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DEFINING AND TEACHING GRAND STRATEGY

By Timothy Andrews Sayle

Tim Sayle is currently a Ph.D. student in history at Temple University. In 2009-2010, he was the Thomas J. Davis Fellow in Foreign Relations and Diplomacy at the Center for the Study of Force and Diplomacy, and a student in Temple's inaugural Grand Strategy course taught by Richard H. Immerman and William I. Hitchcock. He is also a participant in the FPRI-Temple University Consortium on Grand Strategy, which is part of the Hertog Program on Grand Strategy at Temple University. The program is made possible by a grant from the Hertog Foundation.

Grand strategy is a phrase that evokes instant and easy associations. The term immediately evokes a cast of historical actors and events: Thucydides and The Peloponnesian War, Bismarck's *Realpolitik*, or the Grand Alliance of World War II. The phrase might also bring to mind some key texts, including Paul Kennedy's *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* or John Gaddis's *Strategies of Containment*. The definition of grand strategy, however, is elusive, and often operates on a threshold of evidence akin to "I know it when I see it."

It is no coincidence that several professors from Yale University are closely linked with the idea of grand strategy: For a decade, Yale has offered a renowned program in grand strategy, establishing itself as the premiere civilian university concerned with the topic.¹ Since 2000, courses on grand strategy have been added to the course list at other universities.² In 2010, due to philanthropist Roger Hertog's generosity, programs in grand strategy were established at Columbia University, Duke University, Temple University, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The introduction of grand strategy to so many classrooms creates a difficult—but exciting—challenge for course instructors. Despite its easy and quick association, what is the definition of grand strategy?

This essay argues that a working definition of grand strategy serves an important function in a course on the subject. First, it helps to organize a reading list and suggests which historical episodes or theoretical writings are suitable. Second, a working definition provides a common language and useful tool to guide classroom discussion. This is essential for a senior undergraduate course or graduate course that will tend to be self-selecting: a grand strategy syllabus often strikes the student of political, diplomatic, or military history as the holy grail of reading lists. A working definition will not dampen this enthusiasm but channel it so that students and professors are able to examine broad and complex topics from a common perspective. What is grand strategy? Is there a useful definition of grand strategy that will allow for rigorous historical inquiry while also allowing students to think about the formulation of future grand strategy? How should students think about the concept of grand strategy as they approach their reading?

Although the term "grand strategy" is decades old, it is not used frequently in policy documents, and its salience has ebbed and flowed in academic writing since as far back as the 1920s. Grand strategy returned to common parlance in the 1990s as scholars and pundits competed in the "Kennan Sweepstakes" to define America's global role in a changing world. Newspapers, think tank publications, and foreign policy journals were often content to discuss "grand strategy" without providing a clear definition; it was easy enough to allow a search for "grand strategy" to stand in for all of the questions that arose as the Berlin Wall fell. In political science literature, grand strategy has been investigated more rigorously. Virtually all of these definitions are some offshoot of Basil Liddell Hart's rendering in his classic *Strategy*.³

¹ In addition to Kennedy and Gaddis, Yale's Charles Hill recently published a new text, *Grand Strategies: Literature, Statecraft, and World Order* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

² A quick Internet search reveals that The University of Georgia and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology both offer courses on grand strategy: "Grand Strategy in International Relations" and "Comparative Grand Strategy," respectively.

³ For a bibliography of the most prominent recent writings on Grand Strategy, see the extensive list in Stephen D. Biddle, "American Grand Strategy after 9/11: A Reassessment." (Strategic Studies Institute, April 2005).ff. 2 Available online at

IS GRAND STRATEGY ONLY FOR WAR?

The “role of grand strategy,” or simply “higher strategy” as Liddell Hart also referred to it, “is to co-ordinate and direct all the resources of a nation, or band of nations, toward the attainment of the political object of the war.” Liddell Hart’s definition warrants exploring in close detail. First, he argues that Grand Strategy has a “role” and is actively used by the nation to serve a purpose. That purpose, or the “political object” in Liddell Hart’s phrase, is a function of war and is thus defined in relation to an enemy.⁴ For Liddell Hart, grand strategy is inseparable from war. Indeed it is “practically synonymous with the policy which guides the conduct of war.”⁵

Many scholars have used Liddell Hart’s definition profitably when studying the history of high policy of war. James McPherson, to provide a prominent example, has used the concept successfully to explain Abraham Lincoln’s role as Commander-in-Chief during the Civil War. Lincoln’s grand strategy, what McPherson also calls his “national strategy,” was the concentration of all political, economic, diplomatic, psychological and military resources to achieve the Union’s “policy,” or war aims.⁶ But what value does Liddell Hart’s definition have for thinking about historical periods not marked by war?

Liddell Hart’s definition is too narrow to stand alone for a course intended to examine more than warfare alone. If Liddell Hart’s explanation of grand strategy is to be carried forward with its original definition, its use must be circumscribed to major wars that require a nation to exploit its full reservoir of resources. This conception of grand strategy is problematic for two reasons. First, a course based on historical examples that fit Liddell Hart’s concept of grand strategy will be limited to examples of major or total war. Two possible subjects for study, the Roman Empire and the British Empire, do not fit easily into this conceptual framework. Certainly each had many enemies, but whether either empire governed its external policies with attention to enemies to the exclusion of interests is debatable.

Second, for students of political science or policy studies who wish to think about formulating policy, Liddell Hart’s definition offers little guidance about the purpose or objective of a grand strategy. An important element of Liddell Hart’s definition is indeed to achieve a political objective; but in *Strategy* this political object is defined in some relationship to a defined enemy in an ongoing conflict. Liddell Hart’s definition provides no tools for deciding the political object of a grand strategy, a difficult task made more onerous by the lack of an identifiable threat.⁷

The second potential use of Liddell Hart’s definition is to adapt it and make it more broadly applicable. This approach, the argument goes, will serve students who aspire to positions where they might formulate a grand strategy for a business, a non-profit organization, or a government agency.⁸ John Gaddis has adopted a similar definition in his teaching, such that “grand strategy is the calculated relationship of means to large ends.” Examples from war and statecraft, which form the bulk of the Yale course’s syllabus (and that at Temple, the catalyst for this essay), predominate “because the fighting of wars and the management of states have demanded the calculation of relationships between means and ends for a longer stretch of time than any other documented area of collective human activity.”⁹ Gaddis’ definition is Liddell Hart’s stripped of reference to the nation and war, though wars are studied because they provide an extensive data set. But if the scholar, student, or practitioner dismisses the historical surrounds of Liddell Hart’s argument, and applies grand strategy widely to non-emergency, non-war, and even sub-state level problems, how does this differ from the unadorned “strategy?”¹⁰

<<http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/>>.

⁴ The “political object” is a phrase also employed by Carl von Clausewitz in *On War*. For Clausewitz, “the *political object* [...] was the *original motive*” for war. Carl von Clausewitz et al., *On War*, Oxford World’s Classics (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 20.

⁵ Liddell Hart shades grand strategy a slightly different color from pure policy, arguing grand strategy is “policy in execution.” Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from Liddell Hart are from Basil Henry Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 2d rev. ed. (Toronto: Meridian, 1991), pp. 321-22.

⁶ McPherson notes that his term “national strategy” might also be called “grand strategy.” James M. McPherson, *Tried by War : Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008), p. 5.

⁷ Stephen M. Walt stresses the value of understanding state action as a response to perceived threats, rather than potential enemies in *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

⁸ The relationship between the grand strategy of states and the strategic planning essential to effective business policy and administration is murky. An examination and comparison of the literature on both fields would be highly valuable. Much writing on strategy in the *Harvard Business Review*, for instance, seems entirely divorced from that found in diplomatic or military history. A notable exception is a short essay by Henry Mintzberg that stresses strategic formulation as an iterative process rather than a simple top-down and unchanging guidance. See H. Mintzberg, “Crafting Strategy,” *Harvard Business Review*, July-August 1987.

⁹ Gaddis explained and defended his broad definition of grand strategy in his notes for an address: John Lewis Gaddis, “What is Grand Strategy?” Presented at a meeting of the FPRI-Temple University Consortium on Grand Strategy, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. September 10, 2009.

¹⁰ This is not to suggest that “strategy” is a simple concept that does not require deep study and contemplation itself. For a provocative and informative consideration of “strategy,” see Richard K. Betts, “Is Strategy an Illusion?,” *International Security*, Fall, 2000.

The above question begs another: How and why did Liddell Hart distinguish between strategy and grand strategy? Grand strategy was “grand” in Liddell Hart’s definition because it was coordinated at the highest levels of the state and required marshaling the full range of a state’s resources for war. It was a rare and particular circumstance, observable only at distinct times in modern history. There are two concerns that stem from applying grand strategy, based on examples that fit Liddell Hart’s definition, to non-conflict situations.

Edward Luttwak in his book *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace*, published in 1987 and revised in 2001, raises concerns about the wisdom of equating war and peace. Luttwak makes a convincing argument that decision making in war is fundamentally different from that in peacetime or civilian pursuits, such as business or politics. In peaceful pursuits, legal systems and strong customs exist to allow policymakers to plan without worry of physical attack or destruction. As a result, businesses tend to focus on efficiency, economies of scale, and centralization of resources. In war, however, efficiency, economy of scale, and concentration of equipment and personnel are often detrimental to success. Instead, success in war requires a denial of peacetime methods and a focus on redundancy (to better defend oneself and to ensure one’s weapons are effective against various defenses), dispersal, and surprise. Surprise, a key determinant of success in war, often requires wartime leaders to make choices that are entirely illogical other than that they may successfully deceive the adversary.¹¹ The logic of war and the logic of peace, writes Luttwak, are in many ways opposites and require entirely different perspectives and methods of planning and thinking.

The political theorist Michael Walzer offers another compelling argument about why the study of decision making in war may poorly inform peacetime choices. In his *Arguing about War*, Walzer warns against the “routinization of emergency” and considers the moral and ethical dilemmas of treating all foreign policy problems as if resolution requires the full weight of the state’s power.¹² The ethics governing—and perhaps constraining—the policy choices available to decision makers are contingent upon the type of emergency. The major wars which Hart took as his model would likely meet Walzer’s test of the “supreme emergency,” in which immoral activities take on an acceptable level of morality because of the threat posed to the state. The decisions taken by the historical leaders in Hart’s study were often brutal and horrific, often little more than a Hobson’s choice between life and death. The routinization of grand strategy, in the mould of Liddell Hart’s definition, leads directly to what Walzer has termed the “routinization of emergency” whereby means are trivialized and ends reign supreme. Surely, given the arguments put forth by Luttwak and Walzer, those interested in developing a capacity for strategic thinking for peacetime pursuits would be better served by using a data set drawn from business examples.¹³

The Liddell Hart definition, then, is a difficult one for the classroom. In its original form, it serves as a good analytic framework for describing how modern states coordinate and mobilize resources for war. It provides an important warning, too often unheeded, that efforts to win a war should also seek to win the peace. But as the definition rests on a state of war, and the political object that requires a grand strategy is defined in relation to an enemy, it limits historical examples and offers little guidance for those seeking to formulate a future grand strategy without an obvious threat. But trying to modify Liddell Hart’s definition has troublesome consequences. As Luttwak and Walzer suggest, redefining grand strategy so broadly as to disconnect it from *raison d’état* will prove counterproductive and invite moral and ethical complications.

Does this mean Liddell Hart’s definition should be discarded? Certainly not. Liddell Hart’s writing on grand strategy has contributed immensely to the study of high policy, and his chapter on “The Theory of Strategy” is an excellent introduction for students. His most valuable observation is to identify the variety of resources the state may apply to accomplish the political objective. For “grand strategy,” he writes, “should both calculate and develop” the military, economic, and moral resources of the nation. It should also regulate the distribution of power in the war-fighting society, both between the armed services and between the military and industry. Further, it applies financial, diplomatic, commercial, and ethical pressure to weaken an opponent’s will.¹⁴

Again, however, the calculation and coordination described by Liddell Hart is initiated in response to a wartime situation, and the state’s resources are marshaled to end the war and achieve a state of peace. How can the concept of “grand strategy” be framed to allow the study of the interaction of all of the state’s instruments and resources, regardless of whether that state is participating in a major war, or is driven by no other goal than to maintain or enhance its general position? Liddell Hart himself hints at the solution to this problem when he writes that grand strategy is a “plane,” along with other planes such as tactics and strategy.¹⁵

¹¹ Edward Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), Edward Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace*, Rev. and enl. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001).

¹² Michael Walzer, *Arguing About War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004). See Chapter 3, “Emergency Ethics.”

¹³ The case study method, developed by the Harvard Business School in the 1920s, is now ubiquitous in undergraduate and graduate business and public administration programs. Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University also relies on case studies as an essential pedagogical tool.

¹⁴ Liddell Hart, *Strategy*.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

If one reconceptualizes “grand strategy” as a plane upon which the different resources of the state interact, with or without a conscious act of coordination, a different working definition emerges. Luttwak, who has published books on the grand strategies of the Roman Empire, Soviet Union, and most recently the Byzantine Empire, recently offered such a definition and it holds great merit:

All states have a grand strategy, whether they know it or not. That is inevitable because grand strategy is simply the *level* at which knowledge and persuasion, or in modern terms intelligence and diplomacy, interact with military strength to determine outcomes in a world of other states with their own “grand strategies.”¹⁶

Luttwak’s definition obviates the distinction between war and peace, and instead suggests that a state’s grand strategy interacts with other states regardless of whether they are friend or foe. Although all states have grand strategies according to this definition, Luttwak notes that not all grand strategies are created equally. In fact, he argues, these strategies vary dramatically in cohesion and effectiveness.¹⁷ But he is correct to point out that the various resources of the state, and particularly the instruments of foreign policy, exercise an effect on each other, intentionally or otherwise. Luttwak’s definition offers an advantage. Rather than limiting “grand strategy” to an active, purposeful coordination process, it describes the interaction of a state’s resources that occurs despite varying degrees of awareness and management of these resources.

CULTURE, IDEOLOGY AND GRAND STRATEGY

Inherent in this definition is a hypothesis that the roots of grand strategy formulation are deeper than the calculations of contemporary policymakers. An examination of grand strategy following Luttwak’s definition will encourage evaluation of the sources of grand strategy: What influence do cultural forces in society, for example, have on the shape of a state’s grand strategy? Similarly, what freedom and ability do individual leaders have to coordinate and apply the resources of the state?

These are critical questions for the study of grand strategy, but they are not new for either historians or political scientists. These questions reflect a growing trend in both disciplines to focus on the role of “ideational factors” in the creation of policy. There exists a growing literature in both the history and political science literature that may be harnessed in pursuit of the study of grand strategy.

Diplomatic and international historians, for instance, might return to Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher’s writings to get a sense of this method of history at work. Robinson and Gallagher, in their examination of British imperialism in the Victorian age, introduced the concept of the “official mind” to explain the formulation and execution of policy. In describing bureaucrats and politicians in late-Victorian Britain, Robinson and Gallagher explain that their policies were based on more than rational calculation. Instead, their “solutions and purposes [...] were charged with the experience and beliefs of the society in which they lived.” Their behavior was influenced by the “assumptions and prejudices accumulated from past successes and failures.” Because their policies had a historical context, they can only be understood with reference to policies that had gone before, as well as the events of the contemporary era.¹⁸ Paul Kennedy later employed Robinson and Gallagher’s concept of the official mind with great effect tracing British and German attitudes from 1860 through the outbreak World War I.¹⁹ Since these works were published, the discipline of history has undergone a “cultural turn” that has encouraged some historians to emphasize further the roles of ideational factors in explaining foreign policy. Historians of foreign relations will recognize this as the concept of “ideology.”²⁰

In parallel fashion, the political science and strategic studies literature offers a means of exploring the sources of grand

¹⁶ Edward Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 409. Although this sentence only mentions intelligence, diplomacy, and military strength, it is clear from Luttwak’s text that he considers the resources of a state in terms at least as broad as Liddell Hart. Some might balk at Luttwak’s decision to describe a “world of other states,” but “states” in this sentence could and should easily be replaced by “entities” or another appropriate word that acknowledges non-state actors who nonetheless maintain diplomatic, military, intelligence, economic, and moral resources.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Indeed, “the tradition of policy had come down unbroken from Pitt to Canning to Palmerston and Clarendon.” Ronald Edward Robinson and John Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism* (London: Macmillan, 1963), pp. 21-22.

¹⁹ Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860-1914* (London: Ashfield Press, 1987).

²⁰ Ideology, for the purposes of this essay, is best defined as “an interrelated set of convictions or assumptions that reduces the complexities of a particular slice of reality to easily comprehensible terms and suggests appropriate ways of dealing with that reality.” Michael H. Hunt, “Ideology,” in *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, ed. Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 222. The methodology of ideology has driven important works on American policies that are worthwhile candidates for study as ‘grand strategy.’ Cf. Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science And “Nation Building” In the Kennedy Era*, New Cold War History. (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

strategy with the study of “strategic culture.”²¹ The concept of strategic culture, like the historical study of ideology, is rooted in an anthropological definition of culture. Alistair Iain Johnston defined it as an integrated

system of symbols (e.g., argumentation structures, languages, analogies, metaphors) which acts to establish pervasive and long-lasting strategic preferences by formulating concepts of the role and efficacy of military force in interstate political affairs, and by clothing these concepts with such an aura of factuality that the strategic preferences seem uniquely realist and efficacious.²²

Others expand the basis of strategic culture to include geography, climate, natural resources, memory, key texts, transnational norms, generational change, and changing technology.²³ The impact of these elements on grand strategy is difficult to dispute.²⁴ The concept of strategic culture does not minimize—let alone discount—the importance of material factors of hard power. Rather, by piercing the boundaries between culture and politics, it contextualizes hard power by exploring “the range of cultural conditions which shape the perception strategists have of material conditions.”²⁵ The student who uses the methodology of “strategic culture” might be tempted simply to catalogue all of the potential cultural influences that affect the formulation of grand strategy. Doing so would be counterproductively reductionist. The true difficulty—and true rewards—of this approach are in weighing the determinants to find the greatest influences on a state’s grand strategy.

Both the historical and political science approaches offer methods for inquiry into formulating grand strategy.²⁶ The study of grand strategy requires reading political, cultural, diplomatic, and military history and theory, but it also provides a new framework by asking students to consider the relationship between these topics rather than examining each one discretely. This approach to the study of grand strategy, operating within Luttwak’s definition, allows for the study of a wide choice of states and various epochs of war and peace.

This approach, too, is of greater benefit for students interested in thinking about the formulation of contemporary or future grand strategy. First, Luttwak’s definition is more suitable for applying to the current international system. Unlike Liddell Hart, Luttwak disaggregates grand strategy from periods of major war and is appropriate for periods of anarchy, peace, or limited, asymmetrical war. Second, since Luttwak’s definition leads to a constructivist consideration of objectives and resources, it requires students to begin with fundamental questions about grand strategy.²⁷

Despite its many benefits, this approach to grand strategy makes thinking about contemporary grand strategy more demanding. It has proven difficult enough for strategic thinkers to formulate a grand strategy when that meant the conscious application and coordination of resources to a defined objective. But if the United States currently has a grand strategy that is based on the structural and cultural forces inherent in American society, both the complexity and scale of the task is compounded. The student of grand strategy must confront Bismarck’s humble submission that he was simply plunging his hand into the stream of time, the course of which could not be changed.²⁸

If the determinants of grand strategy are as deeply rooted as this essay implies, then the “stream of time” runs over a riverbed carved by long-term, powerful forces. It will be essential for students to grapple with the difficulty of how leaders might

²¹ The study of “strategic culture” did not have propitious beginnings. There were three previous iterations of the concept before Alistair Iain Johnston offered the re-conceptualization used here. This essay will consider Johnston’s definition. For the history of the concept, see Alastair Iain Johnston, “Thinking About Strategic Culture,” *International Security*, Spring, 1995.

²² *Ibid.*:p. 46.

²³ Darryl Howlett, “Strategic Culture: Reviewing Recent Literature,” *Strategic Insights IV*, October, 2005.

²⁴ Perhaps the best test of this logic is the simple counter-factual posed by Stewart Patrick: How might the post-Second World War international system have differed had a state besides the United States emerged as the most powerful? Patrick offers various differences had Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, or even Britain emerged as the strongest state in 1945. See generally Stewart Patrick, *Best Laid Plans : The Origins of American Multilateralism and the Dawn of the Cold War* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008).

²⁵ Howlett, “Strategic Culture: Reviewing Recent Literature.”

²⁶ The constructivist nature of strategic culture makes grand strategy a fertile subject for the interdisciplinary use of history and political science. Political science theories should serve, in the words of Marc Trachtenberg, as the “engines of analysis” to determine research questions. For more on the benefits of interdisciplinary studies, see Marc Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History : A Guide to Method* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 33.

²⁷ Perhaps the most important question is mentioned above, and requires students to assess the balance between structural and cultural forces and role of leaders in making grand strategy more coherent or effective. Other questions might be asked under the umbrella question “What are the sources of grand strategy?” How do states identify the resources they might use to influence outcomes in the international system? How do a state’s resources or constituent elements influence outcomes without policy-makers awareness? How do these resources interact, and does their interaction strengthen or diminish their ability to influence outcomes? How do states decide on what outcomes they seek? Must states consciously seek specific outcomes for them to be achieved?

²⁸ Bismarck is quoted in full in Otto Pflanze, *Bismarck and the Development of Germany; the Period of Unification, 1815-1871* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 17.

identify, let alone re-direct, these currents. Though a difficult task, there is no reason to think it Sisyphean; the encouragement and proliferation of undergraduate and graduate programs in grand strategy is the best means to find answers. Students with a historical bent will profit from reexamining those figures commonly revered as great grand strategists of the past, especially by asking whether these leaders shaped their nation's grand strategy or inherited a preordained policy path. Equally important, students with a more contemporary focus might consider how the current global situation, including the proliferation of non-governmental and transnational actors, reduces or enhances the likelihood of harnessing the resources required for a coherent grand strategy.

Jeremi Suri has written that grand strategy "is the wisdom to make power serve useful purposes."²⁹ Suri's fine point is actually two in one: first, students must ask whether and how grand strategists might make "power serve" at all, while also pondering the degree of choice a state has in identifying "useful purposes." Rarely do students receive the opportunity to participate in a field that offers so much room for new ideas. Both the scholarly challenge and the contemporary relevance of debates over grand strategy all but guarantee its popularity in the classroom.

FPRI, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684

For more information, contact Alan Luxenberg at 215-732-3774, ext. 105, email fpri@fpri.org, or visit us at www.fpri.org.

²⁹ Jeremi Suri. "The Promise and Failure of American Grand Strategy after the Cold War," *The Telegram*, No. 2 (March 2010).