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"A nation must think before it acts." - Robert Strausz-Hupé

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AMERICAN GRAND STRATEGY: LESSONS FROM THE COLD WAR

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U.S. grand strategy stands at a crossroads. Since World War II, America has pursued an ambitious and deeply engaged grand strategy meant to shape the global order—a grand strategy that, in many ways, has been profoundly productive for both the United States and the wider world. Yet in the wake of the Iraq War and a painful financial crisis, that grand strategy has come under fire, with many leading academic observers now calling for dramatic U.S. retrenchment. As I discussed in a recent essay, leading voices in the strategic-studies community advocate a sharp rollback of U.S. military presence and alliance commitments, and a shift to a far more modest and austere approach to foreign policy writ large.[1] Basic issues of what the United States should seek to achieve in world affairs, and whether it should break sharply with the postwar pattern of American global presence and activism, are more openly debated today than at any time in recent memory.[2]

The debate between these two schools of thought centers on a series of key strategic questions. Can the U.S. economy sustain the burdens of a global defense posture? Are U.S. alliances net benefits or detriments to American interests? Is the U.S. overseas presence stabilizing or destabilizing in its effects? How would an American military retrenchment affect geopolitical outcomes in key regions? Is the United States in inexorable geopolitical decline? How one answers these questions frequently determines what one believes should be America's future course.

Grand strategy is not simply about the future, however; it is also about the past. As new scholarship reminds us, policy decisions are indelibly influenced by perceptions of what happened before and what we ought to learn from it. And this is as it should be, because history can shed considerable light on key questions of American policy.[3] It can remind us of lessons that our predecessors have learned at considerable expense; it can provide a sort of laboratory for testing propositions about American statecraft. It can, in general, lend the perspective of the past to contemporary grand strategic debates.

My previous essay entered the debate on American grand strategy by assessing the likely current and future consequences of a markedly more circumscribed grand strategy. This essay, in turn, explores more explicitly how history can inform the current

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[1] Hal Brands, "Retrenchment Chic: The Dangers of Offshore Balancing," Foreign Policy Research Institute E-Note, August 2015.

[2] See the September/October 2015 issue of *The National Interest,* which contains a wide array of responses to the question, "What is America's purpose?" As examples of calls for major retrenchment, see Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: U.S. Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca, 2006), 159-192; Barry Posen, "Pull Back: The Case for a Less Activist Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs,* January/February 2013, 116-129; Stephen Walt, "The End of the U.S. Era," *National Interest* November/December 2011, 6-16.

[3] See Hal Brands and Jeremi Suri, eds., *The Power of the Past: History and Statecraft* (Washington, D.C., 2015).

debate, by revisiting a fundamental period in U.S. diplomatic history: the Cold War. Understandings of the Cold War have always exerted a profound impact on perceptions of the era that followed, as demonstrated by the simple fact that this period is still known as the "post-Cold War era." Indeed, although it ended roughly 25 years ago, the Cold War still exists within the living memory of many policy-makers and academics, and so its perceived insights unavoidably loom large in debates on American statecraft. Moreover, *because* the Cold War ended 25 years ago, there is now a vast body of literature that helps us better understand the history and meaning of that conflict. The purpose of this essay, then, is briefly to explore those lessons that seem most pertinent to America's current strategic crossroads—to evaluating whether retrenchment or efforts at geopolitical renewal represents the best path forward.[4]

This is, of course, a somewhat subjective exercise. Reasonable people could pick different lessons to draw from the Cold War, and they could interpret the underlying history—or the policy implication—in different ways. But that does not make the quest to identify and utilize historical lessons fruitless, for it is precisely this process of debate and argument that helps us sharpen our knowledge of the past and the insights it offers.

On the whole, the eight lessons discussed here strongly suggest that calls for dramatic retrenchment rest on fairly weak historical foundations, and in many ways they powerfully underscore the logic of America's longstanding approach to global affairs. But Cold War history also demonstrates that a dose of restraint—and occasional selective retrenchment—can be useful in ensuring the long-term health of an ambitious grand strategy. Above all, these lessons show that the well-informed use of history can enrich the grand strategic debate today—just as the use of history enriched American grand strategy during the Cold War.

Lesson 1: National power rests on economic foundations, but the economic case for dramatic retrenchment rests on weak foundations

Grand strategy ultimately begins and ends with macroeconomics, and perhaps the central insight from the Cold War is that geopolitical success is a function of economic vitality. It was, after all, the West's superior economic performance that eventually exerted such a powerful magnetic draw on countries in both the Third and the Second Worlds, and that allowed Washington and its allies to sustain a protracted global competition that bankrupted Moscow in the end. In this sense, the Cold War's key takeaway is that preserving a vibrant free-market economy, as a wellspring of both hard and soft power, is the most crucial task that America faces.

Less persuasive, however, is the implication that advocates of retrenchment often draw from this unassailable fact: that America must now slash its foreign commitments because those commitments are so onerous as to imperil long-term U.S. economic and fiscal health. This argument is weak on numerous grounds. For one thing, it elides the fact that U.S. deficits are driven far more by exploding entitlement costs (48 percent—and rising—of federal spending as of 2014) than by defense outlays (18 percent and falling).[5] Just as important, it ignores the inconvenient historical truth that, during the Cold War, America sustained a far higher defense burden—over 10 percent of GDP during the 1950s, and often upwards of 6 percent during the 1980s, as opposed to 3-4 percent today—while maintaining robust growth for most of the postwar period.

In other words, the relevant Cold War lesson is that economic performance is indeed the fount of national power, but that the U.S. economy has historically been capable of supporting a far higher defense burden without compromising that performance. Whether this remains true in the future, of course, will depend on the country's willingness to make hard choices associated with rationalizing U.S. tax and entitlement policy. But if we take the Cold War as a guide, it reminds us that current defense spending actually constitutes a rather modest strain on the economy by historical standards.

Lesson 2: American engagement is the bedrock of international stability

A second key debating point regarding U.S. grand strategy today involves the question of what this defense spending and global engagement actually buy in terms of securing the international order. Does U.S. engagement foster stability and peace, as American officials have long claimed? Or does it primarily invite blowback and other undesirable behavior, as critics allege? The history of the Cold War lends some support to both arguments, but the balance lies overwhelmingly with the former

[4] This essay is a short, initial version of a longer project on the grand strategy lessons of the Cold War. The underlying literature utilized here will be referenced more extensively in that longer version.

[5] Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, "Policy Basics: Where Do Our Federal Tax Dollars Go?" March 11, 2015, available at http://www.cbpp.org/cms/?fa=view&id=1258, accessed April 1, 2015

perspective.

U.S. global engagement during the Cold War was a response to the fact that the *absence* of such engagement had helped cause the catastrophic instability of the interwar era. And during the Cold War, it was precisely the U.S. decision to embrace the responsibility of organizing and protecting the non-communist world that allowed key regions like Europe and East Asia—particularly the former—to break free of their tragic pasts and achieve remarkable levels of stability. U.S. policy helped deter Soviet aggression and dissuade other disruptive behavior; it helped mute historical frictions between countries like Germany and Japan, on the one hand, and their former enemies, on the other; it helped foster the climate of security in which unprecedented economic growth and multilateral cooperation could occur. U.S. policy was not the only factor in these achievements, but it was the common thread that connected them.

What relevance does this history have for grand strategic debates in a period that seems so different from the Cold War? The relevance is simply to remind us that stability—and all of the blessings that stability makes possible—is not an organic condition of the international environment. Rather, it must be provided by powerful actors who are willing to confront those forces—national rivalry, aggression by the strong against the weak—that have, historically, so often pushed international relations toward *in*stability and conflict. At a time when many of those forces again seem to be rearing their heads from East Asia to Eastern Europe—and when there is still no compelling candidate to replace Washington as primary provider of international stability—this lesson is especially important to bear in mind.

Lesson 3: The costs of U.S. alliances are real, but the benefits are enormous

Based on the tenor of pro-retrenchment arguments today, one might think that U.S. alliance commitments are the root of all evil—that they do little to advance American interests, while encouraging a mix of "free-riding" and "reckless driving" by selfish allies.[6] These concerns would not seem novel to America's Cold War statesmen, who continually worried that American allies were not doing enough to sustain the common defense, and that some particularly troublesome partners—such as Taiwan's Chiang Kai-Shek—might drag Washington into conflicts it would rather avoid. In this sense, the history of the Cold War confirms that the burdens—and potential dangers—associated with U.S. alliance commitments are real enough.

What that history also confirms, however, is the tremendous and irreplaceable value those arrangements bring. Throughout the Cold War, for instance, U.S. alliances offered the high degree of military interoperability that flowed from continual joint training, and the ability to call on U.S. allies to support Washington's own military interventions in conflicts like the Korean War. They gave Washington forums for projecting its voice in key regions and relationships, and the moral legitimacy associated with acting as "leader of the free world." They provided Washington with bargaining advantages in trade and financial negotiations with allies, and the leverage needed to dissuade countries from West Germany to South Korea from developing nuclear weapons and thereby destabilizing entire regions. In some cases, they even gave the United States the ability to affect the composition of allies' governments. Finally, and despite fears of entrapment, U.S. alliances frequently gave Washington the influence needed to exert a restraining effect on the behavior of worrisome partners.

Alliances, in other words, have never been a matter of charity in U.S. statecraft; they have conferred an entire range of powerful benefits for American interests. The history of the Cold War reminds us of this fact. In doing so, it also reminds us that the burden of proof in the current debate should be not on those who advocate maintaining such arrangements, but on those who would weaken or terminate them—and thus risk forfeiting the massive benefits they have historically conferred.

Lesson 4: Democracy-promotion is not a distraction from geopolitics

Apostles of dramatic retrenchment frequently hail from the church of realism, and so argue that the longstanding U.S. emphasis on spreading democracy is in fact a distraction—sometimes an explosively counterproductive one—from the core mission of advancing concrete American interests. They are right, of course, to note the Iraq War as a case of democracy-promotion gone horribly wrong, and the history of the Cold War indeed confirms that overeager or ill-timed efforts to promote liberal values abroad—as in Iran or Nicaragua during the late 1970s—can backfire spectacularly. Yet in a broader sense, the Cold War also affirms that encouraging the spread of democracy overseas is essential to achieving U.S. geopolitical goals, and increasing the nation's global power and influence.

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[6] See, for instance, Barry Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, 2014), 33-50.

Broadly speaking, Cold War history reminds us of the simple fact that America's closest and most reliable allies have long been democracies, and that the spread of liberal values therefore increases the range of countries with which Washington can build such deep and lasting ties. More specifically, Cold War history shows us that the advance of democracy can provide critical advantages in a prolonged geopolitical contest with an authoritarian rival. As the Carter and Reagan administrations emphasized from the late 1970s onward, democratic institutions can provide the legitimacy that makes U.S. partners more stable and reliable in such a competition. As these administrations also understood, the spread of liberal values can foster a global ideological climate in which a democratic great power—such as America—is far more comfortable and influential than an authoritarian competitor. As much as anything else, in fact, it was the global turn toward democracy from the mid-1970s onward—a phenomenon that was often assisted by U.S. policy—that signaled a renewed American ascendancy and the ebbing of Soviet global influence in the last years of the Cold War.

The proper lesson to take from this history is not that democracy should be pursued in all quarters and conditions, of course, for the Cold War also underscores the value of partnerships—even uncomfortable and temporary ones—with authoritarian regimes. What it indicates, rather, is that a grand strategy that emphasizes selective and strategic democracy-promotion is likely to bring geopolitical rewards—and that a grand strategy that significantly *de*emphasizes such activities will lose a great deal in the bargain.

Lesson 5: The military balance shapes risk-taking and decision-making

How would a significant reduction in U.S. military power—as envisioned by advocates of sharp retrenchment—impact decision-making in the world's key theaters? This must be a central question in considering U.S. grand strategy today, and based on the Cold War experience, the likely answer is not comforting. For while that history illustrates that the military balance—conventional and nuclear—is certainly not everything in geopolitics, it shows that significant shifts in the military balance can have important effects on how states behave.

Marc Trachtenberg, for example, has documented how the major shifts in the military balance from the late 1940s through the mid-1950s profoundly affected the level of risk that both U.S. and Soviet policymakers were willing to run in places as diverse as Korea and Berlin.[7] Two decades later, the massive growth of Soviet military power was a key factor in pushing West Germany to embrace *ostpolitik*—a policy, one commenter noted, of "partial appeasement" meant to purchase some safety in the face of a changing strategic balance.[8] This Soviet buildup, moreover, seems to have played a role in encouraging more assertive Soviet behavior in Third-World conflicts during the late 1970s. Finally, in the 1980s, evidence suggests that the major U.S. buildup of previous years had a key part in convincing Soviet decision-makers such as Mikhail Gorbachev to reduce the danger via a policy of increasing accommodation with Washington.[9] As military balances shifted, in other words, perceptions of opportunity or danger—and the corresponding propensities for risk-taking or accommodation—often shifted as well.

Notwithstanding the obvious differences between the Cold War and the world of today, these examples are worth keeping in mind when considering the likely consequences of major U.S. retrenchment. For they suggest that if such retrenchment significantly altered the existing balance in key regions like East Asia, it might invite behavioral changes—by allies or adversaries—that could run counter to the favorable climate that Washington's dominance has long afforded in those regions.

Lesson 6: Dramatic retrenchment is unwise, but restraint and selective retrenchment have their virtues

On the whole, the Cold War's insights thus suggest that calls for dramatic retrenchment should be met with great scrutiny and skepticism. Yet there is an important caveat here, for this history also tells us that a degree of grand strategic restraint is essential, and that *selective* retrenchment or recalibration at the margins can actually be quite a good thing.

First, Cold War history reveals that activism must be balanced with prudence in order to keep an engaged global strategy viable. There were, certainly, times during the Cold War when Washington overreached in its efforts to contain communism, the commitment of 500,000 troops to poor, geopolitically insignificant Vietnam being the foremost example. And that overreach, especially in the case of Vietnam, ultimately boomeranged so much that it undercut domestic support for the

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[7] Marc Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy* (Princeton, 1991), 100-153.
[8] Quoted in Marc Trachtenberg, *The Cold War and After: History, Theory, and the Logic of International Politics* (Princeton, 2012), 167.
[9] As Gorbachev later wrote, the need to remove the U.S. Pershing-II missiles from Europe—"a pistol held to our head"—was crucial to his decision to reverse longstanding Soviet policy and conclude the INF Treaty. Gorbachev, *Memoirs* (New York, 1995), 444.

broader U.S. global agenda. Just as the blowback from the Iraq War has more recently given voice to calls for thoroughgoing American retrenchment, the insight from Vietnam is therefore that activism must be carefully calibrated if it is to be enduring.

Second, Cold War history underscores that retrenchment at the margins—rather than at the core—of American strategy can be very useful. As Melvyn Leffler has argued, periods of military belt-tightening during the Cold War forced U.S. policymakers to better define priorities and think strategically about how to accomplish core objectives.[10] Those periods also incentivized strategic innovations—such as the offset strategy of the 1970s—meant to exploit U.S. comparative advantages and sustain commitments at lower costs. More broadly, America's selective post-Vietnam retrenchment allowed it to retreat from exposed positions that could only be held at an unacceptable price, to reset its strategic bearings, and ultimately to forge a more politically sustainable—and geopolitically effective—approach to competing with the Soviet bloc.

To be sure, selective retrenchment is itself hard to calibrate—as the U.S. experience after Vietnam also demonstrates—and it can bring myriad dangers if taken too far. Yet if the overall goal remains to preserve and strengthen a grand strategy of global engagement, then restraint and occasional tactical retrenchment can serve an essential purpose.

Lesson 7: Don't underestimate American resilience

Of course, prospects for continued U.S. global activism hinge on another key question in the grand strategy debate—about whether America is experiencing inexorable geopolitical decline. And here the relevant lesson is that U.S. power has often proved more resilient than predicted. Just as there is widespread discussion of U.S. decline today, America experienced repeated waves of "declinism" during the Cold War. After the Soviet A-bomb test in 1949, or the launching of Sputnik in 1957, or the oil shocks and the humiliating end to the Vietnam War in the 1970s, it was widely assumed that U.S. power was steadily draining away.[11]

In each case, however, these predictions were wrong. Prophecies of decline attributed too much importance to near-term setbacks whose impact ultimately proved transitory (like Vietnam), and too little to the much deeper, systemic weaknesses of adversaries like the Soviet Union. They underestimated the resilience of the U.S. economy and political system, and the enduring global appeal of America's liberal ideology. Just as important, these predictions missed the fact that the very fear of decline repeatedly impelled policymakers to take actions—from addressing budget deficits, to restoring American military advantage over Moscow during the 1980s—that facilitated U.S. resurgence. America would therefore come out of the Cold War not in decline, but stronger—in relative terms—than ever before.

This history should not inspire complacency about America's current trajectory, because challenges to U.S. primacy today—from sluggish economic growth at home to the rise of China overseas—are more formidable than at any time in a quarter-century. But this history certainly shouldn't inspire fatalism, either. For familiarity with the history of the Cold War can help alert us to the fact that our current and potential competitors—Russia, Iran, China—face domestic and international problems that often make ours look modest by comparison. It can remind us that we have a choice in the matter of decline—that there are domestic and foreign policies we can pursue that will either bolster or erode our relative power. Above all, this history can caution us against making potentially irrevocable grand strategic changes based on a hasty reading of global trends—what Robert Kagan has called "committing preemptive superpower suicide out of a misplaced fear of declining power."[12] In sum, Cold War history won't solve the problems that Washington faces today. But it does show that we've rebounded from situations that looked worse before.

Lesson 8: America is capable of using history well

So can America actually employ these historical insights effectively? Many historians would say "probably not." Scholarly accounts of the Cold War frequently emphasize the *mis*uses of history by U.S. policymakers, focusing on episodes like the uncritical application of the Munich analogy in the run-up to intervention in Vietnam. It is true, certainly, that U.S. officials did not always use historical analogies and insights as effectively as they might have during the Cold War. But this should not obscure the fact that, on the whole, America's Cold War grand strategy represented a near-textbook case of history used well.

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[10] Melvyn Leffler, "Defense on a Diet: How Budget Crises Have Improved U.S. Strategy," *Foreign Affairs,* November-December 2013, 65-76.
[11] See Josef Joffe, *The Myth of America's Decline: Politics, Economics, and a Half Century of False Prophecies* (New York, 2013).
[12] Robert Kagan, *The World America Made* (New York, 2012), 7.

The history in question, as noted above, was that of the international system and American isolation in the period prior to World War II. The policymakers of the 1940s and after learned several invaluable lessons from this period. They learned, for instance, that economic depression led to extremism and war, and that the combination of great power and totalitarian leadership was very dangerous. They also learned that U.S. security required maintaining a favorable balance of power overseas, and that the best way of avoiding another global war was through strength, multilateralism, and engagement rather than non-entanglement and withdrawal. These lessons may have been distorted or applied inappropriately at times, but in general they informed a postwar grand strategy that was spectacularly successful.

This learning process stands as a useful corrective to the common academic conceit that when policymakers use history, they almost invariably use it poorly. It also gives cause for optimism about debates on U.S. grand strategy today. As this essay has argued, the history of the Cold War is itself redolent with important insights that can help us assess grand strategic options and alternatives. If the policymakers of today and tomorrow draw on those insights as successfully as their predecessors, they will be all-the-better equipped to chart the nation's course. Because while only a fool would make policy solely on the basis of history, it would be equally foolish to ignore what lessons history has to offer.