

National Security Note 3
The debate over US grand strategy

by Carl Ungerer

89

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Walter Russell Mead once described US grand strategy as America's 'project for the world'. And, at various times over the past century, that project has been defined with a high degree of clarity and purpose—perhaps never more so than during the Cold War when George Kennan's strategy of containment was used to confront Soviet expansionism.

Since the end of the Cold War, however, Washington's choice of grand strategy has defied such neat characterisation. President George H W Bush adopted a latin phrase from the US one dollar bill—*novus ordo seclorum* or 'new world order'—as the leitmotif of the immediate post-Cold War era. And, for a brief moment in the early 1990s, the idea of enhanced international cooperation under UN collective security principles seemed possible. Think about Kuwait and Cambodia. But that was only until the Balkans descended into bloody ethnic conflict and geopolitics kicked back into play.

The decade after 2001 has been framed as the 'global war on terror' or, more recently, the 'long war' against religious extremism. But neither captures the essence of America's global strategic interests or goals. The Libyan intervention proves the point.

As America's weak economic situation continues to force policymakers to make hard decisions on future military commitments and plans, the choice of a grand strategic vision becomes even more important.

So in recent weeks, the debate over grand strategy in the US foreign policy community has intensified, reflecting both a frustration with the policy directions of the Obama White House, and a sense that the Tea Party movement is gaining the political ascendancy.

In a recent essay for the prestigious *Foreign Affairs* magazine, Daniel Drezner argues that the Obama administration has pursued two different grand strategies in just under three years in office. The first, which he labels 'multilateral retrenchment', has focused on rebuilding the American middle class and pushing more of the international security burden to allies. And the second he calls 'counter-punching', intervening where necessary (as in Libya) but preferring to 'lead from behind'. If combined, they could possibly form the basis of a coherent strategy. Pursued separately, however, neither one appears sufficient.

Writing in *The Atlantic* magazine, Parag Khanna suggests that the basis of the next US grand strategy must include a combination of technology, sustainability and economic vitality as global politics transitions to a post-colonial world. He argues for a strategy based on exploiting geo-technology, in which America's considerable advantages in education, innovation and technology are harnessed through better use of public-private partnerships. America's contribution to global security, he says, should be one of 'helping others to help themselves'.

In a similar vein, Lawrence Korb, a former Assistant Secretary for Defense in the Reagan administration, argues in favour of an 'offshore balancing' strategy as the first step towards a more sustainable US national security policy. This would involve greater reliance on alliances and allies to deal with local conflicts. And it would seek to shift the focus of America's overseas military commitments from counter-insurgency operations to counter-terrorism. In practical terms, it would involve a reduction in US troop deployments in places like Iraq and Afghanistan and a rapid increase in the use of intelligence-led drone attacks to target specific terrorist organisations.

A common theme throughout much of this debate, on both sides of US politics, is that American grand strategy will increasingly need to rely on allies to share the burden of international security. But that is not a new sentiment. Ever since President Nixon gave his famous press conference in Guam in July 1969, America has placed high expectations on allies to take care of their own military defence.

The Guam Doctrine, however, was also about providing massive military and economic assistance to allies and was the basis of military aid programs to countries such as Saudi Arabia, Israel, Egypt and Taiwan. Today, in the wake of the Arab Spring, and the contraction of the US economy, such aid is no longer either possible or desirable.

So America appears to be heading towards a new kind of Guam Doctrine—one that will privilege allies that are self-reliant and capable of managing complex strategic and military problems within their own geographic spheres of interest, but also willing to pay their own way.

As Australian and US leaders meet this week in San Francisco for the 60th anniversary of the signing of the ANZUS Treaty, Washington could not find an ally anywhere in the world that is more attuned to this emerging grand strategy. The challenge for Canberra is to convert the historical goodwill in the ANZUS alliance into a closer and more effective alliance partnership based on mutual interests and a common vision for the future of the Asia-Pacific century.

[For a discussion of the possible force posture implications of America's emerging strategy, see *Whither US forces? US military presence in the Asia-Pacific and the implications for Australia* by Andrew Davies and Benjamin Schreer, ASPI Policy Analysis, September 2011, available at http://www.aspi.org.au/publications/publication_details.aspx?ContentID=307&pubtype=9.]

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