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Christopher J. Fettweis

As the Soviet Union was in the process of collapsing, Georgi Arbatov sent a letter to the *New York Times* that contained a warning for the United States. Arbatov, who was one of the Kremlin's leading 'Amerikanists', wrote that the Soviets were unleashing a 'secret weapon', one 'that will work almost regardless of the American response'. It was not the stuff of Cold War nightmares, some sort of last-minute *deus ex machina* from the Academy of Sciences that would rescue the Soviet Union from oblivion. No, in this instance, the weapon was psychological and unequivocal: the Kremlin was about to deprive America of the Enemy.¹

In the 25 years since Arbatov issued his warning, the effects of the removal of the last great threat to the US have become rather clear. Although some of the specific predictions that he made have not come to pass – NATO avoided disintegration, for instance, and no significant wedges have been driven between the US and its allies – it is true that strategic thinking in the US has suffered without an enemy on which to focus. The West has no great threats to worry about today, and precious few smaller ones either; although those who get their information from the breathless media might not realise it, America is a fundamentally safe country. Pessimists may be able to point to a variety of minor and hypothetical future problems, but none are terribly worrisome, especially when compared to those challenges faced by other countries in earlier, less stable eras.

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It is not only the media that have been unable to put the current era into proper perspective, however. The US strategic community has struggled for 25 years even to understand this new period, much less chart a logical course forward. Two decades without danger have had a significant, and mostly deleterious, impact on the American approach to grand strategy.

A good deal has been written on the American tendency to exaggerate threats, both during the Cold War and since it ended.² Far less space has been dedicated to analysing the effect that ‘threatlessness’ has had on the way the US thinks about the world, and about how its leaders and strategists have dealt with the secret weapon unleashed by Arbatov and his colleagues. Among other things, the reduction of danger in the wake of the Soviet collapse has been met with denial in the US, where new dangers, either minor or wholly imagined, have risen to take its place. In addition, strategy has been redefined and force-planning constructs altered to reflect a turn inward, where threats can still be imagined, rather than outward, where they no longer exist. A variety of concepts that were important means to Cold War ends – influence, access and credibility, among others – have been elevated to become ends in themselves. And, finally, in the absence of national-security imperatives, domestic and fiscal factors have come to dominate decision-making.

Overall, although the implosion of the Soviet Union and the general decline in global violence were certainly welcome phenomena, US strategists have not been able to make timely, productive adjustments to their analytical frameworks. As a result, the country has ambled along, rudderless, committing blunders large and small along the way. Until its strategic community comes to recognise the nature of the system in which it operates, such blunders will continue, and true victory in the Cold War will remain elusive, just as Arbatov predicted.

Denial and the rise of new terrors

The US strategic community’s initial reaction to the collapse of the Soviet Union, like the first stage of grief, was denial. As if to refute Arbatov, the conventional wisdom became that the US never lost its enemies; more were always right around the corner, just waiting to be discovered. What had

been second- and third-order threats – proliferation, terrorism, rogue states, failed states, ‘super-empowered individuals’, economic crises or merely chaos itself – quickly rose to primary status, as if levels of danger were a mathematical constant.³ Since those minor threats were more numerous than the singular Soviet Union, the world seemed to have become a more dangerous place. ‘Yes, we have slain a large dragon’, James Woolsey said during confirmation hearings prior to his appointment as director of Central Intelligence, ‘but we live now in a jungle filled with a bewildering variety of poisonous snakes. And in many ways, the dragon was easier to keep track of.’⁴ Secretary of State Madeleine Albright lamented that ‘we must plot our defense not against a single powerful threat, as during the Cold War, but against a viper’s nest of perils.’⁵ A very senior military officer preferred this formulation a decade later: during the Cold War, the US was locked in a room with a cobra, but afterward it had to deal with a limitless number of bees.⁶ Creators of such metaphors tended to overlook the fact that there had always been smaller threats in the world, only no one paid them much attention in the presence of a greater danger. Terrorism and the other threats of the twenty-first century were not new, but the amount of time US leaders had to devote to worrying about them grew substantially once the Soviets were gone. Background problems were moved to the foreground, elevated to replace what had been a much larger threat emanating from Moscow.⁷

Empirical realities of the post-Cold War system tell a different story. As most scholars of international politics are now, or should be, aware, global conflict levels have dropped precipitously since the collapse of the Soviet empire. Great powers have not fought one another for at least six decades, depending on definitions used, which is the longest such stretch in history. Smaller powers resort to violence much less frequently as well, and levels of internal conflict (civil wars, ethnic conflict, massacres of civilians, coups, and so on) are at historic lows.⁸ The various ‘new’ threats of the current age are neither terribly new nor particularly threatening. Terrorism remains a problem, but it is a relatively minor one. Even the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), though a brutal and frightening group, is at the time of writing nothing more than a potential threat to the West. While some of its members apparently hold Western passports, it is important to remem-

ber that the predecessor to ISIS, al-Qaeda in Iraq, was never able to carry out attacks outside the Middle East. Indeed, there have been no al-Qaeda attacks anywhere in the Western world since 2005. The several thousand militants of ISIS certainly need to be monitored, but they hardly pose an existential threat to the US or its allies. Proliferation is not gaining momentum; in fact, for most classes of weapons (including nuclear, chemical and biological arms), its pace has slowed significantly since the Cold War.⁹ Neither are there more failed states, and the threat posed by them remains minimal.¹⁰ Perhaps most significantly, the conquest of states by their neighbours is all but dead: the number of UN members that have disappeared against their will is precisely zero (South Vietnam held only observer status in 1975). Some have disappeared due to implosion or voluntary division, but none have been absorbed following aggression. Vladimir Putin's conquest of Crimea was a notably rare exception to the otherwise sacrosanct borders of the twenty-first century.¹¹ The states of the twenty-first century are essentially safe, and the strongest is the safest. Future historians will look back on this era as either a golden age of peace and security, or perhaps the beginning of a sustained period of relative peace.¹²

This diminution in global violence is occasionally acknowledged in the community of strategists, but it is rarely taken seriously. A much more common reaction comes from senior strategist Colin Gray, who dismisses the new trends out of hand. For decades, Gray has argued that nothing of fundamental importance to international politics ever changes, that there is nothing new under the sun, and that history shows how bad times inevitably follow good. As the 1990s came to a close, Gray argued that 'all truly transformational theory about international politics is, and has to be, a snare and a delusion ... humankind faces a bloody future, just as it has recorded a bloody past'.¹³ 'The cold war is over, but does it really matter?', he wrote in 1993.¹⁴ New wars, big and small, loom on the horizon, even if it may be hard for the average person to see them, or even imagine what they might be.

While grieving people eventually move past denial, many US strategists appear stuck in that initial phase. One of the very few works to address the implications of essential threatlessness (or at least the absence of an enemy) on strategy denies that relative safety tends to accompany the collapse of

rivals. In her book, *Power in Uncertain Times*, Emily Goldman argues that 'relative to the Cold War context', the US now confronts 'a greater number of threats, greater diversity in the types of security actors that can threaten our interests, and a more interdependent world in which rapidly emerging technologies quickly diffuse and are exploited by others in unanticipated ways'.¹⁵ A Soviet-free world is not necessarily a more secure world, in other words. Goldman then goes on to identify a series of precedents for the strategic situation in which the US finds itself. Her examples, which include Russia and Britain between the Crimean War and First World War, as well as the US and Britain between the world wars, are not well chosen. The states in her case studies all faced real threats, or at least rival great powers willing to pursue their interests by force. The inclusion of the interwar period is particularly bizarre, since the latter half of that epoch was dominated by an expansionist empire in the Pacific and a rising, revisionist power in Europe. These periods were hardly analogous to the post-Cold War US, which has little to learn from them. While the past may contain some examples of societies that could operate in virtually threat-free environments due to geographic isolation, it is hard to think of a great power in more recent times that had to make strategy without danger. Widespread denial has guaranteed that few have spent much time considering the ways in which greatly reduced levels of threat affect foreign policy or grand strategy.

The vague and the meaningless: complexity, uncertainty and 'unknown unknowns'

The list of tangible threats in the post-Cold War system may seem insufficient to justify consistently high levels of spending. Fortunately for those who fear major cuts to the budget, there is no limit to the dangers posed by intangible, vague, unknowable dangers that fecund Pentagon imaginations can devise. If there is one unifying theme across two decades of US strategic thinking, it is that the post-Cold War era is marked by complexity, uncertainty and 'unknown unknowns'. Such vague concepts can be quite frightening, as long as they are not considered in any real depth.

The threat to defence spending posed by the absence of threats to the country was first addressed by a group of analysts at the RAND Corporation in the early 1990s. James Winnefeld and other 'uncertainty hawks', in the

words of Carl Conetta and Charles Knight, pioneered the idea that the new system was not in fact any safer, appearances notwithstanding.¹⁶ ‘Out with the old, in with the ?????’ and ‘Certitude vs. Uncertainty’ were among Winnefeld’s self-explanatory subheadings.¹⁷ ‘Uncertainty is the dominating characteristic of the landscape’, wrote Paul Davis, editor of a 1994 RAND volume on defence planning that focused on the dire challenges posed by the collapse of the lone threat to American security.¹⁸ It did not take long for US national-security-strategy documents to pick up the theme. ‘The real threat we now face’, according to the 1992 ‘National Military Strategy’, ‘is the threat of the unknown, the uncertain’.¹⁹ The message has been con-

Analyses downplay the dangers of the past

sistent, in both official and unofficial outlets, for more than two decades. The 2005 ‘National Defense Strategy’ elevated uncertainty (rather than, say, stability) to the position of the ‘defining characteristic of today’s strategic environment’.²⁰ In 1997 Secretary of Defense William Cohen said that ‘while the prospect of a horrific, global war has receded, new threats and dangers – harder to define and more difficult to track – have gathered on the horizon’.²¹ At a press conference five years later, in the

days leading up to the war in Iraq, his successor Donald Rumsfeld warned about unknown unknowns, which were the threats that ‘we don’t know we don’t know’, which ‘tend to be the difficult ones’.²² Uncertainty hawks are now prevalent in the United Kingdom as well. The 2010 UK national-security-strategy document, titled ‘A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty’, claims that, ‘today, Britain faces a different and more complex range of threats from a myriad of sources’, and that ‘in an age of uncertainty, we are continually facing new and unforeseen threats to our security’.²³ Such claims are rarely questioned, much less subjected to any kind of scrutiny. That the world of today is more complex, and therefore less predictable and knowable, than that of prior eras has entered into the realm of belief, accepted without the need for further justification.²⁴

The claims of uncertainty hawks contain a number of consistent elements. First and foremost, one of the more frightening aspects of unidentifiable threats is that little can be known about their relative levels of intensity.

Unknown unknowns might be rather benign, catastrophically severe or somewhere in between. For many observers of US foreign policy, the possibility that unseen threats are exceptionally dangerous simply cannot be ruled out. 'At present, Americans confront the most confusing and uncertain strategic environment in their history', writes prominent historian and strategist Williamson Murray. 'It may also be the most dangerous to the well-being of their republic.'²⁵ 'Known knowns' can be measured, understood and combatted; those left to the imagination quickly expand to ominous proportions. 'To make any thing very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary', Edmund Burke noted centuries ago. 'When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes.'²⁶ The dangers posed by unknown unknowns, perhaps because of their obscurity, tend to appear unlimited and especially terrible.

Secondly, since the present is so uncertain and frightening, these analyses tend to downplay the dangers of the past. Such intangible threats are strategically meaningless unless presented comparatively; presumably, emphasising them is meant to imply that the current era is more complex, uncertain and unknowable than other epochs. The modern-day global security environment presents an 'increasingly complex set of challenges' in comparison to those that have come before, according to the 2012 US 'Defense Strategic Guidance'.²⁷ Nostalgia for the Cold War – a simple, straightforward, even less dangerous era – is depressingly common in the US strategic community. The US left a 'time of reasonable predictability [for] an era of surprise and uncertainty', claimed the 2006 'Quadrennial Defense Review Report'.²⁸ Although the assertion that the Cold War was predictable might surprise those who waged it, to the strategists who came afterward the struggle against the Soviets seems to have been relatively uncomplicated, even quaint, nuclear danger notwithstanding.

Uncertainty and complexity have technological roots. The third theme of claims by uncertainty hawks relates to the technological roots of uncertainty and complexity. They argue that the proliferation of science and advanced technology provides the enemies of the future with far greater potential for mayhem. The evolution of technology, therefore, is ominous not only for US national security, but for the peace and stability of the world. The

US National Intelligence Council predicted in 1996 that ‘accelerating rates of change will make the future environment more unpredictable and less stable’.²⁹ Weapons proliferation is the most troubling aspect of this, but the potentially destabilising effects of general scientific advancements should not be underestimated. The 2006 ‘Quadrennial Defense Review Report’ suggested that the US needed to pay attention not only to ‘catastrophic’ technologies that future enemies might employ but also to those that are merely ‘disruptive’.³⁰ Few topics obsess US planners as much as cyber warfare, with the result that the US Cyber Command was created in 2009.³¹ ‘The world is applying digital technologies faster than our ability to understand the security implications and mitigate potential risks’, warned a report of the US Intelligence Community in 2013. ‘Compounding these developments are uncertainty and doubt as we face new and unpredictable cyber threats.’³² Sociologists have long understood that technological change tends to be accompanied by increases in anxiety and predictions of ill effects to come.³³ Since the speed of that change has never been greater, it should perhaps come as no surprise that the anxiety it has generated is greater as well.³⁴

Fourthly, the rise of intangible threats has found a receptive audience in the American strategic community due in large part to its traditional concern, perhaps even obsession, with surprise attack. For decades, a variety of observers have argued that a powerful, unreasonable fear of surprise has been a central part of US strategic culture since at least Pearl Harbor.³⁵ The attacks of 9/11 seemed to suggest that dangers can arise virtually out of the blue. Arnold Wolfers observed decades ago that the nations that tend to be most sensitive to threats ‘have either experienced attacks in the recent past or, having passed through a prolonged period of an exceptionally high degree of security, suddenly find themselves thrust into a situation of danger’.³⁶ Periods of apparent calm are not comforting to those societies conditioned to believe that surprise attacks can materialise out of nowhere. A seemingly safe world, where the sources of those inevitable surprises remain obscure, can seem more frightening than one with obvious dangers.

Finally, the obsession with the intangible prevents proper consideration of what is probably the most important force-planning question: how much is enough? How many ‘super-carriers’ are enough to address a complex

future, for instance? How many F-22s, cyber warriors or spy satellites does the US need to keep its people safe from unknown unknowns? A security environment characterised primarily by drastic ‘unknowables’ offers no guidance to those seeking to construct military forces. When danger is limited only by imagination, states will invariably purchase far more than they need, wasting money on weapons systems that will never be used in the hopes of addressing threats that they do not yet perceive.

As long as human rationality remains bounded, incorporating a certain degree of flexibility will remain part of any sagacious strategy. Those making planning decisions, however, must take probabilities into account, while establishing priorities. While anything is possible, if we are to believe the cliché, surely not everything is plausible. Even if there are no limits to the potential dangers that the human mind can manufacture, there will always be very definite boundaries on the specific threats that reality contains. Despite the assertions of uncertainty hawks, the current strategic environment has proven to be not only rather stable and predictable, but benign for the West. No new strategic threats have arisen out of the blue, whether small groups of psychotics – international intelligence services were well aware of al-Qaeda prior to 9/11 – or major peer competitors. Indeed, it is nearly impossible to imagine how the latter could possibly emerge without the US having fairly substantial warning. Serious threats cannot rise in secret.

Goldman wrote that, ‘unlike the prior interwar period, the uncertainty engendered by the end of the Cold War shows few signs of abating’.³⁷ In this, she is essentially correct, even if her analysis is backward. The lack of identifiable, tangible, immediate threats to US security has caused strategists to look towards intangible, unidentifiable, future dangers, and this shows little sign of changing. This age of uncertainty, however, is an age of relative safety. Until the day comes when American strategists are forced to replace vague threats with concrete ones, the basic security of the US is assured.

Beyond denial: the turn inward

What would a chess player do if an opponent simply stood up and left the table? Would it make sense to continue on with the same amount of effort, concentrating instead on the capabilities of his or her own pieces? This is

essentially what the US has done since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Rather than change its outlook or level of preparation to match the evolving dangers of the world, Washington merely changed the direction of its strategic gaze, turning its focus inward. The resulting, post-Cold War conception of strategy takes no other side into account (since none exists), which has drastically, and counterproductively, altered the way the US plans and constructs its military.

The most basic effect of this turn inward has been on the way in which strategists regard their central concept. Although there never has been a universally accepted definition, strategy has traditionally incorporated some conflict, or at least its potential, against a foe.³⁸ The imperative of taking the preferences and actions of the 'other' into account is what separates strategy from mere planning.³⁹ One does not need a strategy to drive home from work, nor to walk next door to buy a sandwich – unless, of course, one anticipates traffic, or people also trying to buy that sandwich who may interfere with the process. Chess and international security are inherently strategic endeavours because there are other actors simultaneously attempting to accomplish their own, often conflicting goals. Without an enemy, or at least other actors, there is no need for strategy in the traditional sense.

In the late 1980s, US strategists began to redefine the concept, severing the traditional link between strategy and the enemy. One of the first to do so was Arthur Lykke of the US Army War College, who wrote in 1989 that strategy was better thought of as the ways in which states used their power to pursue their objectives.⁴⁰ Risk arises when those three components are not properly balanced. The actions of others barely registered in Lykke's conception. To be strategic, one needed only to ask three questions, all of which could be answered by looking inward: what is to be done? How is it to be done? What resources are required to do it?⁴¹

Lykke's conception of strategy has become ubiquitous in the US strategic community. 'In essence', summarised Mackubin Owens of the US Naval War College in 2007, 'strategy describes the *way* in which the available *means* will be employed to achieve the *ends* of policy'.⁴² No longer is interaction with, and the attempt to react to and influence, the other the essence of the concept; no longer does Washington need to ask itself what its enemies and

rivals are likely to do in response to its actions. As long as ends are properly identified, and ways and means sagaciously chosen in their pursuit, the mission has been accomplished. 'The challenge for the strategist', write Derek Reveron and James Cook, is not to take the potential actions of others into account, but to 'coordinate the various levers of national power in a coherent or smart way'.⁴³ To those with a bit of historical perspective, such as eminent strategist Lawrence Freedman, this new but well-established conception 'barely counts as strategy'.⁴⁴ At the very least, it is a new way to conceive of the subject, one that has impoverished strategic thinking in a country already too willing to ignore the rest of the world. Strategy that fails to take others into account is not only a contradiction in terms but harmful to those decisions based upon it.

The second result of the turn inward has been a fundamental alteration of the Pentagon's approach to force planning. Until two decades ago, the US had followed what was known as a 'threat-based' approach, which focused first and foremost on responding to the capabilities of potential opponents, anticipating their likely actions and devising ways to counteract them. This model was rendered obsolete by the removal of plausible enemies. Since then, the military has followed a 'capabilities-based' approach to force planning, in which the actions of rivals (or even their existence) are essentially irrelevant. Decisions on which capabilities to develop are now determined by perceived weaknesses in US defences that, if they are apparent to us, could be exploited by a future enemy. What such an enemy could do now is not as important as what we can imagine it doing in the future. As Rumsfeld argued, after the collapse of the Soviet Union a new approach was necessary, one that 'focuses less on who might threaten us, or where, and more on how we might be threatened and what is needed to deter and defend against such threats'.⁴⁵ In other words, the actual threats posed by the outside world are not as important for the purposes of planning as the vulnerabilities that US strategists can identify (or imagine) in their own armour. Wise planning should proceed as if there were peer competitors continually probing US defences for weakness, even if no such competitor actually exists.

*Washington
turned its
focus inward*

As a result of capabilities-based planning, the United States is now adding a new generation of attack submarines to its fleet, despite the fact that the older generation – which remains the best in the world – was never used in the role for which it was designed. The mere fact that no other navy has even one super-carrier will not stop the US from replacing each of its 11 with all-new models, at a cost of \$13 billion each.⁴⁶ The US Air Force was determined to add new generations of both air-superiority (F-22) and ground-support (F-35) fighters, no matter what the rest of the world did. Stealth ships, upgraded battle tanks and space weapons may someday be useful, we are told, even if they are not now.

This transformation in approaches to force planning did not occur accidentally, nor without debate. In the early 1990s, Les Aspin, then-chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, championed the continuation of traditional planning models, arguing that by using their logic a great deal of money could be saved in the absence of major threat. Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney opposed him, arguing that focusing on identifiable dangers (or lack thereof) rendered the US vulnerable to those as-yet-unidentified threats that might arise in the future.⁴⁷ Cheney maintained that the US ought to create and maintain the best military it could, rather than be limited by challengers of the present, or by the ability to predict the challengers of the future. After all, a high jumper does not stop trying to achieve greater heights just because the competition cannot keep pace.

Capabilities-based planning was another notion championed early on by analysts at RAND. Winnefeld and some of his colleagues led the way in encouraging the Department of Defense to break away from the ‘tyranny of scenario plausibility’ and turn the focus inward: ‘the scenarios that are over the horizon – yet nevertheless make a sudden preemptive strike on today’s comfortable assumptions – lie in the category of unanticipated surprises’.⁴⁸ The Pentagon seized upon capabilities-based planning with enthusiasm, in part because it helped justify the continuation of enormous defence budgets, but also because it fit nicely with a defence posture focused on uncertainty. Davis emphasised that ‘the notion of planning under uncertainty appears in the very first clause’ of his definition of capabilities-based planning because it fit nicely with a defence posture focused on uncertainty. The approach

'has the virtue of encouraging prudent worrying about potential needs that go well beyond currently obvious threats'.⁴⁹ Worrying about needs that go beyond threats is only prudent to those following the inward-looking, capabilities-based model that has come to dominate Pentagon planning since the end of the Cold War.

The *Millennium Challenge* exercise from the summer of 2002 is a clear example of capabilities-based planning in action. That war game, which was one of the biggest in the history of the US military, gave all the services a chance to test new technologies that had rolled off the high-tech assembly line in preceding years. Given the date, one might assume that the fictional enemy would have been Iraq, one of the other members of the 'Axis of Evil', or perhaps even China or Russia. None of those states had the potential to give US capabilities the correct kind of test, however, so the game's enemy was the country with the second-most advanced military: Israel.⁵⁰ The US spent \$250 million simulating a war against the Israelis, an event that most would probably consider unlikely.

Capabilities-based planning led directly to one of the most notorious force-planning failures in American history. The US went into Iraq with the army it had, to paraphrase Rumsfeld, not the army it needed. Had force planners concentrated their energies on external threats rather than internal capabilities, they may well have considered the possibility that irregular enemies would not use advanced technology to challenge US power in the wars to come. Unfortunately, the long list of weapons that were in the US arsenal did not include much that would help against improvised explosive devices, such as armed personnel carriers with heavily armoured undersides. The army would have to wait until years of combat had passed, and thousands of lives were lost, before the Pentagon planned in response to real, pressing threats.

No rational planner would suggest that the US military should cease striving to remain the best that it possibly can be, no matter what other states are doing. The task of the strategist, however, is to assess realistic risks and allocate scarce resources according to the most likely threats of the future. Capabilities-based planning makes insufficient effort to assess probabilities, and as a result entails enormous costs, in both resources and opportunity, for the US.

Conflating means with ends

Since the new conception of strategy now common in US defence circles emphasises matching ends, ways and means, one might assume that, at the very least, those components have been well considered in the post-Soviet era. Unfortunately, this has not proven to be the case. Another effect of threatlessness on US defence planning has been a habitual conflation of means and ends, often in ways that can quickly become dangerous. A collection of concepts traditionally seen as ways to accomplish goals – influence, presence, credibility, even alliances – have all too often become the ends of policy in themselves, raising the possibility of conflict in the process.

The US has an obsession with credibility

The first example is one of the most pervasive ideas.

Influence in foreign capitals has always been a goal of states, but it has historically been pursued as a means with which to pursue interests in times of both peace and crisis. Today, influence is increasingly pursued for its own sake, under the apparent perception that it will be useful someday, even if its utility is rarely considered,

much less articulated. Once freed from tangible outcomes, or strategic purpose, the quest for influence can dramatically expand the scope of US involvement abroad. The massive US investment in security cooperation and assistance, for instance, is largely intended to increase its influence. By one count, the US places its commissioned and non-commissioned officers in more than 150 countries to serve a variety of purposes, one of which is certainly to influence events, whatever they may be.⁵¹ The 1992 'National Military Strategy' justifies global deployments by explaining that they 'lend credibility to our alliances' and promote US influence and access.⁵² What exactly such influence can hope to accomplish is rarely discussed, since it is not really at issue. Influence is valuable in itself, and is pursued for its own sake.

There is also a danger of conflating means and ends regarding 'access'. Instead of being a tool or capability that could allow for the realisation of national goals, access has been elevated to an end in itself, primarily by naval and air-force strategists. One of the hot new organising concepts for the Pacific, for example, is the so-called 'Air-Sea Battle' concept, which is specifically designed to counter potential Chinese attempts to shut off access to

(or employ the dreaded 'area-denial' capabilities in) nearby seas.⁵³ Although details of the concept remain classified, in essence Air–Sea Battle encourages greater cooperation between the US Navy and Air Force in order to deny China the ability to keep American ships out of its littoral seas. The 2012 'Defense Strategic Guidance' warned that 'state and non-state actors pose potential threats to access', and pledged that the United States 'will seek to protect freedom of access throughout the global commons'.⁵⁴ The development of Air–Sea Battle, as well as another new joint-operating concept entirely devoted to access, is proceeding without much discussion of means and ends. Access has been awarded value all its own.

Assuring economic access has been an enduring US interest in Asia, dating back to Commodore Matthew Perry's mission to Japan and the Open Door policy in China. In these instances, access was valuable because it opened markets, which was the real goal of the policy. Today's strategists refer to the economic benefits of access or the protection of allies as afterthoughts rather than as the central purpose of policymaking. Why Beijing would decide to cut off international trade and essentially bring its economy to a grinding halt is hardly clear, but it does not need to be if the focus is on access itself. None of this is to downplay the tactical or operational importance of freedom of action, but that freedom must remain connected to larger strategic ends in order to have meaning. Once disconnected from such ends, as much thinking surrounding Air–Sea Battle is, ensuring access can drive choices by itself. To the extent that Washington values access for its own sake, rather than as part of a broader strategy to protect free trade, problems will arise.

Another vital interest of the US, at least as defined by the willingness to spill blood in its pursuit, is credibility. According to conventional wisdom in the policy world – which, it deserves noting, is nearly unanimously rejected by scholars – credibility earned through displays of resolution can help states achieve goals in the future by affecting the calculations of others.⁵⁵ During the Cold War, the US fought to preserve its credibility with regularity, in the belief that it was sending messages regarding its determination to defend its interests to the Soviet Union, allies and those countries on the fence.⁵⁶ This obsession with credibility outlived the Soviet Union, despite

the fact there is no longer an enemy poised to take advantage of irresolution, nor an alternative power towards which US allies or third parties could tilt.⁵⁷ While it is far from clear that credibility ever had any real utility, it is certainly meaningless when there is no enemy to receive the messages the US tries to send. Today, the logic behind the obsession with credibility, or what Stephen Walt calls the ‘credibility fetish’, is rarely articulated or examined.⁵⁸ Credibility is pursued for its own sake, not so much as a tool to make future interests easier to address, but as an interest in itself.

The credibility imperative has been particularly visible during the past year. When US President Barack Obama drew a rhetorical ‘red line’ in Syria and then hesitated to back up the threat, critics charged him with the kind of irresolution that encourages challenges. Putin’s adventurism in eastern Ukraine is only the most prominent example of the effects of diminished US credibility, according to this line of thought. Former Vice President Cheney asserted that there is ‘no question’ that Putin believes Obama is weak, and that weakness encouraged Russian aggression.⁵⁹ This criticism, which comes mostly but not exclusively from the most hawkish voices in the marketplace of ideas, also suggests that resolve and strength could somehow have deterred this action in the first place. Such critics would do well to remember one of the most basic observations of political psychology: actors routinely exaggerate their influence over the decisions of others.⁶⁰ The crisis in Ukraine – to the extent that it is actually a crisis for the US – has regional dynamics that unfolded irrespective of Washington’s actions. There is little reason to believe that American credibility factored into Moscow’s calculations any more than it did during the 1970s.⁶¹

As a general rule, there is little to fear from loss of credibility. When the Reagan administration pulled US troops out of Lebanon following the 1983 barracks bombing, to take but one of many examples, hawks were predictably apoplectic. ‘If we are driven out of Lebanon, radical and rejectionist elements will have scored a major victory’, Secretary of State George Shultz said in briefings on Capitol Hill. ‘The message will be sent that relying on the Soviet Union pays off and that relying on the United States is a fatal mistake.’⁶² Michael Ledeen was more explicit: ‘our defeat in Lebanon will encourage our enemies, in the Middle East and elsewhere’, he wrote. ‘In all

probability, we shall pay a disproportionate price for our Lebanese failure', from the Middle East to Central America, where Soviet-sponsored guerrillas would be disastrously encouraged. As always, US allies and potential friends would be powerfully disillusioned, including the Egyptians, whom Ledeen felt would 'increasingly distance themselves from the Camp David agreement'.⁶³ Fortunately for the United States, the Soviet Union's influence in the Middle East did not increase, its guerrilla allies did not change their behaviour and the Egyptians did not abandon their treaty commitments. The fears generated by lost credibility proved, as they usually are, baseless.⁶⁴

The final example of the conflation of means and ends involves one of the centrepieces of the US security structure. Arbatov was hardly the only person to be surprised when NATO not only survived the collapse of the Soviet Union but grew. Expansion had liberal and realist supporters, all of whom agreed that, in order to survive, the Alliance had to change, in both its missions and composition. For liberals, expansion represented a way to stabilise countries in the former Soviet bloc and integrate them into Europe.⁶⁵ The relatively few realist supporters appreciated the consolidation of gains from the Cold War, just in case future Russian leaders were to foster ideas about rising again. Expansion helped to give the Alliance a new *raison d'être*, a way to prevent the loss of momentum that could easily occur following the removal of its former purpose. To use a phrase common at the time, NATO had to 'expand or die'.⁶⁶ The Alliance that had once been a primary tool for keeping the Soviets out of Western Europe (and the Americans in, and the Germans down, in the well-known formulation) was in the 1990s transformed into an end in itself. Colin Powell summarised this thinking, and the confusion of means for ends, in the title of a 2004 piece published in *Foreign Affairs*: 'A Strategy of Partnerships'.⁶⁷ Partnerships no longer served the goals of the strategy; they became the goals of the strategy.

When there are no pressing goals to accomplish, or threats to be countered, inertia can ensure that the means previously employed take on the appearance of ends. As a result, US policymakers may feel pressured to fight the Chinese over access, or to intervene in Syria to preserve credibility, or to expand NATO further in order to maintain the viability of the

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Alliance. The elevation of means into ends in the absence of threat may be understandable, but that does not make it wise. Blurring the distinction has confused US strategic thinking to the point that, in some cases, unnecessary confrontation has become more likely.

The formulation of post-Soviet policy

Threatlessness has had other, more predictable effects on the formulation of foreign and national-security policy, a few of which are worthy of brief mention. Elimination of the traditional strategic imperative has raised the standing of non-strategic considerations in the policy process. Domestic political and budgetary concerns in particular now drive decisions in ways that they never would have during the Cold War.

In states where no central, all-encompassing enemy demands the focus of strategists, domestic factors become more important in the making of foreign policy. Members of Congress in particular do not have to worry about the potential negative impact of parochial or ethnic-orientated influence on policy. When US national security is simply not threatened, they are free to promote the interests of lobbies without fear of serious strategic consequence. As a result, a variety of domestic lobbies have enjoyed a much greater degree of influence on foreign policy in the post-Cold War, low-threat period.⁶⁸ The US tilted decisively towards Armenia in the early 1990s, for example, as the Armenian diaspora asserted itself. During the Cold War, national interests occasionally clashed with the interests of the Israel lobby; today, lawmakers compete to be most obsequious to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. In the absence of urgency from without, decisive influence comes from within. The US finds itself obsessing over trivia, such as formal recognition of the 1915 massacres in Turkey as genocide, or irrationalities, such as the continuing, pointless embargo on Cuba.⁶⁹

The post-Cold War era could easily be read as a 25-year case study in organisational behaviour. As anyone familiar with Morton Halperin's writings would have expected, the protection of resources became a central concern of the massive defence bureaucracy originally constructed to fight the Soviets.⁷⁰ In the 1990s, defenders of the budgetary status quo argued that the US needed to be prepared to fight two simultaneous regional conflicts,

which would require approximately the level of spending that occurred during the Cold War. Without that capability, which came to be known as ‘two major theatre wars’, potential enemies might take advantage of a situation in which US forces were tied down elsewhere to launch their own offensives. The two theatres under consideration were kept officially vague but were widely acknowledged to be the Middle East and Northeast Asia. If the US had to deal again with Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, this thinking went, the North Koreans might well take advantage of the opportunity to attack southward. The mere fact that such a sequence of events had never happened, or that this is generally not why countries decide to invade their neighbours, did not seem to bother supporters of this argument, whose primary purpose was to avoid the dreaded ‘peace dividend’ that might have been logically expected to follow the removal of the main threat to the West.

Fiscal imperatives will drive security decisions when not challenged by those of national security. Military spending, for instance, is commonly described in terms of percentage of GDP, usually in order to argue that the US is not spending as much as it could, or even to imply that there is an optimal level for proper force planning. Often, the connection is made quite explicitly, as in 2009 when US Senator James Inhofe introduced a bill that would have committed the US to devoting 4% of its GDP to defence in perpetuity, an idea endorsed by a large number of analysts.⁷¹ The bill died, but the sentiment lives on, and the metric has become widely accepted.

Such blatant use of the budget to guide strategy is perhaps a good place to conclude this examination of the pathological effects of the end of the Cold War on US national-security thought. When otherwise serious analysts can argue that a certain level of spending must be maintained without reference to the external environment – nearly advocating spending for its own sake – or to how the US economy performs, for that matter, all pretence of strategy has been abandoned. Such arbitrary, spectacularly non-strategic goals for US military spending would not be needed if threats existed that needed to be addressed. The post-Cold War world does indeed contain threats, as it turns out, just not to the security of the US: it is the military budget that has been under siege, and its defenders have reacted with arguments that seem logical, as long as they are not subjected to much sustained, strategic analysis.

* * *

The Soviet Union did not survive the Cold War, but neither did the American ability to think clearly about strategy. Arbatov's warning to Washington might not have come true in every one of its particulars, but the overall effect of the removal of its enemy has indeed been detrimental to the formulation of US grand strategy. Attempts to chart a way forward in an era of essential threatlessness have suffered from a variety of under-considered, shallow and dangerous ideas that have come to dominate national-security policy for more than two decades. As a result, the US worries more, and spends more, than is necessary to achieve its goals.

During the Cold War, threat helped create an enormous strategic community; now that it is over, that strategic community has helped create threat. Those who worry about uncertainty, complexity and undetectable dangers evince a clear nostalgia for simpler times, when all the US had to fret over was an aggressive totalitarian enemy with millions of troops and thousands of nuclear weapons. Those with less selective memories, however, might recall that the Soviet Union was not only tangible and unpredictable, but much more dangerous to Western interests than the unknown unknowns that apparently keep modern-day US planners awake at night.

The US won the Cold War but somehow feels less safe. Washington would do well to remember the advice of one of its clearest thinkers, George Kennan: 'in so far as we feel ourselves in any heightened trouble at the present moment, that feeling is largely of our own making.'⁷² The present moment is less troubled for the US than any that have come before, even if we do not always seem to realise it.

Notes

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