

The (Near) Impossibility of a Coherent National Strategy, and Why That Is Okay

Written by Jason Schultz

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JASON SCHULTZ, JUL 24 2017

One doesn't have to look far to read about how the United States lacks a strategy. Whether it is Senator John McCain lamenting that there is no strategy to defeat ISIS, that we either have a weak or nonexistent strategy for North Korea, or that the US has struggled to develop a Grand Strategy or even a coherent strategy for China, one would assume that the US is simply adrift in an ocean of competing strategic demands that overwhelm policymakers and those who would endeavor to develop coherent strategy. However, those who would point at examples such as NSC 68 as the epitome of a Grand Strategy should consider that times have changed, that the world has become more complex, and that every action in favor of US interests in one arena likely lead, directly or indirectly, to actions that harm US interests in other arenas. As the world becomes more complex, particularly in regards to US foreign policy and strategy, developing a coherent strategy that fits a neat set of goals may simply be a near impossibility. This is driven by the reality that the US rarely, if ever, acts alone, that economic interdependence is ubiquitous with countries that would otherwise be adversaries, and that actions are likely to cause long-term cascading effects.

Operations and actions since 9/11 are key indicators that the US will seek to maintain treaty obligations or form coalitions prior to taking any action. This is evident in the enduring nature of NATO, the "Coalition of the Willing," and in the premises found in the Army Operating Concept, which acknowledges the multinational aspect of operations as one of its assumptions. Bilateral and multilateral treaty organizations provide assurance of effort should the need arise. Coalitions provide resources while primarily providing legitimacy. However, both types of partnership also add complexity to operations, as each member nation will seek to achieve their own desired outcomes. Adding further complexity, attempting to operate in a coalition that includes only partial sets of treaty partners can be especially daunting. This can be especially difficult when overlapped with economic concerns.

The United States has become economically intertwined with China to the point of what is now being labeled "Mutually Assured Economic Destruction." While this may seem quirky, it is a legitimate concern that also constrains action. In the interest of brevity, China serves as an outstanding example (other examples are easy to develop). Take action in North Korea. For any action the US may want to take, China has a keen ability to constrain that action. First, China has veto power in the UN security council. Should the US decide to go further, there is the possibility of an overall trade war. Additionally, China can persuade the US using other means in the short term. While this was once the realm of China's market dominance of rare earth elements (which may have passed), skilled manufacturing, particularly machinists, is now a short-term economic threat should the US need it. As with treaty obligations and coalitions, the additional complexity of globalization of markets has made coherent action more difficult. What helps in one area may hinder in others.

Additionally, there is the hesitation that derives from the realization that actions in one arena may produce unanticipated actions in another arena. While NATO argues that its expansion has nothing to do with current Russian aggression, other sources easily argue otherwise. Long-term US actions in the Philippines may have led to the rise of its current President, who ostensibly hates America. He has even gone so far as to court China at times. Further, US actions in Iraq, NATO actions in Libya, and international actions in Egypt may have contributed to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's decision to continue the civil war instead of stepping aside based on the end results for the leaders of the other nations. Actions taken in one realm, whether diplomatic or economic, cause unpredictable

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reactions elsewhere.

Bottom line: it's not just that grand strategy is hard. It is near to impossible to coordinate the overall activities of government, particularly in a multi-polar world where actions cause cascading and emergent effects that cannot be anticipated. It may not even be necessary. While many may long for a "Golden Age of Strategy" that may not have even existed when NSC 68 was published, it is suspect that even that team of strategists could produce a similar product or result today. More complexity will only make it harder to formulate an overall Grand Strategy, unless the definition is changed. But that is okay. Piecemeal, adaptive strategies that are able to cope with developments as they occur have enjoyed, at a minimum, moderate success in recent years. Additionally, production of a Grand Strategy enables our adversaries more opportunities to counter it; this may even lead to an argument against developing one. Instead of worrying about developing a Grand Strategy, our leaders and pundits should worry about building relationships that enable the US to tackle problems on a day-to-day basis.

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