—features of the 21st-century world:

- Erosion of governance locally, leaving openings for repressive regimes, violent conflict, terrorist or other criminal networks, or all of the above, with the potential destabilization of entire regions. Participants used the phrase *global Balkans* to describe this dynamic.
- Large numbers of people affected by extreme poverty, disease, and environmental degradation. The combination of demographic explosions, poverty “traps,” and rapid political change is a witches’ brew that could lead to fascistic nationalism and aggressive militarism.
- Uncertain trajectory for globalization. Will trade and capital flows remain stable? Will terrorist and black market flows grow or shrink? Will globalization retain legitimacy by spreading its benefits more broadly?
- Proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear weapons.
- Rise of new major and intermediate powers. Emerging scarcity of, and competition for, resources, especially energy and water.
- Resistance to American primacy and the fragility of its legitimacy.

In the discussion of possible strategic objectives, participants unsurprisingly favored aims that lined up with this diagnosis of the challenges: the spread of prosperity and good governance and the management of globalization to promote these goals. There was agreement that the United States should encourage all nations to take part in the globalizing economic, political, and security systems. One participant pointed out that the United States is not the only one affected by these problems, and global problems demand global responses, not just American ones.

Most participants saw the integration of other nations into a globalized system as the best way to extend prosperity and freedom. The international system helps keep military, political, and economic activity within certain limits. But participants were not ready to count on this system to guarantee US and global security. The system itself cannot deliver results on autopilot. Unless the globalizing world economy, for instance, raises living standards in the poorest countries, globalization’s political legitimacy could be undermined. One of the aims of the current Doha Round of trade negotiations is to devise trade

rules that will promote development. Moreover, to deal with the system's most egregious violators, strong US armed forces will be necessary to respond to direct military threats. A strong defense capability was seen as an important insurance policy for breakdowns in the international system.

Rising Powers, Asia, and China

Because of the United States' ongoing strategic role as a guarantor of stability in East Asia and China's continued rise as a regional and world power, the group focused much of its discussion on China. Participants were also mindful of pressure from hard-liners in Washington to view China as an adversary. One participant even started a statement with the disclaimer, "I'm not part of the China threat inflation industry."

A strategy of integration would continue pulling China more deeply into cooperation rather than squaring off against it. Taking stock of the success to date, a participant said, "Who would have thought 20 years ago that China would have come this far in integrating into the international system." If the trend continues, China could become an important bulwark of the system—its power a source of strength. Noting the extraordinary degree of US economic interdependence with China, another participant said the two countries were locked into "mutually assured depression."

Just as with the future strength of the international system, participants were leery of taking China's long-term commitment to integration for granted. As a result, a number of them pointed out, even these strategic guidelines leave difficult choices in US policies toward China. Two examples came up in the discussion: the proposed purchase of California-based oil company UNOCAL and potential European arms sales to Beijing. Also, should US-India relations be viewed as a realpolitik counterweight to China?

Values and Democracy Promotion

The role of democratization in grand strategy was another major focus of discussion. Here, the issue with the Bush strategy was not over the importance of democracy promotion per se, but rather with pursuing democracy with such reckless abandon. This raised the value of stability and its proper role in security strategy. Stability is not a value in itself, participants agreed, but neither should it be dismissed as a consideration. Comparing his own perspective with that of prominent neo-conservative thinker Richard Perle, one participant said, "What Perle meant by the opposite of stability was change; what I meant by the opposite of stability is utter chaos."

One problem with the current approach toward democracy is its haste in seeking elections, always trying to democratize in one great leap, sometimes at the point of a gun. Participants tried to

identify intermediate goals that would lay the vital groundwork for democracy. One suggestion was to mimic the Microsoft business model and get countries to adopt "operating software" such as the rule of law. The same participant highlighted the importance of a strong middle class. Another participant stressed that local culture will always be a major factor in the shape of governance, which must be expected and respected.

One set of decisions that is meant to flow from a national security strategy is the allocation of resources for the government's efforts to guarantee security. Most conference participants agreed that civilian agencies should be viewed as integral to national security—right alongside the military—and that the military has been overused and continues to receive a disproportionate share of scarce resources. They discussed Dr. Cindy Williams' analysis that breaks security spending down into offense (military), defense (homeland security), and prevention (foreign affairs).^{*} Whatever the proper level of spending for the military, the 15:1 ratio of offense to prevention struck most participants as misaligned. "The entire diplomatic budget is the size of the rounding error of mistakes in the military budget," said one. It will take a shift in the political debate to correct this. As another participant put it, "Congress still believes more military spending buys more security."

Participants also said a reorientation of strategy would require a shift in how agencies worked, and worked with each other. "We face a networked, decentralized set of adversaries," said one, "and we have to respond in a 21st-century way." Operations centers would need to monitor sources of stability in an integrated, contextual way, said another, and so would planning staffs. There was disagreement over whether this problem extended to the very way the government and agencies organized themselves. One participant suggested that the reorganization effort be focused on Congress.

Since a security strategy is really formulated for the *nation* rather than merely for our government, participants stressed that it is critical to enlist the support of the public. One said, "We need a strategy where hope outpaces despair and positive expectations outpace rage."

The task of replacing the current strategy would be formidable. Couching it as the search for a compelling narrative, a participant said, "They have a story that 'we're fighting them over there so we don't have to fight them here.' What's our story?" Vigorous debate over America's purpose and direction is, at minimum, an important first step. ■

^{*} The Stanley Foundation recently published a version of Dr. Williams' research in its Policy Analysis Briefs series. The brief is entitled *Beyond Preemption and Preventive War: Increasing US Budget Emphasis on Conflict Prevention*. Dr. Williams is a former budget expert at the Pentagon. She is currently a principal research scientist in the Security Studies Program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

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Affiliations are listed for identification purposes only. Participants attended as individuals rather than as representatives of their governments or organizations.

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The Stanley Foundation

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