

# America Needs a Grand Strategy

*The Honorable Robert L. Wilkie*

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Anglo-American tradition of grand strategy in foreign policy has been essential to success against major threats. Currently, the U.S. does not have one.

America's inherited role as the leader of the liberal world gives it a unique advantage and responsibility to defend the free and open global commons.

The Biden Administration has been weak in its support for allies and resistance to threats. It's time for a strategy that shows America is not in decline.

Dwight Eisenhower famously said, “The plan is nothing, planning is everything.” In other words, a nation must create a conceptual framework from which international actions and answers will flow. Grand strategy is just that, a reference from which a nation’s historical, cultural, economic, diplomatic, and military thought is brought to bear to create a strategic synthesis. The English military theorist Sir Basil Liddell Hart opined that “grand strategy forces policymakers to look beyond the war to the subsequent peace.”

Grand strategy is the highest level of national statecraft that establishes how states prioritize and mobilize sources of power to ensure what they perceive as their interests.

Without such a synthesis defining the national interest, policymaking is reactive, often haphazard,

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and always dangerous. We are then reduced to President Barack Obama summing up his strategic outlook in cable news sound bites—“Don’t do stupid stuff”—while muddling from crisis to crisis. So, as the unipolar world has disintegrated, the question begs: Do we want to be like Ike, or flounder like Barack or Joe Biden?

Without such a synthesis defining the national interest, policymaking is reactive, often haphazard, and always dangerous.

## Origin of the Concept

Dr. David Morgan-Owen, writing for Kings College, argues that the modern concept of grand strategy was not born in the aftermath of the two great world wars or the twilight conflict with communism, but with the struggle of Imperial London to control the “Empire’s anxieties over its global security challenges,” particularly highlighted by Britain’s dealings with the emerging German Empire.

**British Dominance.** Even at the height of Imperial Germany’s ambitions in the late 19th century, Kaiser William I and his chancellor Otto von Bismarck were haunted by the one power their nation dared not challenge—Great Britain. On the European chessboard, the island kingdom wielded her economic and military might at any time and place of her choosing. Such strategic flexibility had already laid Napoleon low and was a clear warning to Berlin.

During the Congress of Berlin in 1878, called to settle the aftermath of the Russo–Turkish War, Bismarck, whose armies had already conquered Denmark, Austria, and France in less than a decade, would not even proffer a suggestion unless it had been blessed by Queen Victoria’s first minister, Benjamin Disraeli. Indeed, upon the old conjurer’s arrival at the Berlin summit, the laconic Bismarck yelled across the Hall: “There is the Man!”

Reginald Brett, Lord Esher, confidant of King Edward VII, was able to contrast the differences in strategic outlook between the global British superpower and its European-centric rival Imperial Germany. Writing in 1904, Esher noted that the issues confronting Berlin were “simple and stable compared with those affecting our world-wide Empire[,] and they are purely military,” whereas there is “hardly any point on the earth’s surface

which can change ownership, and certainly not a modification in the relative power of two foreign states, can take place without affecting the National Strategy of Great Britain.”

**The United States Inherits the Leadership Mantle.** Shortly after he was unceremoniously dismissed by the vainglorious young Kaiser William II, Bismarck was asked for his vision of the coming 20th Century. The iron Prussian tersely said, “The North Americans speak English.” He envisioned the might of the British Empire that reached every continent and ocean slowly transferred to the young American colossus with its limitless manpower and industrial genius. Britannia ruled the waves, and so, too, would the United States.

Britain and the United States capitalized first on providential geography (in Britain’s case, an island fortress last successfully invaded in 1066 and one that expanded its economic power behind the shield of the Royal Navy) and a worldview based on securing the global commons for free trade. Each traditionally had small standing armies until the two world wars forced them away from simply policing the commons to destroying (sometimes kinetically) the continental might of successive German Reichs, Imperial Japan, and the Soviet Union. Upon Britain’s exhaustion from victory in World War II, the United States comprehensively inherited the mantle of global military, cultural, and economic leadership.

**The Soviet Threat.** The collapse of the Soviet Union was seismic for strategic thought; the end of history was nigh. In 1993, then-National Security Advisor Anthony Lake said that the challenge for American policymakers was to win the new “Kennan Sweepstakes.” Lake referenced the “Long Telegram,” written on February 22, 1946, by George Kennan, then a young American diplomat in the Soviet Union, who warned the State Department as to the mortal threat Moscow posed to the post-world war order.

The Telegram’s prescience is as powerful today as it was when written under Stalin’s nose:

We have here a political force committed fanatically to the belief that with US there can be no permanent *modus vivendi*, that it is desirable and necessary that the internal harmony of our society be disrupted, our traditional way of life be destroyed, the international authority of our state be broken, if Soviet power is to be secure. This political force has complete power of disposition over energies of one of world’s greatest peoples and resources of world’s richest national territory, and is borne along by deep and powerful currents of Russian nationalism. In addition, it has an elaborate and far flung apparatus for exertion of its influence in other countries, an apparatus of amazing flexibility

and versatility, managed by people whose experience and skill in underground methods are presumably without parallel in history.... [H]ow to cope with this force [is] undoubtedly the greatest task our diplomacy has ever faced and probably the greatest it will ever have to face.

At the time of the Telegram, the Soviet Union had already subjugated Eastern Europe and was planning to take control of the Bosphorus, displace Britain as the predominant power in Greece, and ensure communist control of the eastern Mediterranean. With post-war blinders off, President Truman announced that “it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.” The Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan were born, and America slowly turned its attention to the twilight struggle with Soviet communism.

Kennan’s clear-eyed assessment of the brutish Soviet regime was the foundation for 45 years of the containment of Moscow and the eventual triumph of the American ideal. Lake argued we needed a replacement.

## **New Grand Strategy Needed**

We certainly do not have one. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, we have travelled from George H. W. Bush’s New World Order to America First. For the current Administration, “Don’t do stupid stuff” is the only operative guidance. As we speak, tomes are flowing from the pro-Biden think tanks and Oxbridge and Ivy League lounges that Lake was wrong. America does not need a grand strategy since that only works in a predictable political environment such as the bipolar world of the United States and the Soviet Union. Such thinking is divorced from historical and practical reality. Can anyone name a period since Waterloo that was peacefully predictable for the Anglosphere powers? Empires and dictators have come and gone; small wars have continually erupted, sapping national energy; economic turmoil roiled the planet; and those same Oxbridge and Ivy dons continue to gleefully predict the fall of the liberal experiment.

The 1970s were a case in point. The world assumed that the United States was on an inevitable decline riven by problems at home and indecisiveness abroad. Jimmy Carter apologized for America. The academics argued, as they do now, that we had entered the Thucydides trap, with America as Athens and Russia as Sparta. Moscow made the mistake of underestimating American resilience, and Ronald Reagan stepped forward with a cold and honest assessment of Soviet weakness and an economic and military vision

that brought Moscow to its knees. (As an aside, then-Senator Biden's woeful track record began during that decade, and, as former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates put it, set the stage for him being "wrong about every major national security issue for 40 years.")

The bromide is that a battleplan never survives first contact with the enemy. However, that does not negate the necessity of having that plan in place so that the commander's organization understands his intent and what resources must be marshalled to see that objectives are met. Battle planning conditions the mind. The same holds for the international arena.

**America's Unique Position.** Before we start, there must be an acceptance of America's unique position as the lodestar of a liberal world order. To lead, you must first understand America's history and like the country you serve. It is not clear if that is the case with this Administration, at least judging by its reactions to China's global provocations and Beijing's haranguing of the Secretary of State at a March conference in Alaska. The Chinese Foreign Minister embarrassed Mr. [Anthony] Blinken by simply repeating President Biden's own woke critique of America, noting the need for Black Lives Matter and condemning America's suppression of human rights within her own borders. *The Wall Street Journal* posited that the Chinese made clear that "after the Trump years, Beijing wants a return to the policy of Obama accommodation to China's global advances."

## How can America cope with a rampant China or Persia's theocratic fanatics when her own leaders do not believe that the country is worth defending even rhetorically?

Mr. Blinken retreated in the face of the onslaught, mouthing faculty lounge pieties about America's "imperfections." His inability to be anything but defensive about his own country sets the tone for what to expect in the next three years. How can America cope with a rampant China or Persia's theocratic fanatics when her own leaders do not believe that the country is worth defending even rhetorically? If they will not stand for a nation grounded in the universal principles of human dignity and individual freedom and the one nation in history to offer a helping hand to all the peoples of the world including our enemies, where will they stand?

In formulating a global strategy, start from the premise that the United States remains the dominant, military, economic, and cultural power in the world. To paraphrase Lord Esher, there is hardly any point on the Earth's surface which can change ownership, and certainly not a modification in the relative power of two foreign states can take place without affecting the national strategy of the United States.

**Defending the Global Commons.** Despite chaotic times, America's basic strategic posture has not changed since Thomas Jefferson's presidency. The protection of the liberal world order is essential for the continued safety and prosperity of the American nation. The freedom to navigate the global commons has expanded beyond its 19th-century sea lanes to include air, space, and cyber. Britain's Georgian and Victorian strategic imperative was to prevent a single power from dominating the European continent. For the United States, it means preventing one nation or a combination thereof from dominating any one of the commons. Even during the rivalry with the Soviet Union, the prospect of defending the commons was conceptually easy. However, the rise of China, revanchist Russia, and militant Islam convinced many that the world is far too complicated for traditional strategic thinking.

At the turn of the 20th century, Britain's industrial and military dominance was waning. Multiple power centers were emerging around the globe—America, Germany, Japan, and a rapidly industrializing Russia. Populations in the Empire were restless, and conflicts like the Boer War were sapping British energy. Whitehall had to pivot, albeit without losing sight of its grand strategy—protect the commons and deny one-power domination of the continent. London entered military and commercial alliances with France, Russia, and Japan and, more importantly, ended its competitive antagonism with the United States. British diplomacy stressed cooperation, not benign hegemony. As a result, when the ultimate challenge came in the middle of the century, Churchill was able to promise the Axis that the new world with all its might would come to the rescue of the old. It worked.

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**Strengthening Alliances.** China represents a more ominous threat than Germany did 120 years ago. If we are to adjust to this reality, we must pivot as the British did and as Harry Truman did by breaking America's historic aversion to permanent alliances by forming NATO in 1949. China is surrounded by nations with thousand-year memories of Chinese aggression and imperialism. In the last 60 years, China has fought wars with Vietnam (it lost) and India. Those nations, as well Japan, Korea, Australia, Singapore, New Zealand, Malaysia, and even the Philippines are searching for an American alliance to protect them from the new mandarins. Strengthening them weakens Beijing.

**Setbacks Under the Current Administration.** Sadly, it did not take the Biden Administration long to signal American weakness in the Pacific. It sent the Secretary of Defense to Asia to reassure allies with memories of Obama-era indifference that President Biden is cut from a different cloth. Secretary [Lloyd] Austin offered one hand in friendship while the other was cutting an already stretched defense budget. The incongruity was not lost on nations looking to stand together with Washington to prevent Chinese military dominance of the Pacific.

Then came a disaster in Kabul that made the world think that Jimmy Carter would have done better. The worldview that wrecked Afghanistan applies to the broader Middle East where Arab states buried age-old animosities toward Israel to stand together against the mullahs in Tehran. Throwing away years of progress, the Biden White House signaled that it would return to the Obama-era appeasement of Iran and its proxies.

When Biden decided to pull out of Afghanistan, he didn't bother to consult with our British allies over the timing of the withdrawal. He then refused to accept Boris Johnson's calls for 36 hours after Kabul fell to the Taliban.

More than 450 of Her Majesty's troops gave their lives in Afghanistan fighting alongside Americans, just as they did on the Western Front, Normandy, and Korea. Yet that was not enough to warrant a simple phone call.

For 80-plus years, the U.S.–U.K. alliance has selflessly offered a helping hand to all the peoples of the free world. Nothing in history compares to it. And Joe Biden is ripping it asunder.

For the rest of Europe, the message is also retreat. The Trump Administration halted Russian aggression in Ukraine by providing Kiev with weapons that killed Putin's tanks, helicopters, and planes. Obama and Biden only offered meals ready to eat—hardly a deterrent to the KGB colonel in Moscow. The Biden–Harris Administration unilaterally halted the flow of military supplies to Ukraine, in the hope that Moscow would reciprocate. Putin in the meantime continues to wage war on the cyber commons vital to American security.

In London, our most important ally was left flabbergasted by a President who could not comprehend that Northern Ireland was a constituent part of the United Kingdom, not a province of the Irish Republic. The Canadians are reeling from the loss of thousands of oil and gas jobs as America relinquished its energy independence with the stroke of a presidential pen.

**America, the Indispensable Actor.** All of this means that America is now led by those who believe they exist to manage national decline not to lead the world. Can anyone imagine Xi Jinping, [Vladimir] Putin, or [Ali] Khamenei yelling, “There is the Man!” when Joe Biden enters the room? Developing a clear set of strategic guidelines would signal to the world that America is engaged, and that national decline is not our mindset.

Grand strategy in the Anglo-American historical tradition is not a panacea; international relations is always riven with uncertainty. There will always be a Vietnam or a September 11. But if we develop a system of intellectual norms around which we can agree, beginning with the understanding that America is the indispensable actor on the world stage and that defense at home begins with marshaling our resources to defend the commons and erect a cordon sanitaire around our enemies, the chances of us muddling through from crisis to crisis will be greatly diminished. We will not simply avoid “stupid stuff”; we will pay homage to Ike—planning is everything.

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