What is in a name: discarding the grand strategy debate and seeking a new approach

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Published online: 3 December 2020

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Introduction

In the 19th century, the Prussian Field Marshal Helmuth Von Moltke wrote ‘Strategy is a system of expedients: it is more than a mere scholarly discipline.’ Contempory attempts to define grand strategy become trapped in the same dilemma as any effort to find a conclusive approach to strategy. Those working in the domain of the military and security do not have a monopoly on the fundamentals of strategic thought. Outside the bounds of these sectors, the meaning of strategy is far more varied, and hence develops many different approaches. Security planners would be wise not to neglect this broader understanding of strategy.

The very nature of the subject resists rigid definition and constantly evolves. For the teaching and understanding of strategy, ‘grand’ or otherwise, the use of maxims – short statements expressing a general truth or rule of conduct – is probably all that is possible. Because, the core need of any strategy is to be flexible, and as maxims are only general truths, it will always be necessary to depart from them in specific situations. The current grand strategy debate is somewhat opaque as it attempts to seek certainty in a fluid context; therefore, the debate

risks constraining one field of strategic studies into a narrow inflexible discipline of limited utility.

This paper argues that in their pursuit of certainty current attempts to define grand strategy become fragmented due to the very nature of the topic and hence they provide little service to the creation of effective strategies. Therefore, it is necessary to abandon the further development and consideration of a ‘grand strategic’ epistemology. What is required is a broader and more nuanced approach to security strategy, one that may have to depart from the centrality and primacy of an impending conflict. It will be argued in this paper that good strategy is based on expedients that demand the development of specific solutions framed in contextual, temporal, relational and ethical settings.

Problems of defining grand strategy

Beyond the classic definition of grand strategy, recent attempts have been diffuse and unhelpful. Apart from the benefits of education and promoting necessary dialogue, what is the further benefit of defining an additional level of strategy as ‘grand’?

An earlier well-developed attempt by Basil Liddell Hart, and further discussed by Colin Gray and Edward N Luttwak, defined grand strategy in the classical sense. These ‘classic’ theorists anchor grand strategy to a description centred on the creation of a national security strategy for a potential or current conflict. Liddell Hart proposes that:

the role of grand strategy–higher strategy is to co-ordinate and direct all the resources of a nation, or band of nations, towards the attainment of the political object of war—the goal defined by fundamental policy.⁵

Even though Gray is accepting of Liddell Hart’s definition, he, however, remains wary:

the prime reason why one hesitates to broaden the definition of strategy is that when one discusses grand strategy, the use of all of a security community’s assets as instruments of policy, one is apt to lose sight of the issues distinctive to military power amidst the total items in the crowd of somewhat competing policy instruments.⁶

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Luttwak also points out that achieving such coordination across ‘the highly diversified bureaucratic apparatus of modern states is difficult.’ Hence, like Liddell Hart, Luttwak equates a coordinated national security strategy centred on conflict, with the concept of being ‘grand’.

Williamson Murray views grand strategy as the domain of great states. While being a more restrictive definition, this approach does not resolve the issue of which state is ‘great’ (exceptions to the rule are raised). His definition does, however, lead to some valuable but not necessarily unique ‘grand’ insights. For example, Murray lists characteristics deemed necessary to be successful in the design and execution of grand strategy as: acting beyond the demands of the present; ‘… recognition of and ability to react to the ever-shifting environments of war and peace.’ While Murray, like Gray, Liddell Hart and Luttwak, remains anchored to a conflict-centric view of strategy, all of these theorists provide invaluable insights for the teaching of military strategy and add to the strategic discourse.

So the classic view provides us with three characteristics of grand strategy. First, the need to coordinate all relevant elements of national power to the strategic challenge. Second, grand strategy encompasses both peace and war, and whatever current fashion says lies in between (i.e. grey zone, hybrid warfare). Finally, it possesses ‘grand’ objectives which to most classic theorists means that it remains in the domain of great powers. However, Norrin Ripsman warns that even these simple definitions do not have universal acceptance:

Grand strategy is an imprecisely used term in international relations. Scholars who use it mean anything from a state’s overall strategy in a war to a long-term blueprint for the state’s foreign relations. Some view grand strategy (GS) as solely encompassing military considerations and means, whereas others incorporate economic and ideological considerations as elements of GS. Furthermore, GS has typically been studied in a strictly national context, with scholars focusing on the GSs of great powers. The few attempts to study states’ strategic behaviour in a comparative context have

been useful, but may have suffered from a lack of in-depth contextual knowledge of all of the cases.\textsuperscript{13}

Thierry Balzacq, Peter Dombrowski and Simon Reich further define a grand strategy’s purpose to be “the shaping of the global system.”\textsuperscript{14} Ironically, this suggests that recent fragmentation and undermining of global institutions by major powers, or anarchic deconstruction, might therefore be viewed as ‘grand’ acts. The question then remains, what of this definition when the global system no longer exists? Moreover, what level of impact is required for a shaping action to be considered global? For example, while China’s Belt and Road program embodies mercantile initiatives as distinct from its military action in the South China Sea, which initiative has greater global shaping effect? The fixed frame of this definition becomes problematic, for example, when dealing with the emerging issue of control and the use of outer space. Grand strategy could no longer then be described as ‘supra-national’ but rather ‘supra-global.’ In essence, the shaping of the global system as a definition would no longer apply universally.

Balzacq and co-authors develop a comparative framework for grand strategy,\textsuperscript{15} which deserves closer inspection. The framework defines a club of major powers and ‘pivot’ powers that are the players of grand strategy. A cursory inspection of the application of the framework underplays, for example, the effect of the 1956 Suez Crisis on the hegemony of the United Kingdom and France; appears to ignore US influence in Central and South America; and the underpinning of certain ‘pivot’ powers by US, Chinese or Russian support. These are systemic weaknesses in the framework. There are some notable exemptions in the framework: African states, Turkey, Germany, Japan. These gaps are more likely a limitation of written space and the finding of suitable authors but does show that attempts to bring an ordered understanding of the global security system are demanding. Azar Gat reminds us that all strategic paradigms are contextual;\textsuperscript{16} to develop an all-encompassing framework is therefore incredibly challenging.

Nina Silove’s commendable contribution to the debate is that grand strategy has evolved into three ‘distinct meanings’: grand principles, grand plans and grand

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behaviours. If such meanings are present, Silove accepts that small nations can implement grand strategy, an approach which is analogous to Luttwak’s need for coordination in grand strategy. The trouble with such an approach is that it gives little credence to the importance of context. It assumes adherence to meanings as a gateway to ‘grand’ outcomes, thereby running the risk of entering the dangerous ground of strategic self-delusion. While the meanings are well-grounded in grand strategic writing, they are not in themselves independent of sound strategy in general. The Australian strategist Peter Layton adopts a similar paradigm to Silove in his attempt to have Australia develop an independent and less alliance-dependent approach to emerging regional threats. While commendable, and offering important benefits, both theories of grand strategy fall short of proffering an alternative to the classic definition or resolving Ripsman’s concern.

Several writers have identified problems with the grand strategy debate. Andrew Carr, for one, has developed a temporal approach to assist in understanding strategy. Carr posits that the duration of a strategy becomes a key consideration. Considering the time (the duration/life) of a strategy would enable any strategic planner to look past the myopia of the military-inspired end-state, perhaps helping to avoid the post-invasion question, ‘What do we do next?’ Carr’s contribution to strategy is of great merit and worthy of further investigation. It is highly notable that Carr, for the sake of developing his ideas and for clarity, explicitly excludes the consideration of grand strategy in his paper.

The label of ‘grand’ risks turning a strategy into what Richard Rumelt terms ‘fluff,’ further concealing it with a mask of unfamiliar definitions and terms, which so often abound in epistemology; something that Silove attempts to contain. In addition, grand strategic debate and definitions further the likelihood of it becoming cloistered: of being protected from scrutiny. The use of exclusive language would lead to a lack of criticism and problems in translation and understanding.

Gray was particularly wary of **concepts du jour** – current strategic trends – which ‘will be tomorrow’s stale leftover, until it is re-discovered, recycled and revealed as a new truth.’\(^{22}\) This is an accurate observation of how military and security concepts are either recast enduring maxims and principles or new technologies claiming overstated advantages, or both. Recent security dialogue has seen the return of phrases such as ‘great power competition,’\(^{23}\) and the ‘the great game’\(^{24}\) – **concepts du jour**. The current grand strategic discussion, which utilises such continuous recycling and revelation, exhibits the same shortcomings as a **concept du jour** and therefore remains of limited value.

Discourse does not have to be diffuse and complicated. Richard Betts, in his critique of the overblown nature of the grand strategic debate, posits that ‘a concept should not be simplistic, but should be as simple as possible,’\(^{25}\) which echoes the dictum of Karl Von Clausewitz that ‘everything is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult.’\(^{26}\) Both are cogent reminders that unnecessary dialectic does little to ensure the achievement of good outcomes as we can see considerable academic horsepower has been, and continues to be, applied in an attempt to establish some form of anchored ontology. The problem with such an approach is that strategy is deeply rooted in the human condition and therefore inherits the same problem organisational theorists wrestle with. As Karl Weick puts it:

> Theories are built on regularities among events, people, and relationships, not on sporadic, infrequent and explosive episodes…
> It is these irregularities which are absent from many case studies.\(^ {27}\)

This inability to deal with irregularities is the one big thing wrong with the grand strategy literature: it is seeking a universal conflict-based view. It lacks emphasis on strategy as a system of contingencies and is lacking in a diversity of possible perspectives.

\(^{22}\) Gray, *Fighting Talk*, p 62.


The need for diversity

In the 1990s, the Copenhagen School opened a broader security perspective by providing a new set of lenses for any security challenge that, among other things, presents security matters where conflict-based approaches are untenable. However, even its founders, Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, recognise that this more diverse approach is not the answer to all security challenges. They aver:

Most worrying...[is the] implicit argument that there is only one correct way to study security. We believe that there are many ways to understand security, and that each will have its merits and its drawbacks. Focusing on any one element will always make some things clearer at the cost of obscuring or distorting others.28

In proposing the exigent need for a diversity of views, the Copenhagen School increases the range of expedients—viable outcomes—that can become available. While an effective strategy is dependent upon a diverse set of options being developed, there is little point in considering numerous approaches if they are all contextually indistinguishable. Furthermore, if the problem is cast too narrowly ergo narrow options and narrow outcomes will ensue. Empirical studies by Varda Liberman, Steve Samuels and Lee Ross demonstrated that the way a problem is framed does significantly affect both the approach taken and the outcome reached.29

While Gray was not a supporter of the Copenhagen School;30 this paper proposes that framing security issues diversely both inside and outside of the presumption of conflict is essential. This broadened approach does not run contrary to his maxim ‘military power is trumps in politics,’31 to use a game metaphor, the player can still choose no trumps. It has been argued here that the conflict-centred, and increasingly turgid grand strategy debate is now redundant, and must be replaced by a more diverse approach that is tailored to each specific context. Strategic planners must learn from but then move beyond the military roots of strategic study and practice.


30 Ripsman, ‘The Emerging Sub-Field of Comparative Grand Strategy’.

31 Gray, Fighting Talk, p 97.
Strategy as a set of expedients

Von Moltke clarifies the importance of expedients by stating:

Strategy is a system of expedients. It is more than a discipline; it is the transfer of knowledge to practical life, the continued development of the original leading thought in accordance with the constantly changing circumstances. 32

Expedients are intrinsically flexible and contextually dependent, and Von Moltke’s definition does not imply that expedients are solely reactive to changing circumstances. Despite this enlightened stance, he is unlikely to have accepted that strategic context could shift away from the lens of conflict. 33

By employing phenomenological underpinnings, the strategist can employ contextual, temporal, relational and ethical considerations in developing successful expedients. Adding to the work of Carr’s ‘temporal’ and Gat’s promotion of the importance of context, this paper proposes two additions: relational and ethical, drawn from both personal experience and the literature.

The following anecdote illustrates the importance of relational insight. Many years ago, at an Indo-Pacific security conference, a South Korean professor gave a remarkably lucid presentation. During question time, a student asked, ‘What is the current South Korean strategy towards North Korea?’ Sage minds in the audience would have jumped to a shopping list of strategies: engagement, appeasement, containment or deterrence. The initial response from the professor, ‘Whatever works,’ illustrates, undeniably, how outcomes can be affected by leadership and are therefore relational.

It is necessary to consider another underpinning: that of ethics. To illustrate in a security setting, the long-term failure of the Arab Spring, and in its wake emerging instability, shows a paucity of ethical deliberation. There is a foundation for the centrality of ethics in strategy as articulated by President John F Kennedy. 34 An ethical framework does not exist to develop moral codes to underpin the legitimacy of previously chosen action but to advance ethical actions which are proximal to the strategy.

These underpinnings alone are insufficient to avoid the same confusion that has clouded the recent debate on grand strategy because a specific focus is

32 Moltke, Moltke on the Art of War: Selected Writings, p 67.
required to correctly frame temporal, contextual, relational and ethical settings of the strategic challenge at hand. The use of these phenomena does not mean the abandonment of ‘classic’ strategic considerations such as geography because geography is contextual with relational and temporal effects.

The accurate labelling of a strategy will additionally greatly assist in achieving this specific focus and avoids the amorphous application of ‘grand’ or any other abstract descriptor. To illustrate hypothetically, the Australian Military Strategy, the United States National Security Strategy and the Chinese Indo-Pacific Economic Strategy more accurately describe the functions of these strategies, rather than using value-laden adjectives such as ‘grand’. Interestingly, these titles are also geographically bound. This proposal to reinforce the discipline of naming strategies based on function is designed to bring clarity as well as to add to the lexicon and adds a specific focus.

In executing strategy, avoidance of the abstract is of exceptional merit, but the military origin of strategy can hinder this. It automatically places strategic design into a frame of conflict and, accordingly, subsumes military concepts, ideas and assets into all manner of security issues: to illustrate, ‘the war on drugs,’ ‘the war on cancer’ and the ‘war on hunger’. This ‘war’ on abstract nouns is what Sir Michael Howard and Terry Jones, both coming from different disciplines, tell us is deeply perilous. Thus, by using military terms (in this case ‘war’), in what are broader problems, the tone immediately becomes adversarial. Furthermore, there is a raft of security areas such as health security, gender security and food security, where military expertise, metaphors and resources are not automatically helpful.

In the context of expedients chosen to address COVID-19, a commentary by Joseph Nye highlights the shortcomings in contemporary American strategy towards what he considers to be adopting a broader view. Nye states:

This administration has shown an inclination toward short-term, zero-sum, transactional interpretations, with little attention to institutions and allies. “America First” is defined too narrowly ... On transnational issues like COVID-19 and climate change, power becomes a positive-sum game. It is not enough to think of American power over others. We must also think in terms of power to accomplish joint goals, which involves power with others. On

many transnational issues, empowering others helps us to accomplish our own goals.36

While Nye’s proposition is insightful in a classic grand strategic sense, it is siloed contextually and ethically. He views the COVID-19 crisis to be about national power and strategic competition. Undoubtedly, there is an impact on national power because of major economic and social shifts. However, the statement is not suitable as the primary, or even secondary contextual lens, for what was a predictable health security threat—to say nothing of the ethical issue of minimizing human suffering. To return to Von Moltke’s admonition that a system of expedients is at the core of strategy, Nye’s statement suffers from a fixed original leading thought that is not context dependent. It fails to consider the transfer of scientific knowledge about the virus, the continually changing circumstances of the pandemic and their impact. The narrow definition of a problem overly relies on the certainties of the past and, to a certain extent, stifles the ability to think creatively. In an age of uncertainty, this can result in overly simple solutions being offered to complex problems.

Conclusion

This paper proposes four underpinnings that should be considered for the creation of a security strategy. These contextual, temporal, relational and ethical underpinnings are necessary for the design of a strategy, and whose title should reflect its’ specific focus. This is a phenomenological framework which uses a diversity of viewpoints and conditions; and departs from a narrow, classic sense of strategy. However, it is not a radical departure because it seeks to build on the fundamentals of strategy.

An essential element in this proposal is the need for specific rather than umbrella strategies of the type inspired by the shifting paradigm of grand strategy. Specificity may often demand a departure from the traditional default of the presumption of conflict and competition. More importantly, specific strategies provide greater utility.

The classic definition of grand strategy and ongoing debate is doing little to improve the quality of strategic planning and, most importantly, its execution. It is undesirable and impossible to arrive at a universal description because strategy will always be fluid and case dependent. Contemporary efforts to do so are detrimental to the sharp and dynamic focus that is essential to the development of an effective strategy.

Gray believed in the primacy of effective strategy, and that ‘prudence is the supreme virtue in statecraft and strategy’\textsuperscript{37} – a warning against narrow viewpoints and fixation upon desirable goals.\textsuperscript{38} Von Moltke’s broad view of strategy as a system of expedients resists such a narrow approach. A system of expedients demands flexibility, diverse knowledge and the courage to depart from existing approaches. Then we might have strategies that could genuinely be considered ‘grand’.

\textsuperscript{37} Gray, \textit{Fighting Talk}, p 131–133.
\textsuperscript{38} Gray, p 131.