

The Necessary Evolution of U.S. Grand Strategy: Learning from the Past to Address Modern Challenges in the Era of Strategic Competition

Description

Introduction

In an [era of increasing global complexity and competition](#), the United States faces unprecedented challenges that require a fundamental reassessment of its grand strategy. As defined by Sir Basil Liddell Hart, the role of [grand strategy](#) is, “to coordinate and direct all the resources of a nation, or band of nations, towards the attainment of the political object of the war—the goal defined by fundamental policy.” Examining historical approaches to national security should inform contemporary strategic thinking, all while acknowledging that modern threats demand innovative solutions that go beyond traditional frameworks. The transformation of the international system from a [unipolar moment following the Cold War to today’s multipolar reality](#) necessitates a comprehensive reevaluation of American strategic priorities and approaches.

Historical Foundations: The Containment Strategy

The Cold War era’s containment strategy, first articulated by George Kennan in his 1947 article in *Foreign Affairs*, “[The Sources of Soviet Conduct](#),” and later formalized in [National Security Council Paper 68](#) (NSC-68), represented a watershed moment in American strategic thinking. This comprehensive approach successfully constrained Soviet expansion through [multiple interconnected mechanisms](#). The strategy established a robust military deterrent through the nascent [North Atlantic Treaty Organization](#) (NATO) and other regional alliances, thus creating a credible counter to Soviet military power. Simultaneously, it leveraged economic tools, including the [Marshall Plan](#), to strengthen democratic allies and create a resilient international order. These efforts were complemented by sophisticated diplomatic initiatives to isolate the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact while building a coalition of democratic nations.

The success of containment demonstrated the effectiveness of patient, multi-dimensional engagement in achieving long-term strategic objectives. However, it is crucial to note that this success came at [significant cost and required sustained commitment](#) across multiple administrations. The strategy’s

effectiveness stemmed from its ability to align domestic resources, international partnerships, and strategic objectives in a coherent and sustainable manner. This alignment proved essential in maintaining American resolve through periods of intense crisis and relative calm.

The containment strategy's success also highlighted the importance of strategic communication in maintaining domestic and international support. Through various initiatives, including the [United States Information Agency](#) and [Radio Free Europe](#), America effectively communicated its values and objectives to global audiences while countering Soviet propaganda. This aspect of the strategy provides valuable lessons for today's information environment, where the battle for narrative dominance has become increasingly crucial.

The [Reagan Doctrine](#) represented both an evolution and intensification of Kennan's containment strategy, moving beyond mere constraint of Soviet influence to actively rolling back communist expansion through support to anti-communist forces worldwide. This more aggressive approach maintained containment's fundamental recognition of the need to integrate multiple instruments of national power, but significantly expanded America's willingness to provide overt military and economic support to insurgent forces in places like [Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, and Nicaragua](#). Reagan's strategy paired this support for anti-communist proxy forces with a massive conventional military buildup, strengthening of key alliances, and promotion of free trade—demonstrating how discrete tactical

actions could serve broader strategic aims.

The strategy's success in accelerating [the Soviet Union's eventual collapse](#) highlighted several enduring principles of effective grand strategy. First, it showed how [supporting local partner forces](#) could achieve strategic objectives at relatively low cost and risk to US forces. Second, it demonstrated the importance of aligning military, economic, and diplomatic efforts—as Reagan's military pressure was amplified by [economic warfare and aggressive diplomacy](#). Third, it revealed how focusing on adversaries' key vulnerabilities (in this case, the [Soviet economy's inability to match US defense spending](#)) could force them to make strategic concessions. These lessons would later influence approaches to counterterrorism and great power competition, though the unique circumstances of the late Cold War meant that not all elements of the Reagan Doctrine would translate directly to future challenges.

The Evolution of Political Warfare

Modern great power competition has evolved beyond traditional military confrontation into a [complex web of political warfare](#). Kennan's May 1948 memorandum on political warfare offered perhaps the clearest articulation of how great powers compete across all domains, defining it as [the logical application of Clausewitz's doctrine in time of peace](#). In his analysis, political warfare was fundamentally the employment of all means at a nation's command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives. This understanding wasn't new from the Monroe Doctrine to Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan's emphasis on [sea power as an economic and diplomatic tool](#), American strategists had long recognized that great power competition demands orchestration of all instruments of national power.

What has fundamentally shifted is not the multidomain nature of this competition, but rather the [revolutionary impact of the information environment](#). While Kennan emphasized overt and covert measures across diplomatic, economic, and military domains—all backed by America's growing power—today's strategic environment is dominated by the unprecedented speed, scope, and accessibility of information. The digital revolution has transformed traditional concepts of political warfare, [creating new vulnerabilities and opportunities in cyberspace](#) while accelerating the pace of influence operations to a degree that would have been unimaginable during the Cold War.

Political warfare in the contemporary context encompasses a [broad spectrum of activities](#) and capabilities, from economic coercion and cyber operations to information manipulation and proxy conflicts. The digital revolution has [transformed the nature of political warfare](#), creating new vulnerabilities and opportunities in cyberspace while accelerating the pace of information operations. Understanding and adapting to these changes is crucial for developing effective strategic responses to modern challenges.

Counterterrorism and the Islamic State: Lessons from Recent History

The Trump Administration's [campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria](#) (ISIS) offers important lessons about the evolution of American strategy in the face of non-state threats. The approach demonstrated the importance of integrating conventional military operations with irregular warfare capabilities to create an effective counterterrorism framework. Much like with the Soviet containment approach, this strategy combined precision military operations with robust partner force development and the [diplomatic, informational, and economic elements of US national power](#), creating a sustainable approach to counterterrorism that acknowledged the limitations of purely military solutions. Throughout 2017 and 2018, I represented the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for

Intelligence as part of the broader interagency team that drafted and then implemented the [“Defeat ISIS” whole-of-government strategy](#), witnessing firsthand an outstanding example of an integrated national strategy.

That strategy highlighted the importance of operational flexibility and the need to adapt strategic approaches to local conditions. The success in degrading ISIS territorial control came through careful coordination of [military pressure, diplomatic engagement with regional partners, and efforts to address underlying governance challenges](#). Most recently, I served as the deputy commander for our NATO Special Operations Advisory Group in Iraq throughout 2022, where we supported the [Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service](#) in maintaining ever-increasing pressure on ISIS remnants following the destruction of its physical caliphate. These experiences provide valuable insights for addressing hybrid threats in other contexts, particularly in regions where state weakness creates opportunities for malign actors.

Contemporary Challenges: A Multi-Threat Environment

Today’s strategic landscape presents a more complex set of challenges than either the bipolar Cold War environment or the post-9/11 focus on counterterrorism. [China represents the most comprehensive challenger to US interests](#), combining rapid military modernization with sophisticated economic statecraft through projects like the [Belt and Road Initiative](#) (BRI), technological competition in critical areas, and information operations that challenge democratic narratives. Both the Trump and Biden administrations’ [National Defense Strategies \(NDS\) listed China in the top tier of global competitors](#). Understanding China’s [“Three Warfares”](#) approach to strategic competition has become so important that my research on this topic is featured in the latest [Army Doctrine Publication 3-13 \(Information\)](#). China’s strategic approach demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of how to leverage economic power for geopolitical advantage, while its military modernization presents increasingly significant challenges to American power projection capabilities in the Indo-Pacific region.

Russia, despite economic limitations, also poses significant challenges to global stability and peaceful competition through military modernization, nuclear capabilities, hybrid warfare tactics, energy diplomacy in Europe, and sophisticated information warfare operations. The [Russian approach to hybrid warfare](#), demonstrated in Ukraine and other theaters, highlights the importance of developing [comprehensive responses to threats](#) that blur traditional distinctions between war and peace. Iran continues to present [regional challenges](#) through its network of proxy forces, nuclear program development, cyber capabilities, and demonstrated resilience to economic sanctions. These diverse challenges require strategies that can address multiple threats simultaneously while maintaining strategic coherence.

The proliferation of advanced technologies has further complicated the strategic landscape. Artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and autonomous systems are [transforming military capabilities and creating new vulnerabilities](#). Meanwhile, the increasing importance of space and cyberspace as domains of competition requires new approaches to deterrence and conflict management.

Irregular Warfare in Strategic Competition

The modern security environment demands adaptation of irregular warfare capabilities to counter adversaries' gray zone activities while maintaining conventional deterrence. This requires developing [sophisticated approaches to proxy warfare, information operations, and economic statecraft](#) that can compete effectively below the threshold of armed conflict. The challenge lies in integrating these capabilities into a coherent strategy that can address both immediate threats and long-term strategic competition.

Success in this environment requires developing [new operational concepts](#) that can effectively combine conventional and irregular capabilities. It also demands new approaches to partnership and coalition building that can sustain long-term competitive efforts while managing escalation risks. The role of special operations [forces must evolve to address the full spectrum of modern conflict](#), from direct action to strategic influence operations.

Toward a New Grand Strategy

Addressing these diverse challenges requires a comprehensive approach to grand strategy, defined by [Sir Basil Liddell Hart](#) as directing all the resources of a nation, or band of nations, towards the attainment of the political object, looking beyond the conflict to the "subsequent peace." Success demands the coordinated application of all elements of national power. In the diplomatic realm, this means strengthening existing alliances while building new partnerships, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. This includes revitalizing traditional alliances like NATO while developing new frameworks for diplomatic, economic, and informational cooperation.

The information domain requires sophisticated capabilities to counter disinformation while promoting democratic values, combining defensive measures against foreign influence operations with [proactive efforts to shape the global narrative](#). This requires not only technical capabilities but also a sophisticated understanding of how to effectively communicate American values and objectives to diverse global audiences.

Military strategy must maintain conventional and nuclear deterrence while developing capabilities for [gray zone competition](#), including investments in emerging technologies and expansion of unique capabilities. The challenge lies in balancing these various requirements while maintaining [force readiness, deployment cycles, and modernization efforts](#).

Economic tools must be deployed strategically, combining [targeted sanctions](#) against adversaries with investment screening mechanisms, [trade agreements](#) that strengthen allies and build strong relationships, and [technology controls in critical sectors](#). Emerging technologies must be central to strategic planning, with particular attention to artificial intelligence applications, quantum computing, space capabilities, and cyber tools for both defensive and offensive operations.

Institutional Reform and Implementation

Effective grand strategy requires institutions with [reformed interagency coordination mechanisms](#) and updated decision-making processes that match the speed of modern challenges. Success in modern conflict requires breaking down traditional institutional barriers and creating more agile organizational structures capable of responding to hybrid threats.

The current national security architecture, largely designed for the Cold War era, must be updated to address modern challenges. This includes developing new mechanisms for coordinating responses to hybrid threats, improving information sharing across agencies and with partners, and creating more effective processes for strategy development and implementation that are more akin to the Cold War era containment approach and my own experience with the [successful Defeat-ISIS strategy](#).

Several significant implementation challenges must be addressed. [Resource constraints](#) require [careful prioritization](#) and sustained funding across multiple domains. Domestic political dynamics necessitate building [consistent policy approaches that can survive transitions](#) between administrations. [Different threat perceptions and priorities](#) among allies complicate coalition building, while technology management demands sophisticated regulatory frameworks that balance innovation with security.

Conclusion

The United States faces a strategic environment more complex than at any point in its history. Success requires learning from both the patient, multi-dimensional approach of containment and the agile, targeted nature of counterterrorism operations. However, these lessons must be adapted to address contemporary challenges.

A new American grand strategy must leverage all elements of national power while maintaining the flexibility to both address current threats while focusing on a desired future global security environment. Such a grand strategy, in addition to describing this preferred future state, must lay out the multidimensional processes, policies, and programs necessary to achieve that outcome across an extended time horizon. This requires institutional reform, technological innovation, and sustained commitment across multiple administrations. Most importantly, it demands recognition that in today's interconnected world, American security and prosperity are inextricably linked to global stability and America's strength within the international order. However the US ultimately [decides to shape the future](#), it will require a coherent grand strategy to make that future a reality.

The path forward requires not only new capabilities and approaches but also a renewed commitment to American leadership in the international system. This leadership must be based on a clear understanding of American interests and values, combined with a realistic assessment of the resources and capabilities required to achieve strategic objectives. Success in this endeavor will require sustained effort, strategic patience, and the ability to build and maintain effective coalitions in an increasingly complex global environment.

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