

Marines from Mike Battery, 4th Battalion, 14th Marines, operate 155mm M198 howitzer in support of Operation *Phantom Fury*, November 2004 (U.S. Marine Corps/Samantha L. Jones)



Toward a Future National Strategy

A Review Essay

By Joseph J. Collins

What could be more important than a nation's strategy? A strategy brings together ends, ways, and means. It assesses costs and risks and establishes priorities. It takes basic guidance and direction from

national policy, but, in turn, strategy guides subordinate plans and policies. It provides a framework that can help us comprehend contextual developments, which, in turn, can reshape the strategy. A consistent strategy is also a

certain trumpet for friends and allies to heed. In our messy democracy, domestic politics and bureaucratic politics will often frustrate strategy, but, in the end, national strategy retains its importance.

For the entire Cold War, we had one overarching national strategy: the containment of our principal enemy, the Soviet Union. Strategic debates on how to contain the Soviet Union were severe and constant, but the aims and framework of the strategy were widely accepted. Containment activities ranged from military operations to subtle diplomacy or foreign aid to the more than occasional covert operation. When the Cold War ended, some claimed that history (and strategy!) had ended, but others argued that the United States had to exploit its "unipolar moment" or otherwise behave, in Madeleine Albright's phrase, as the world's "indispensable nation."

The predominant national strategy that emerged has been called primacy or

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liberal hegemony. During the years of the Bill Clinton administration, this strategy featured engagement and enlargement of the number of democracies, especially in Europe. After failures in Somalia and Rwanda, the domestically focused Clinton team fought low-casualty air wars in Bosnia and Kosovo, followed by peace enforcement operations, which were followed by what came to be known as nation-building. The George W. Bush administration initially rejected nation-building and tried to focus on great power relations, but fate had another path in mind. After the 9/11 attacks, President Bush conducted a retaliatory war against al Qaeda and the Taliban government in Afghanistan, and less than 2 years later, a preventive war against Iraq, presumed to be both a supporter of international terrorism and the holder of weapons of mass destruction stockpiles and research programs. That miscalculation led to a still-compounding tragedy in the Middle East.

The Barack Obama administration made it quite clear that its priorities were ending the war in Iraq and first surging and then drawing down in Afghanistan. The new President was all about exit strategies, with the accent mark on exit and less so on strategy. U.S. strategy encountered a host of new problems. Allied dissatisfaction with the Obama administration appeared to rise as overseas policy problems increased and compounded one another. Today, the United States finds itself war-weary and deficit-ridden, with much of the world dissatisfied with our leadership. We are at a strategic inflection point. What we have been doing no longer works, and the need for a new strategic course is overwhelming.

Three books have performed serious strategic critiques that range from the theoretical to the micro-analytical. Together, they have produced a set of books that should be read by the incoming national security team.

The first book is Ian Bremmer's *Superpower: Three Choices for America's Role in the World*.¹ Bremmer, the founder of the Eurasia Group and a prolific author, argues that we have become increasingly directionless and that Donald

Trump should choose one of three strategies: Independent America, Moneyball America, or Indispensable America. After quizzing the readers about their views, Bremmer artfully takes a chapter to advocate for each of the strategies, later matching the readers' views to their preferences on his quiz.

Independent America, what some would call neo-isolationist America, argues that America is overextended abroad and underfunded at home. In the future, it should forget about being the leader of the free world, lead by example at home, be far less active abroad, and concentrate on improving its infrastructure and economy. This strategy option, as written, even rejects regional and global trading arrangements. For Independent America, "national security begins at home," and to protect the homeland, we have to invest in public infrastructure, border protection, and homeland defense.

Moneyball America—despite the catchy title—is actually a strategy guided by finite, prudent realism, "a cold-blooded, interest-driven approach that redefines America's role in the world in a way designed to maximize the return on the taxpayer's investment" (89). Aiming directly at both security and prosperity simultaneously, Moneyball America demands more prudent interventionary choices, a focus on vital interests, prudent negotiations, the use of sanctions, and, occasionally, leading from behind. It takes its direction on using force from the Colin Powell and Casper Weinberger doctrines. In Bremmer's formulation, this strategy emphasizes trade, especially in the Asia-Pacific region. Overall, Moneyballers argue for humility: "America is *not* an exceptional nation. America is the most powerful, but that doesn't mean that it's always right. We are not all-knowing, and the universal benefit is never our concern" (119).

Indispensable America, which takes its names from Madeleine Albright's oft-used phrase, is a strategy that is oriented on global leadership, engagement, and, where necessary, intervention. This strategy is frequently referred to as liberal hegemony or primacy. It is long-term in its perspective: "Today's globalized world

of overlapping commitments, interests, and rivalries demands the kind of long-term strategic thinking that a Moneyball approach, with its focus on limited investment in limited goals for near-term results, can never produce. How many American (and global) problems are the result of short-term thinking" (137)? Advocates of Indispensable America are globally focused, activist, and oriented on both standing up to and engaging China and Russia. American values loom large in this strategy, and expanding the number and vitality of democracies around the world is also part of the approach. Bremmer's advocacy for this option concludes:

Seven U.S. presidents, Democrats and Republicans, followed their [Truman and Eisenhower's] lead. When Soviet communism finally collapsed, democracy, freedom of speech, and free-market capitalism began the next phase of their global advance. Imagine the cost to the world if America decides that the job is now finished—that Americans will no longer fight for these values (158).

Bremmer, an internationalist, surprises the reader in his last chapter when he—almost reluctantly—opts for the neo-isolationist, Independent America, with the addition of an added plank on more international trade. In the conclusion, however, he puts aside his own preferences and insists that the key thing for the Trump administration is to choose a single strategy and to follow it consistently: "The worst choice of all is to refuse to choose, because I don't believe we can continue to improvise our foreign policy. We're confusing our allies, our rivals, and the American people with an incoherent approach to an increasingly dangerous world" (191).

Bremmer's short book is earnest, clever, and appeals to a wide audience. Its laser-like focus on the elements of each of the three strategies is terrific, but the student of international affairs and the policy wonk need more detail to add meat to the strategic frameworks that he so artfully builds.

Barry Posen's *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* adds theoretical and practical detail to the debate over future strategy.² It also goes one step further than Bremmer: Posen includes a military strategy, a force structure, and a useful risk analysis. Posen is a senior professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a prolific academic writer on national security issues. His book, published in 2014, is a cousin to Bremmer's *Moneyball* strategy. Motivated by perceived failures such as the enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the war in Kosovo, and the Iraq War, Posen concludes that "the United States has grown incapable of moderating its ambitions in international politics. Since the collapse of Soviet power, it has pursued a grand strategy that can be called 'Liberal Hegemony,' which is unnecessary, counterproductive, costly, and wasteful" (xi). Posen's prescription is a strategy of restraint that is focused on realism, vital interests, and prudence.

In his tightly reasoned book, Posen is concerned with international relations theory, strategy development, and the record of current efforts to secure our national security. He takes the reader through the ascent of liberal hegemony, the rise of neoconservatism, and changes in the international system, which he maintains will further frustrate liberal hegemonists. He finds our large Armed Forces and frequent interventions overseas to be costly and ill-advised, especially in the Middle East. In many places, U.S. forces, a potential solution, can easily become a significant problem.³ He is also tough on our "cheap riding" or "reckless driver" allies (35–44). Posen concludes that the costs of liberal hegemony have far exceeded its benefits and that the overactive strategy is "unnecessary given our strong, inherent security position" (65).

Posen argues that this wasteful, dysfunctional strategy should be replaced by a strategy of restraint that is focused on the balance of power in Eurasia, managing the threat of nuclear weapons, and "suppressing terrorist organizations that have global ambitions" (69). This would

entail a reduction in "political commitments and military deployments" and transitioning many regional burdens to our allies over a decade. Posen treats every region of the globe in some detail, but in all, U.S. allies receive tough love under the strategy of restraint. For example, over time, Israel would lose its multibillion-dollar U.S. defense subsidies. Posen also concedes that some of our major allies might have to become nuclear powers in the process of reestablishing regional balances. His proposals for fighting violent terrorist movements are balanced, even if less detailed than his thoughts about major powers. (The advent of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant [ISIL] occurred after this book was written.)

Posen's national strategy of restraint comes with a military strategy that focuses on "command of the commons," sea, air, and space, an idea that he put forward in 2003. (He says little about cyberspace, although it could easily be adapted to his strategy.) A focus on control of the commons would reduce military personnel strength by 20 percent, and spending from around 4 percent of gross domestic product to about 2.5 percent. He would reduce all the Services, including the Navy, the keystone in his maritime strategy. Posen admits that a strategy of restraint might encourage nuclear proliferation. He wisely posits at least a decade for transitional activities.

In my view, Posen's military strategy and force structure are risky. The military strategy relies on the good offices of allies whom we no longer would serve with on the ground. A smaller, mostly mobile offshore force would be a weaker deterrent and a reactive warfighting entity. Such a force would have less slack for multiple contingencies and carry with it an increased risk of running out of means even when pursuing limited ends. Accordingly, a markedly smaller force also carries a higher risk of defeat if it arrives too small or too late to get the job done. Today, markedly building down U.S. forces as China and Russia improve theirs may create an impression of weakness.

Posen's recommendations, however, made sense for his restraint strategy when it was written, but may need to be modified to take into consideration aggressive changes in Chinese and Russian behaviors, as well as operations against ISIL. Similarly, writing in 2012–2013, Posen might want to reconsider his argument that U.S. troops should be withdrawn on schedule from Afghanistan, "no matter what develops" (127). Posen is wary of China, but does not support suggestion by "offensive realists" to contain it or foster a "preventive cold war" (171).

The strategy of restraint is a potential alternative to liberal hegemony, selective engagement, or a "fortress America" approach. Posen's approach is consistent, well-reasoned, and comprehensive. He also has owned up to the risks inherent in changing strategies and implicitly encouraging nuclear proliferation. It is a book for the serious student of global affairs, while Bremmer's breezier tone is better suited to the general reader.

In the past few years, President Obama captured some of the spirit of the restraint strategy with little of its rigor or consistency. He has drastically reduced forces fighting in the Long War from a few hundred thousand to less than 20,000, total, in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan. While the inelegant "leading from behind" was never officially doctrine, Obama tried to give allies and partners greater space to exercise initiative. On his watch, however, the security situation in Iraq and Afghanistan deteriorated, the civil war in Syria turned Europe and the Middle East upside down, and ISIL, the successor to al Qaeda in Iraq, established a proto-caliphate and extended its tentacles into Asia and North Africa. As its battlefield prospects have worsened, ISIL has expanded its anti-Western terrorist operations with dedicated operatives or otherwise with Internet-inspired actors or small groups. On President Obama's watch, Libya and Yemen also fell into turmoil. The last book in this trilogy—Robert Kaufman's *Dangerous Doctrine: How Obama's Grand Strategy Weakened America*—addresses this problem set.⁴



Nuclear weapon test Dakota on Enewetak Atoll, 1956 (National Nuclear Security Administration)

Professor Kaufman is on the faculty of Pepperdine University. His book is a scholarly, conservative, and polite but powerful critique of the Obama grand strategy. He rejects notions that Obama is either a pure realist or idealist, and he asserts—like Bremmer in his advocacy for an Indispensable America—that “President Obama has imprudently abandoned the venerable tradition of muscular internationalism emblematic of Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Reagan, and both Bushes” (4). He notes that Obama has turned his back on the U.S. role, in Josef Joffe’s term, “as the world’s default power” (4). Kaufman writes that the “Obama Doctrine” of retrenchment has the following tenets:

- Protect the world and the United States from the arrogance of American power too often justified by extravagant claims of American exceptionalism.
- Embrace multilateralism rather than unilateralism or narrow coalitions of the willing.
- Minimize the salience of regime type or ideology.

- Use force sparingly, proportionally, multilaterally, for limited goals, with limited means, and only as a last resort.
- Rely more on soft power rather than on hard power. Focus more on the danger of terrorism, nuclear proliferation generally, humanitarian concerns, and unconventional threats rather than on the imperatives of traditional geopolitics.
- Realize that the emergence of other power centers makes a substantial devolution of American responsibilities possible.
- Build bridges to engage and conciliate actual and potential rivals (10–26).

Kaufman runs this doctrine up against international relations theories and concludes that Obama’s “original and largely coherent synthesis draws on multiple sources and experiences” (60). He concludes later that this synthesis “appropriates the most problematical features of these paradigmatic features without their countervailing values” (183).

Having addressed theory, Kaufman takes the reader around the world.

Kaufman argues that Obama flubbed U.S.-Russian relations and handled Putin poorly. He concludes, “President Obama fundamentally misjudged the character of Russia’s increasingly nasty, authoritarian, and assertive regime, the grandiosity of Russia’s swelling ambitions, and the inability of democratic Europe to counter them without strong American leadership stressing muscular deterrence rather than conciliatory engagement” (72). Kaufman finds that Obama has failed to lead our European allies or even maintain their trust. (Of late, NATO has begun to beef up its presence in Eastern Europe, but Kaufman would likely see it as too little and awfully late.)

In the Middle East and Afghanistan, Kaufman finds Team Obama focused on strategic withdrawal and not war winning. In Libya, President Obama led from behind, and despite the Arab Spring, the President gave a low priority to promoting democracy. Where he did support a democratically elected government in Egypt, he was slow to see the danger of its Islamist bent. He has cozied up to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey and ignored his authoritarian tendencies. The security situation in Iraq deteriorated rapidly in Iraq during the Obama administration. In Afghanistan, the security situation today is even more troubled than when Obama took office. Kaufman decries the Iran deal, but some of his more dire projections have not come to pass. Finally, Team Obama delivered the Libyan people from Muammar Qadhafi’s oppression into chaos. The debacle in Benghazi was in part the result of a failure to follow up a successful multilateral humanitarian intervention with effective assistance to the new government of Libya.

By the sixth chapter, the reader is not surprised to read that Kaufman believes that Obama’s pivot toward Asia has been a bust. He argues, “President Obama’s Asia policy has de-emphasized traditional geopolitical rivalry, elevated climate change as a priority rather than a peripheral security issue, and emphasized diplomacy rather than hard power in fashioning an Asian pivot that remains more rhetoric than reality” (145). Like

Bremmer and Posen, Kaufman is wary of China's growing power, but he emphasizes that the roots of this problem are in China's authoritarian political system. In any case, Kaufman rails against China for behaving aggressively and Obama for focusing on spreading optimism and soft power in the region. He cites influential sources that assert that the United States is losing its military edge in the region. Kaufman also notes that a "neglect of India ranks high on the list of the Obama administration's foreign policy mistakes" (178). He concludes that the Asia pivot, like the Syria red line, was typical of Obama's "words without meaning . . . commitments without follow-up, phrases without plans" (184).

In his conclusion, Kaufman returns to Josef Joffe's phrase and recommends that the United States behave as "the world's default power," strengthen its defenses, and conduct its affairs with a keen sense of regime types, that is, favoring democracies and furthering democratic values. He recommends a "grand strategy anchored in moral democratic realism" that embraces American exceptionalism and behaves with prudence as its paramount value (191–198). Needless to add, Posen and Bremmer would take issue with these conclusions. For Posen, Kaufman's strategic recommendations are the source of America's problems abroad.

Merlin the Magician could not square all the contending circles drawn by these three authors. While they all recommend strategic change, they disagree widely on that change, with Bremmer advocating an inward-looking Independent America, Posen calling for a realist strategy of restraint, and Kaufman recommending a strategy akin to primacy, which he calls moral democratic realism. Other scholars have added to the list of possible strategies: Brandeis's Robert Art, writing in 2003, rigorously evaluated various options and recommended a strategy of selective engagement, which falls between restraint and liberal hegemony.⁵ Frank Hoffman of the National Defense University (NDU), a decade after Art, had his own hybrid strategy, which he called forward partnering.⁶ President Trump will and should choose a single

consistent yet flexible strategy, but if history is a guide, the President is not likely to follow a specific international relations theory. The result may well look like some sort of combination of the recommended strategies in these three books and the other sources mentioned, above.

What prudent strategic advice can we leave for President Trump and his national security team? First, the next U.S. strategy will not be like the Cold War's containment. It will not have a single, primary focal point. U.S. domestic needs will compete with security challenges, which will emanate from major powers, like Russia and China; revisionist regional powers, like Iran and North Korea; and transnational threats, like international terrorist movements and illicit criminal networks. The pace of change also seems to be accelerating. Strategy and the security environment are interactive. Change in one will be reflected in the other.

President Dwight Eisenhower was fond of repeating an old Army adage: plans are nothing; planning is everything. In that regard, a future strategy will have to have relatively constant objectives with the flexibility to change ways and means. Strategists will have to become masters of multi-scenario thinking.⁷ Strategy will chart the course, but change will be constant and often discontinuous. Of course, there is a danger here: a strategy that changes rapidly or dysfunctionally can risk appearing feckless or confuse friend and foe alike.

Second, the next strategy should begin with an exhaustive analysis of the security environment, including challenges and opportunities. Next, it will need to have an elaborate, prioritized set of national security objectives. The hard arguments in the next national strategy development are likely to come in determining the "hows" of the strategy. Bremmer, Posen, and Kaufman's work would suggest that some of the key questions include:

- Does the United States maintain global engagement and force presence, limit its presence to a few key regions, or adopt a fully offshore posture?

- How can the United States ensure that its allies do their fair share?
- How should the United States balance its defense priorities among preparing for great power contingencies, continuing to fight terrorists, and contending with rogue regional powers?
- What role should regional and global trading arrangements play in U.S. strategy?
- What percent of U.S. national product can we afford to spend on national security, and how will we control entitlement spending and the national debt to allow for a robust defense, improvements to our crumbling infrastructure, and other validated Federal programs?

Third, with an eye to the future, strategists should also mine the past for lessons. In the past year, a team at NDU worked on the strategic lessons of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The effort has borne great fruit and deserves to be replicated for other cases.⁸ Henry Kissinger tells us that history teaches by analogy.⁹ Strategic wisdom can come only from the knowledge of many cases and the ability to compare them contextually. International relations theory is a useful tool, but Goethe tells us in *Faust* that "all theory, my friend, is gray, but green is the golden tree of life." The danger may arise if cases are made to fit into existing theories rather than being used to refine or modify them.

Fourth, strategic analysis teaches the importance of assumptions, from the grand to the petty. Strategic assumptions must be continually tested and strategies adjusted appropriately. Opinions and assertions can also be problematic. For example, Posen, in arguing for his strategy of restraint, asserts on the first page of his book that the United States is "incapable of moderating its ambitions in international politics" (xi), but President Obama has made a serious attempt to do just that. Some, like Kaufman, might add that Team Obama has often been *too* restrained. Moreover, Bremmer and Posen both assert that NATO expansion has been dysfunctional and is a factor in



Remains of "Iron Curtain" in Czech Republic, 2014 (Courtesy Marcin Szala)

Russia's increasing aggressiveness. There are other possible explanations. Instead, Russian policy may be motivated by Putin's misguided machismo, or its historical habit of attempting to dominate its neighbors, or a desire to control its near abroad and restore territory lost at the dissolution of the Soviet Union. For my part, I could not imagine the evolution of democracies in East Europe without NATO expansion and the Partnership for Peace, which both have allowed East European militaries to evolve beyond the Soviet model. In strategic affairs, facts are often illusive or subject to complex qualifications, far beyond what will fit on a bumper sticker or a talking point. Opinions asserted as facts and sensitive assumptions will remain normal parts of the human condition, and they can inhibit progress toward improved strategy and policy.

Fifth, future strategists and policy-makers will have to deal with the problem of dealing with authoritarian states and false democracies. Authoritarian regimes, such as Russia and China, are not subject to the brake of public opinion. Their leaders do not face free and fair elections where people can reward or punish bad decisions. The rule of law in such states is replaced by the rule of one person or a small group of people. Freedom of the

press is sharply curtailed. The growing assertiveness of Putin and Xi Jinping add to this concern. The United States must be wary of such states, even when they temporarily act in consonance with our interests. At the same time, these three books have each given testimony to the difficulties of nation-building or attempting to export democracy. The danger of false democrats, like Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood ruler Mohamed Morsi and now Turkey's Erdoğan is yet another complicating problem.

Finally, even the best of strategies cannot be an infallible guide for a future President to make specific decisions. Often, a reasonable strategic initiative, like the Russia "reset," will fall on deaf ears, or, like the Asia pivot, be slowed by critics, distractions, or more pressing priorities. A forward-thinking President may have a fine strategy but never escape the effects of his predecessors' mistakes. For example, the legacy of the invasion of Iraq, now 13 years past, will still be a major factor in the next President's foreign policy.

The strategist will also have to leave room for chance, accidents, and luck. The greatest modern strategist, Otto von Bismarck, argued for strategic flexibility and humility when he asserted, "a Statesman . . . must wait until he hears the

steps of God sounding through events, then leap up and grasp the hem of His garment."¹⁰ Here is hoping that President Trump is listening and ready to leap. JFQ

Notes

¹ Ian Bremmer, *Superpower: Three Choices for America's Role in the World* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2015).

² Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

³ This theme is nicely developed in David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), xiii–38.

⁴ Robert Kaufman, *Dangerous Doctrine: How Obama's Grand Strategy Weakened America* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016).

⁵ See Robert Art, *A Grand Strategy for America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

⁶ Frank Hoffman, "Forward Partnership: A Sustainable American Strategy," *Orbis* (Winter 2013), 20–40. For an additional source that argues that the United States has much continuity in its grand strategy, see R.D. Hooker, Jr., *The Grand Strategy of the United States*, INSS Strategic Monograph (Washington, DC: NDU Press, October 2014).

⁷ The classical text that employs multiple-scenario long-range planning is Peter Swartz, *Art of the Long View: Planning for the Future in an Uncertain World* (New York: Currency Doubleday, 1996).

⁸ Richard D. Hooker, Jr., and Joseph J. Collins, eds., *Lessons Encountered: Learning from the Long War* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2015).

⁹ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 27.

¹⁰ This quotation can be found at www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/o/ottovonbis134221.html. A longer version is in Chas. Freeman, *The Diplomat's Dictionary* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 1994), 361.