

# THE COMPLEX ART OF GRAND STRATEGY

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Grand strategy is a term that is often used when national security is being discussed or debated. At the political level, opposition benches are often heard to blame the government for not formulating or implementing a grand strategy that suits and protects the nation. So, what is Grand Strategy? Why is it so important in the context of national security? Why is it such a nebulous concept? Why are discussions of grand strategy often obscure and unclear? Why is it often quoted as an end-state rather than as a methodology to achieve a desired end-state? The concept of grand strategy is very easily invoked and also easy to allude to, but is very seldom clearly defined because of the ambiguity attached to the idea.

Grand strategy, like any other strategic appreciation, should be focused on linking the ends, ways and means paradigm. The only factor that distinguishes grand strategy would be that its application occurs at a higher level of abstraction and deals with more enduring features in the form of broad national interests.

Strategy and tactics are two words that are most often used in relation to explaining the employment, manoeuvring and application of military forces. These terms have also been traditionally used to separate the analysis of

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**The concept of strategy therefore has been separated into military strategy—that which controls the military aspects of a conflict; and grand strategy—that which sits above military strategy and deals with the political aspects of war and national security.**

manoeuvring of a large force such as an army also falls within the broader ambit of being tactics.

Similar to the subdivision of tactics, strategy also has a recognisable hierarchy. In most cases the use of the word strategy is related to military matters, although in more recent times the word has assumed common usage in the business world. In fact, the use of the term strategy in relation to a war normally does not cater for the consideration of the non-military aspects of a conflict. It also does not provide sufficient spread to deliberate upon the longer-term political purpose for which the war is being fought. The concept of strategy therefore has been separated into military strategy—that which controls the military aspects of a conflict; and grand strategy—that which sits above military strategy and deals with the political aspects of war and national security. From a purely military viewpoint, strategy is the link, the way, which ensures that the means are employed to achieve the desired outcomes, the end-state. The hierarchy could be explained thus—tactical actions are initiated to create operational effects, which are aligned together to achieve strategic outcomes.

Edward Mead Earle paraphrased the concept of grand strategy in a concise manner when he wrote, “strategy is the art of controlling and utilising

warfare, in all its various forms as well as in examining the actual application of force by military forces. Clausewitz had explained that: “tactics is the art of using troops in battle; strategy is the art of using battles to win the war.”<sup>1</sup> However, both tactics and strategy can be further subdivided to indicate the levels at which the discussion is being held. Tactics, especially, can be seen at the lowest level to be the actual techniques that are employed by soldiers individually or as part of a small fighting group, while the

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1. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 127-32.

the resources of a nation—or a coalition of nations—including its armed forces, to the end that its vital interests shall be effectively promoted and secured against enemies, actual, potential, or merely presumed. The highest type of strategy—sometimes called grand strategy—is that which so integrates the policies and armaments of the nation that the resort to war is either rendered unnecessary or is undertaken with the maximum chance of victory.”<sup>2</sup>

**Strategy is the methodology employed to balance means and ends in a contextual manner to ensure the nation’s success in an international competition, in war and peace, and during potential as well as actual conflict.**

Another modern definition is by Andre Beaufre, which states that strategy is, “the art of dialectic of two opposing wills using force to resolve their dispute”.<sup>3</sup> This definition makes it clear that strategy is the methodology employed to balance means and ends in a contextual manner to ensure the nation’s success in an international competition, in war and peace, and during potential as well as actual conflict.

The aim of this paper is to provide an explanation of grand strategy; elucidate its importance—why it matters—in the overarching context of national security; and highlight the challenges to formulating an effective grand strategy.

## **STRATEGY—A TRADITIONAL PERSPECTIVE**

The concept of ‘strategy’ is not new, it dates back to the times of Sun Tzu and Thucydides, who could be considered contemporaries expounding on the topic in different parts of the world, almost at the same time.

### *Sun Tzu—The Art of War*

In his classic treatise, *The Art of War*, the ancient Chinese warrior-strategist Sun Tzu repeatedly mentions the need to adopt the right ‘stratagem’ to

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2. Edward Meade Earle (ed.), *Makers of Modern Strategy* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1943), p. viii.

3. Andre Beaufre, *Introduction to Strategy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), p. 22.

ensure victory in war. In the second chapter of his book<sup>4</sup> Sun Tzu deals with real-life situations, and not with the abstract as philosophers are prone to do, examining the application of strategy and the inherent risks involved in doing so. He avers that the need is to minimise and control the risks and assure success within a set limit of resources while also staying within the bounds of fundamental strategy. This fundamental strategy that Sun Tzu refers to is 'grand strategy'.

Sun Tzu clearly made the point that after the 'ends' to be achieved have been established, the first step in crafting a grand strategy would be to understand the costs of initiating action and ensuring victory. This awareness was a fundamental challenge for the commanders—knowing the cost of victory before the battle is commenced. Sun Tzu goes on to elaborate on the need to balance ends and means in a campaign or war. The chapter focuses on the economies—human, materiel and financial resources—of conducting and winning a war. Sun Tzu analyses the 'means' not only in terms of the quantum of resources, but also in terms of the time required to achieve victory and the psychological and emotional impact of the war on the people.

Although the term grand strategy is not used anywhere in Sun Tzu's text, the chapter under reference is all about grand strategy and its direct connection to the need to balance means and ends. He exhorts the leadership to formulate a strategy only after deliberating on the very high logistical costs of conducting a successful campaign, the hazards—including financial and economic crises—which a nation will face in case a campaign does not go according to plan, and the need to anticipate and eliminate all possible resource limitations that could be faced. Sun Tzu had explained the concept of grand strategy and its indelible connection to the ends and means equation 2,300 years ago.

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4. This chapter has been titled "The Challenge: The Cost of Victory", in Sanu Kainikara, *The Art of Air Power: Sun Tzu Revisited* (Canberra: Air Power Development Centre, 2011), pp. 45-66.

An Artful Strategy must be supported with  
A thousand swift four-horse chariots,  
A thousand armoured four-horse vehicles,  
A hundred thousand armoured troops,  
And provisions transported for a thousand miles.  
Further expenses must come from within  
To be used for envoys and advisors,  
Glue, lacquer and other construction materials,  
Repair to armour and chariots.  
To raise a corps of a hundred thousand,  
A thousand pieces of gold will be spent each day.<sup>5</sup>

***Thucydides—The History of the Peloponnesian War***

Thucydides (c. 460-396 BC) was an Athenian general and historian. His monumental work, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*<sup>6</sup> is the history of the war that was fought between Athens and Sparta. The war was really three separate conflicts—431-421 BC, 415-413 BC and 413-404 BC—that Thucydides was unifying into one account when he died sometime before 396 BC. Thucydides has been regarded as the first true historian and at times dubbed the father of 'scientific history'. He placed a high value on the importance of eyewitness testimony and applied an extremely strict standard of impartiality, evidence gathering and the analysis of cause and effect.

Thucydides was clearly moved by the suffering inflicted by war and concerned with the excesses committed by human beings in waging war. This is unmistakably the concept of avoiding unnecessary collateral damage. Further, he carefully analysed the connection between human intelligence and judgement and its impact on the conduct of a war. In chronicling the Peloponnesian War, he enunciated the strategies that were conceived and

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5. Sanu Kainikara, *The Art of Air Power: Sun Tzu Revisited* (Canberra: Air Power Development Centre, 2011), p. 47.

6. Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, translated by Richard Crawley and first published by Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1874.

employed by both the adversaries, intending the writing to be a work for all time. Thucydides' explanations provide a sound basis from which to discover the best strategy to approach complex contemporary challenges since it provides information for better understanding the continuities and discontinuities inherent in conflict situations.

In narrating the history of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides provides the fundamentals to understanding the influence of war on the State. He explores the repercussions, sometimes dire, of blindly following political objectives through the employment of military means. Essentially, Thucydides alludes to the need to continually study and monitor the strategy being followed and the need to ensure that the strategy incorporates sufficient flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances. This is doubly important because of the rapidity with which circumstances could change, especially when the nation is in a state of war.<sup>7</sup> Thucydides was perhaps the first strategist to clearly bring out the unchanging nature of war and the two factors that are derived from this universal truth. The first is that all wars are contests for power and therefore the desired objective and end-state is always political. The second is that human nature and characteristics shape the strategic and military culture of a nation, which indirectly influence the conduct of war by that nation.<sup>8</sup> These are unchanging facts that must be taken into account when strategies are formulated.

Through narrating the story of the Peloponnesian War in a completely unbiased manner, Thucydides demonstrates the consequences of pursuing political power at all costs and, indirectly, the result of implementing a set strategy to achieve the desired and fixed end-state.<sup>9</sup> Further, he demonstrates the continuum that exists between military strategy and national grand strategy, brought about by the alignment of their aims—securing national interests.

There are two fundamental lessons that can be derived from the Peloponnesian War. First, strategic perception regarding national security

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7. Thucydides, edited & translated by R. B. Strassler, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Touchstone, 1998), p. 15.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

9. Karl Walling, "Thucydides on Policy, Strategy, and War Termination", in *Naval War College Review*, Newport, US, vol. 66, no. 4, Autumn 2013, p. 79.

that is derived from human emotions will invariably lead to war. Second, the creation of a winning strategy is primarily dependent on the ability of the strategists to balance the available choices, tempered with the nation's strategic and military culture.<sup>10</sup> An ongoing war will influence the desired political objectives to be achieved and in turn alter or adapt the strategies to be employed to achieve them. Accordingly, the military culture of a nation will also have to change in order to adapt to the altered end-state and strategy. This is an eternal cycle in the pursuit of political power within which resides national security.

### *Modern Background*

Even though both Sun Tzu and Thucydides had clearly identified the need to formulate strategy in order to balance ends to means, grand strategy as an identifiable concept started appearing in European thinking only in the late 18th century, that too in an exclusive military form. The meaning became inflated over the years and by the mid-19th century it was concerned mainly with fighting a war, by deploying the entire military force of a nation to achieve victory. Napoleon further refined the concept by conceiving the waging of war as a whole-of-nation activity, which has also been termed as 'Total War' in some commentaries.<sup>11</sup> This was part of formulating a grand strategy, the ways to achieve national objectives.

Political aspects that influence strategy started to be examined and discussed only after World War I. Around the same time discussions started to differentiate strategy as a broader element from purely military strategy. From this subdivision grand strategy can be distinguished, which at the highest level, can be considered to be the process of carefully marshalling and employing all means available to a nation to achieve the desired end-state. Grand strategy therefore was accepted as the mobilisation of the entire

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10. Mark Gilchrist, "Why Thucydides Still Matters", in *The Strategy Bridge*, November 30, 2016, at <https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2016/11/30/why-thucydides-still-matters>. Accessed on March 2, 2020.

11. Michael Broers, "The Concept of 'Total War' in the Revolutionary-Napoleonic Period", in *War in History*, vol.15, no. 3, July 2008, pp. 247-68, at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26070628>. Accessed on March 2, 2020.

**It follows that a nation needs to formulate its grand strategy even when there is no recognisable threat to its security, and independent of calculations for war that will influence its development. Further, this process has to be kept flexible so that, when necessary, the development can be altered to cater for the emergence of threats as well as the possibility of war.**

physical and moral forces of a nation, the implementation of national policy, which covered all aspects of social, economic and military activities to achieve national aims, both during wartime and in times of peace. However, after World War II, when the concept was debated and attempts were being made to define it, grand strategy and its overarching purpose started to become obtuse and diffused.

Grand strategy is not only about conducting war efficiently to achieve national security objectives—it is much broader, playing a role even when there is no war, to further national interests and achieve national political ambitions. The

distinction that grand strategy is equally applicable in peace as in war is necessary to be made and understood, since decisions in times of war are not made in a similar manner nor are they the same as in times of peace. The primary characteristics of grand strategy emerge from this overarching understanding; it contributes directly to a longer-term vision of national interests; it encompasses all elements of national power, including the military forces; and is focused on achieving prioritised national objectives.<sup>12</sup> Grand strategy has far-reaching responsibilities vis-à-vis national security, including the alliances of a nation.

It follows that a nation needs to formulate its grand strategy even when there is no recognisable threat to its security, and independent of calculations for war that will influence its development. Further, this process has to be kept flexible so that, when necessary, the development can be altered to cater for the emergence of threats as well as the possibility of war.

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12. Lukas Milevski, "Can Grand Strategy be Mastered", in *Infinity Journal*, Summer 2017, Article 5, vol. 5, issue 4, pp. 33-36, at [https://www.infinityjournal.com/article/196/Can\\_Grand\\_Strategy\\_be\\_Mastered/](https://www.infinityjournal.com/article/196/Can_Grand_Strategy_be_Mastered/). Accessed on December 24, 2019.

The concept of grand strategy is abstract and therefore most scholars approach the explanation of the concept by attempting to define grand strategy. This approach is based on the understanding that concepts are theories about the fundamental constituent elements of the phenomenon being explained and that theories are open to being defined.<sup>13</sup> These definitions therefore tend to be arbitrary. However, two definitions, amongst the large number that is available, have stood the test of time and when considered together could provide an acceptable

understanding of the concept. The first one is by Barry R. Posen, which states that grand strategy is, “a political-military, means-ends chain, a state’s theory about how it can best ‘cause’ security for itself”.<sup>14</sup> The second definition is by Paul Kennedy, an erudite strategist, who states, “To begin with, a true grand strategy was now concerned with peace as much as (perhaps even more than) with war. It was about the evolution and integration of policies that should operate for decades, or even for centuries. It did not cease at a war’s end, nor commence at its beginning.”<sup>15</sup> In an explanatory note Kennedy goes on to elaborate that the longevity of the grand strategy, once it has been formulated, is of critical importance to its effectiveness; in other words, grand strategy has to be enduring. Even though the combination of these two statements acts as a pointer to the explanation of grand strategy, the

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13. Garry Goertz, *Social Science Concepts: A User’s Guide* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2006), p. 5.

14. Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 13.

15. Paul Kennedy, “Grand Strategy in War and Peace: Toward a Broader Definition”, in Paul Kennedy (ed.), *Grand Strategies in War and Peace* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 4.

fact remains that they do not provide an answer to the question, “What is grand strategy?”<sup>16</sup>

Grand strategy is complex—to understand and even more to formulate—because it is the intricate coming together of political, social, and economic power elements of a nation, overlaid by its military power, which grapples with the realities and ever-changing nature of the emerging geopolitical environment to ensure national security and further national interests.<sup>17</sup> From this rather lumbering elaboration emerges another aspect of understanding grand strategy. In a broad manner, grand strategy could be considered to comprise a grouping of sets of ideas, each set containing more than one element in it, rather than a formal document that has been endorsed at the appropriate level. Considering grand strategy as sets of ideas emphasises the inherent flexibility of the concept as well as its enduring nature, which can be adjusted, adapted and altered to cater for the prevailing circumstances in a contextual manner.<sup>18</sup>

The development of ideas itself requires careful study of the broad principles that govern national security and national interests and their interconnected relationship, operating within a dynamic security environment. The long-term interests of the nation must also be factored into the incubation and development of ideas that in turn align with national security. Since it involves long-term planning, grand strategy when it is articulated can only be a blueprint for flexible interpretation in a contextual manner and not a detailed instructive document. The sets of ideas, and the flexibility that they afford, will assist in the contextual formulation of plans to deal with unknown and emerging security challenges effectively, within the broader framework of the grand strategy.

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16. Nina Silove, “Beyond the Buzzword: The Three Meanings of Grand Strategy”, in *Security Studies*, 27:1, pp. 27-57, published online August 28, 2017, at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09636412.2017.1360073>. Accessed on December 24, 2019.
  17. Williamson Murray, “Thoughts on Grand Strategy”, in Williamson Murray, Richard Hart Sinnreich, and James Lacey (eds.), *The Shaping of Grand Strategy: Policy, Diplomacy and War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 3-5.
  18. Hal Brands, *What Good is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), p. 1.

## FUNDAMENTALS OF GRAND STRATEGY

### *Differentiating Grand Strategy and Strategy*

As mentioned earlier, the term 'strategy' is often used in a very loose and broad manner and could convey different meanings in different contexts. Further, in the context of national security, it is almost always connected to the employment of military forces.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand the term 'grand strategy' is not clearly understood and is also used in a vague manner, most of the time. Grand strategy is intimately connected to government policy at the highest level. However, both grand strategy and strategy are about doing things to achieve the desired end-state, which should ensure national security and support national interests.

World War II provides a classic example that illustrates the difference between grand strategy and strategy. The build-up of the US Army for employment in World War II was a political and economic process, which was oriented towards implementing a high-level policy made by the government. This was grand strategy in action. When these forces were assigned to different theatres and strategic commanders such as Eisenhower and Montgomery employed them in campaigns, they were applying strategy to achieve victory, the desired end-state.<sup>20</sup> Strategy should achieve an end-state as close as possible to the political end-state dictated by policy. In other words, policy has primacy over every other process. The intimate connection between grand strategy and policy means that good grand strategies can only be developed on the foundations of good policy.<sup>21</sup> In this case, good policy must be focused on ensuring that national interests are not only protected but also advanced.

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19. In modern times, the words 'strategy' and 'strategist' have been used copiously in the business world and there is a vast amount of literature surrounding 'business strategy'. The proliferation of 'strategists' in the corporate world has made it necessary to state the connection between national security, strategy and military forces.

20. William F. Owen, "Modern Errors in Discussions on Strategy", in *Infinity Journal*, vol. 5, issue 4, Summer 2017, pp. 37-39, at [https://www.infinityjournal.com/article/197/Modern\\_Errors\\_in\\_Discussions\\_on\\_Strategy/](https://www.infinityjournal.com/article/197/Modern_Errors_in_Discussions_on_Strategy/). Accessed on December 24, 2019.

21. *Ibid.*

*What Is Grand Strategy?*

Sir Basil Liddell Hart (1895-1970), the famous British military theorist and thinker, could probably be credited with articulating the concept of grand strategy and bringing it into common discussions. His book, *Strategy*,<sup>22</sup> is a seminal work on military theory and perhaps the most important book on the subject written in modern times. In his explanations he equated grand strategy very broadly to the war policy of the nation, dealing with grand strategy from the perspective of the conduct of war to achieve laid down objectives. These objectives were to be aligned with national security imperatives.

At the very foundational level, grand strategy is a collection of plans and policies that are judiciously combined to produce the process through which national security is assured. The process brings together and harnesses, through deliberate effort, all elements of national power to ensure national security, safeguard its sovereignty and advance national interests. The efficacy of the process is determined by its ability to reconcile and balance the means and the ends. Means include all the resources available to a nation that could be brought to bear in order to achieve the ends—the desired outcome that in turn ensures national security.

The development of grand strategy requires blending together different disciplines such as history, political science, public policy and economics. It is also necessary to bring together the rigour of pure academic research with the real-world experience of practitioners. Grand strategy is also an indicator of why, how and for what purpose nations employ national power. It acts as a marker to understand the reasons for a nation employing its national power, the methodologies that it uses and the objectives that it wishes to achieve by doing so. Grand strategy should take into account the fact that the ultimate aim of going to war is to attain peace, even if the peace so achieved may be from a singular perspective.<sup>23</sup>

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22. For more information see, B. H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (New York: Meridian Books, 1991, 2/e).

23. B. H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (New York: Meridian Books, 1991), pp. 353-60.

During times of relative peace, when the military forces of a nation are not being employed in furthering its security interests, the role of grand strategy is normally not focused on achieving a defined objective, but functions in a more generic manner, improving national security through improving the influence of the nation. In other words, during non-war periods, grand strategy is oriented towards leveraging 'soft power' to enhance national stature and further national interests. This effort would normally be oriented towards the employment of other strategies such as shape and influence, deter and coerce to achieve the desired national objectives. These strategies may or may not require a discrete supporting stance by the military forces.<sup>24</sup> Grand strategy is at all times driven by national security imperatives, foreign policy and statecraft, with minimal influence exerted by domestic political calculations.

The process to develop grand strategy, by virtue of the inherent flexibility that is needed at the core of the strategy, cannot be rigid. It cannot be created from a foundation of one, or multiple, policy(ies) that control history and political developments with absolute certainty. Instead, the process must be based on as broad an identity of the nation as possible; an identity that is influenced by the realisation of how its own people view the nation, what it wants to become, its culture, historical experience, political and administrative institutions, its religious ideology and the core values that its people cherish. On the other hand, the identity of a nation is also directly influenced by 'what it is not' and what it does not want to become.<sup>25</sup> These inputs will have to be superimposed on the process in order to cater for the complexity of prevailing geopolitical circumstances.<sup>26</sup> The identity of the nation and its security priorities will influence the grand strategy developed through this process. Grand strategy will have to be cognisant of the need to align

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24. Sanu Kainikara, *The Bolt from the Blue: Air Power in the Cycle of Strategies* (Canberra: Air Power Development Centre, 2013), pp. 8-14.

25. Francis Fukuyama, "Why National Identity Matters", *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 29, issue 4, October 2018, pp. 5-15, at <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/why-national-identity-matters/>. Accessed on March 3, 2020.

26. Hal Brands and Patrick Porter, "Why Grand Strategy Still Matters in a World of Chaos", in *The National Interest*, December 10, 2015, at <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-grand-strategy-still-matters-world-chaos-14568?page=show>. Accessed on February 7, 2018.

resources, the elements of national power, to achieve national objectives. The balancing of means and ends, at the highest level is achieved by creating the appropriate 'ways'—the grand strategy.

Although grand strategy has been defined in varied ways and these definitions are open to multiple interpretations, there are a few areas of agreement that bind this concept together. First, grand strategy is accepted as a broad framework for change-management that aims to further national interests for the greater benefit of the nation. Such a framework ideally should encompass and integrate all elements of national power and national resources, orienting them towards the achievement of national objectives. Grand strategy built on such a framework would, in some ways, be able to cater for strategic uncertainty of geopolitical developments that would directly affect the security environment.

Second, there is general agreement that prior to starting the formulation of a grand strategy, national objectives and available resources have to be identified, and the development process properly understood as a prerequisite to ensuring that the strategy so developed would be fit for purpose. It is the government's responsibility to ensure that the grand strategy is created through an interdisciplinary process.<sup>27</sup> Only an interdisciplinary process, involving all segments of the government, will be able to cater for emerging uncertainties, brought about by the adaptive behaviour patterns of the stakeholders of the various systems involved.

The third common sphere of agreement is the need for a nation's grand strategy to encompass both the domestic and external geopolitical and security environments, which may influence the security status of the nation either directly or indirectly. There is agreement that in terms of grand strategy it will be difficult to differentiate between the domestic and external geostrategic situations and that there will always be an optimised coming together of the two policies.

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27. Krishnappa Venkatshamy, "The Problem of Grand Strategy", in *Journal of Defence Studies*, vol. 6, issue 3, Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi, 2012, pp. 113-28, at [http://www.idsa.in/jds/6\\_3\\_2012\\_TheProblemofGrandStrategy\\_KrishnappaVenkatshamy](http://www.idsa.in/jds/6_3_2012_TheProblemofGrandStrategy_KrishnappaVenkatshamy). Accessed on December 24, 2019.

The fourth commonality in understanding is that grand strategy ultimately is built on a compromise of competing interests and conflicting values within the nation itself. The compromise is deeply embedded in politics, and in the long term is the culmination of a political process that cannot be separated from the day-to-day political dealings within the country. Success in creating a grand strategy, therefore, is dependent on the unbiased cooperation of the full spectrum of political entities that make up the nation.<sup>28</sup>

So, what is grand strategy? After considering the commonalities in the different explanations as well as the variations in the descriptions that abound in the discussions, grand strategy can be broadly considered to be the theory that facilitates the connection between the nation's primary interests and the employment of the elements of national power in furthering them.<sup>29</sup> It is meant to guide the actions and reactions of the nation, through its policymakers, who must always ensure that they are aligned to achieving national objectives. Further analysis of the concept reveals that when it is intellectualised, grand strategy influences the creation of policies for the individual elements of national power, which can be oriented towards overcoming possible threats. In turn, these policies, individually and collectively, guide the nation's interaction with the rest of the world. They craft calculated and focused initiatives—diplomatic, economic, military and informational—that are meant to maximise the nation's core interests.<sup>30</sup>

In a similar manner to being the connection between national interests and elements of national power, grand strategy is also the continuum that bridges the gap that must essentially exist between short-term actions of a nation and its long-term goals. However, the connection between the immediate and the long term is also influenced by the political process of the nation. In democracies with short electoral cycles, it may be more difficult to ensure the veracity of long-term objectives. In this mould, grand strategy

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28. Ibid.

29. Hal Brands, *The Promise and Pitfalls of Grand Strategy* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, August 2012), pp. 3-4.

30. Ibid.

has to be carefully kept apart from reactions to the day-to-day events or minor crises that face a nation, and focused on achieving the desired end-state based on a nation's long-term interests.

National power stems from a number of different and diverse sources and therefore is multidimensional. It is grand strategy that binds all aspects of national power into a viable whole and focuses it to achieve national objectives, while ensuring a balanced relationship between ends and means. This is particularly important in situations where the means—the resources available—are limited and the ends—the desired objectives—may have to be prioritised. While grand strategy supports the optimised employment of national power to achieve the desired end-state, it also caters to the conservation and protection of the elements and resources that create national power.<sup>31</sup>

Grand strategy is directly linked to long-term objectives and therefore cannot be based on a single principle. It has to be a continually evolving process that is controlled by the sub-strategies that function for shorter durations in order to achieve the immediate and near-term goals. In an indirect manner, the broader grand strategy acts as a link between the present and the future while continuing to prioritise the ends, ways and means equation.<sup>32</sup> This holistic concept has been articulated by Platias and Koliopoulos, "Essentially, grand strategy is a state's theory about how it can 'cause' security for itself, namely preservation of its sovereignty, territorial integrity, and relative power position."<sup>33</sup>

### ***Why Is Grand Strategy Important?***

Grand strategy is essentially an intellectual framework that is founded on a set of core ideas that are at the heart of what the nation values the most and serves the national interests. This framework guides the creation of a synergy within the elements of national power that influences the geopolitical and

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31. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

32. For a detailed analysis of these factors, see Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (London: Fontana Press, 1989).

33. Athanassios G. Platias and Consantinos Koliopoulos, *Thucydides on Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 14.

security environment to enhance national security. More importantly, the synergy thus created retains the flexibility to react to unfamiliar and unexpected developments that could pose a threat to the well-being and/or sovereignty of the nation.<sup>34</sup>

The strategic world view is essentially one of emerging threats—great and small—that have the potential to derail carefully calculated national security initiatives. Therefore, grand strategy must take its cue from a wider appreciation of threats and their possible neutralisation. From grand strategy, national security strategy derives the process to concentrate allocation of resources and their effort to achieve the desired end-state in any confrontational situation.<sup>35</sup> A clear understanding of the strategic world view is an essential ingredient to focus the efforts necessary to safeguard the nation. Grand strategy is important since it provides the highest level of inputs to ensure that the application of national power is aligned with the optimised methodology that will achieve national objectives. This result is often achieved through shaping and influencing the environment or initiating the necessary action needed to realise the required results. In order to fulfil this criteria, grand strategy must never be developed in a prescriptive manner, and for effectiveness it must retain flexibility.

Even in the case of great powers, the resources—finances, military forces, equipment—and, most importantly, the time available, are never sufficient to meet all the requirements of the nation. All nations have to go through the dilemma of appropriate resource allocation and its prioritisation, since the demands are many. This prioritisation is one of the major roles of grand strategy. The other side of the coin is the need for grand strategy to focus on the fundamental security imperatives of the nation and then prioritise them amongst the myriad foreign policy interests and challenges. A well-developed grand strategy should provide a viable template for the nation to deal with the insistent, varied and many requirements of global diplomacy and power

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34. Hal Brands and Patrick Porter, n. 26.

35. *Ibid.*

projection to ensure the furthering of national interests.<sup>36</sup> Although grand strategy will not provide a 'ready-made' solution to emerging challenges, its importance resides in the fact that it does prepare the decision-makers for the unexpected and provides a broad indication of the possible solutions.

The importance of grand strategy lies in the fact that, as a concept, it covers much more than the events that unfold in a battlefield alone and is also something more than the preparation of the military for possible eventualities during peacetime. When understood as a broad concept that envelops the apex considerations of national security it encapsulates critical components of national power and is also influenced by a number of factors that are normally not enunciated. The three major factors that influence the creation of a viable grand strategy are: management of national resources, the role of diplomacy and the political ethos of the nation.

The effective management of national resources ensures the balance between ends and means. Historically, the balance was maintained by the king, who was both the military commander and the person who allocated the resources. Therefore, the allocation could be easily manipulated to ensure adequacy of resources to achieve the desired end-state. However, in modern democracies, the situation is very different. In democracies there is no foolproof method to ensure that the means available to achieve the end-state are adequate. Evidence suggests that in a large number of cases, the means fall short of what is required, thereby straining the ways (strategy) in its attempt to achieve the ends. In a holistic analysis, management of resources could be considered the most critical factor to ensure victory.<sup>37</sup>

Diplomacy plays a role in the well-being of a nation whether it is at war or peace. Astutely managed diplomacy can reduce the number of 'adversaries' and also swell support for a national cause, especially when attempting to

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36. Stephen Krasner, "An Orienting Principle for Foreign Policy: The Deficiencies of Grand Strategy", in *Policy Review*, no. 163, October 2010, at [www.hoover.org/publications/policy-review/article/48786](http://www.hoover.org/publications/policy-review/article/48786). Accessed on December 27, 2019.

37. For a succinct analysis of this aspect of grand strategy, see Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (London: Fontana Press, Harper Collins Publishers, 1989), chapters 2 and 3. Also read Geoffrey Parker, *The Military Revolution* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016). (Originally published in 1988.)

influence neutral nations. As a corollary, the reverse is also true, a diplomatic gaffe can create the exact opposite effect. The role of diplomacy within the broader construct of grand strategy was very clearly demonstrated during the Cold War. The USA, implementing a proactive diplomacy, was able to win more friends and thereby influence a larger number of nations in contrast to what the erstwhile USSR was able to achieve.

Public opinion, especially in democratic countries, is intimately connected to diplomacy and plays an important role in influencing the formulation of the grand strategy of the nation. Public opinion and grand strategy share a cyclical relationship and mutually influence each other. When the grand strategy is appropriate, then it automatically influences public opinion in a positive manner, and in a negative manner when it is found to be less than optimum. In turn, public opinion can influence the creation of grand strategy and influence it to change direction, not drastically, but in a sort of fine-tuning.

The combination of national identity and political ethos of a nation create complex traits that are difficult to accurately guess and analyse, since a large number of inputs go into its holistic creation. The political ethos determines the answer to the fundamental question, “Who are we?”, within the nation. It percolates to the very core of a nation and directly affects the national morale, especially in times of national crises. The political ethos determines the national will to fight as well as to bear the resource requirements of maintaining standing military forces in times of relative peace. The development of grand strategy is also directly influenced by the nation’s attrition tolerance level—the capacity of the nation to absorb losses, both in terms of equipment or resource expenditure and human casualties. In extreme cases attrition tolerance could become the fundamental factor around which grand strategy is developed and flexibly altered to cater for emerging circumstances. The political ethos, sub-factors that influence it and its impact on grand strategy are non-quantifiable factors.<sup>38</sup> They do not relate to resources or any other

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38. For a detailed analysis of political ethos, its connection to public opinion and the sub-elements that affect its development, see Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (New York: Ballantyne Books, 1982).

**Grand strategy needs to retain some amount of flexibility to retain the ability to align itself with ground realities and accept the fine-tuning that will be required to ensure that it is fit for purpose. It should at all times provide overarching guidance to steer the state to stability and prosperity.**

element that is easily tangible and visible, with even public opinion only peripherally influenced by it.

*The Correctness and Success of Grand Strategy*

The fundamental urge of a people and a nation is to survive and flourish. This is an age-old urge of human beings and nothing new, even though the geography, culture, societal norms and myriad other elements of each country and nation vary and are never the same. In modern times, the global environment is close to being anarchic and

the international order threatens the well-being of all nations in some form or the other. Under these conditions, the necessity not only to have a grand strategy but also to ensure that it is correct and appropriate takes on an added impetus and criticality.

The development of grand strategy is a complex undertaking and very seldom does the end product exactly meet all of the requirements of the nation. The world functions in an environment that has far too many variables and no grand strategy is fully correct or infallible. Therefore, grand strategy needs to retain some amount of flexibility to retain the ability to align itself with ground realities and accept the fine-tuning that will be required to ensure that it is fit for purpose. It should at all times provide overarching guidance to steer the state to stability and prosperity.

Further, in order to ensure the security of the nation, its grand strategy would have to be continuously enforced, monitored and adjusted. Thus, in order to be successful, grand strategy as a functioning element at the highest levels of national decision-making must follow a cycle of application, followed by assessment, then readjustment as required and reapplication. This entire process has to be oriented towards balancing the ends and means,

since a critical measure of the correctness of the strategy would be its ability to meet this explicit end-state. In a slightly different examination of a particular grand strategy, its effectiveness can be measured by its ability to ensure that the means are commensurate to achieve the ends.

The success of a grand strategy fundamentally depends on the ability of the national leadership to combine all elements of national power in an appropriate and contextual manner to achieve the immediate goal, while ensuring that this goal is aligned with the declared long-term national interests. In this context, national leadership should include political, civilian and military leadership, in order to ensure that the connection between short and long-term objectives is not lost. The development of grand strategy must take into account a number of imponderables that would be unique to the nation, cater for the dynamic and emerging factors that influence national security imperatives, and the ever-changing security environment that alter and buffet at random.

The complexity of grand strategy is increased somewhat by the fact that it functions simultaneously at the politico-strategic, military-strategic and operational levels while also interacting freely between these levels.<sup>39</sup> The development and application of a grand strategy requires collective wisdom and judgement from the leadership of the nation. However, these are two intangible qualities that are prone to human frailties and, therefore, require careful consideration at all levels that deal with the implementation of the strategies. It is also not possible to develop a successful grand strategy in isolation. A 'correct' grand strategy is the end product of observation, study, experience and the ability to refine what has been learned to suit the

**A 'correct' grand strategy is the end product of observation, study, experience and the ability to refine what has been learned to suit the emerging and changing environment within which the nation has to function and flourish. Developing an effective grand strategy is always an involved and challenging task.**

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39. Kennedy, n. 15, p. 5.

emerging and changing environment within which the nation has to function and flourish.

Developing an effective grand strategy is always an involved and challenging task. However, once this has been achieved successfully, an effective grand strategy provides a number of benefits to the nation. They are listed below, not in any order of priority or importance.<sup>40</sup>

- It acts as a catalyst to create synergies between agencies and elements of national power to focus on collective action.
- It has the potential to enhance bilateral and multilateral communications since openness of grand strategy can create positive engagement opportunities.
- An articulated grand strategy assists the national power elements to develop a plan for the short and medium-term for mutual support that is fully aligned with the national intent.
- It forms the foundational basis for prioritising resource allocation.
- It creates a checks and balances system to ensure that all actions initiated by a nation are in accordance with the core values and interests of the nation.
- A grand strategy provides a framework for long-term planning of national objectives, outside the political election cycle, which would otherwise be absent.

Even though it cannot be considered a strategic master plan for all activities of a nation, especially in an increasingly unpredictable world, the creation of an effective grand strategy is not an unattainable dream. Its importance lies in the fact that an effective grand strategy facilitates the projection of lessons from history, which could provide a linear projection of possible future events.<sup>41</sup>

### *Challenges to Formulating Grand Strategy*

There is no doubt that a sovereign nation should develop and implement

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40. Krishnappa Venkatshamy, n. 27.

41. Hal Brands and Patrick Porter, n. 26.

a grand strategy suited to its unique requirements if it is to assure its own security. This need increases in importance and criticality as the global security environment becomes more dynamic, which in turn makes regional geopolitical environments unpredictable and prone to rapid alterations in its manifestation. Such changes normally lead to uncertainty in the strategic calculations of a nation, which is of paramount importance in ensuring national security. A suitable grand strategy, with built-in flexibility, which encompasses all elements of national power, is the optimum way to ensure that national interests are never threatened by external elements. However, there are many direct and discreet challenges that must be addressed to ensure that the strategy that is developed is successful and would stand the test of time.

**Challenge One.** The first challenge stems from the fact that the formulation of grand strategy is a difficult task. Three major reasons that contribute to it being a difficult process can be identified. First, conceptually, the term grand strategy conveys different meanings to different elements of national power. Since all elements must be involved in its formulation, a concerted effort to develop a strategically overarching strategy becomes difficult to enact. The second concerns the political aspect of formulating a grand strategy, especially in functioning democracies. Ideally, a well-formulated grand strategy should be an agent to build political consensus to deal with national security at the highest levels of decision-making. However, bipartisan support for the process of creating a grand strategy would be difficult to come by in vociferous democratic nations. In some cases, it might even be a divisive tool that would diminish the chances of the nation achieving the highest levels of protection for its national interests.

Third, formulation of a meaningful grand strategy requires a very high level of competence at different levels of dealing with national security imperatives. The competence is required to bring together and synthesise, as a first step, varied inputs and insights to convert them into a coherent whole. The second step would be to convert the roughly worked, but holistic, combination of inputs to an element that can adjust

to the ever-changing security environment while retaining the necessary flexibility to continually be adaptive to the dynamic environment. This process, consisting of the first and second steps, is harder than normally understood and requires genuine interdisciplinary cooperation to be successfully conducted.

**Challenge Two.** The second challenge is a little more complex—the development of grand strategy requires the identification of national priorities, stated and unstated, which may require strategic intervention to be fulfilled. This identification would further have to be fine-tuned to be cognisant of the context under which such an intervention could be optimally undertaken. Grand strategy that is created with the conscious alignment of these two sub-factors, identifying the priorities that need intervention and ascertaining the appropriate context that would provide for a successful intervention, will be able to cater for the uncertainty and dynamism of the emerging strategic environment.

**Challenge Three.** The third challenge is the necessity to be cognisant of the cost of the means required to achieve the desired end-state. At the outset, a cost-benefit analysis should be conducted to ensure that the cost of achieving the desired end-state, in terms of resources expended, is not outrageously high. In this instance, resources would include quantifiable elements such as finances, materiel, and personnel; as well as intangible elements like the goodwill and influence that the nation has with respect to other nations, and national ethos regarding security and related issues. However, in extreme cases, when national sovereignty is directly threatened, it is possible to consider grand strategy without a cost-benefit analysis. This would involve implementing the grand strategy without undue consideration of resource expenditure and dealing with the various fallouts that invariably follow the adoption of such a course of action. In either case, whether a cost-benefit analysis has been carried out or not, it would be necessary to institute a feedback loop, which is the optimum way to ensure that the strategy retains sufficient flexibility. It is imperative to have built-in flexibility to ensure the robustness of the developed grand strategy.

**Challenge Four.** The success of a grand strategy lies in its ability to include all elements of national power within its broader concepts. Achieving the correct balance between individual elements of grand strategy is a greater challenge than the mere formulation of it. An inclusive grand strategy delineates the relationship between the military forces of a nation and the other elements of national power, both in times of war and in other times of relative peace. It also facilitates the combined or integrated application of national power to achieve the desired effect.<sup>42</sup> This approach to grand strategy has been referred to as a ‘comprehensive approach’ and can also be termed a whole-of-government approach to achieving national security imperatives. Only when the challenge of inclusivity of all elements of national power is overcome can the connections between the disparate fields and disciplines of power be established. The pursuance of a common goal by all power elements is critical to the successful implementation of a grand strategy.<sup>43</sup>

**Challenge Five.** The concept of ‘inclusivity’ is easy to understand but a challenge to implement correctly. It is difficult because there is very little development of theory that has so far taken place to facilitate and guide its study. In the absence of clearly elucidated theoretical analysis, the implementation of this somewhat nuanced concept could lead to chaos. The likelihood of confrontation between agencies that control different elements of national power will be very high if the theory is not well-understood.<sup>44</sup> Therefore it will be a necessary part of the development of grand strategy to also articulate the theory underpinning a whole-of-government approach at the fundamental level. The theory should be such that it could be superimposed on any element of national power in order to provide uniformity in understanding national interests and the desired end-state.

**Challenge Six.** The connection between national policy and grand strategy is tenuous and prone to misinterpretation. Both must be formulated in a contextual manner—keeping open the possibility to pursue policy in the long

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42. Lukas Milevski, “Can Grand Strategy be Mastered”, n. 12, pp. 33-36.

43. Harold R. Winton, “An Imperfect Jewel: Military Theory and the Military Profession”, in *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 34/6, December 2011, at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01402390.2011.583389>. Accessed on December 29, 2019.

44. *Ibid.*

**Balancing the enduring with the ability to adapt will require a careful appraisal of inbuilt responsiveness and the reactive capacity of the evolving strategy. It is possible that the manner in which the end-state is achieved may not be the preferred straight line, but a meandering path. The challenge in this case is that there is no foolproof assurance that the grand strategic route being followed is the correct and optimum one.**

been involved in conflicts that seem to have no clearly desired end-state, strategists have started to debate whether or not grand strategy necessarily must subscribe narrowly to the logic of the ends, ways and means process. The other option is for grand strategy to be made even broader than it already is and made to encompass the ends, ways and means process as one part or constituent of a larger whole. The challenge is to define the breadth of such a concept. If grand strategy is to be such a broad concept, it will have to be developed as a guiding idea for all the power elements of the nation to follow, and must essentially have a long lifespan. Such a grand strategy must be perennially flexible, and creating it would be a difficult test. The challenge is to ensure that such a broad grand strategy is practical enough to be implemented, failing which it would gradually sink into irrelevance.

**Challenge Eight.** Grand strategy must be formulated in such a way to ensure that the product is flexible, resilient and also retains the capacity

term, whereas strategy would have to be reformulated when a desired end-state has been achieved. The new grand strategy that is formulated must once again be contextual to be effective. Policies and grand strategies cannot be formulated as open-ended entities, but must retain adequate flexibility to cater for an ever-changing strategic environment.<sup>45</sup> Further, a successful grand strategy cannot exist for its own sake, devoid of connection with national policy and oblivious of the desired end-state.

**Challenge Seven.** In the past few decades, when nations have

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45. Braz Baracuhy, "The Art of Grand Strategy", in *Survival*, vol. 53, issue 1, February-March 2011, at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00396338.2011.555608>. Accessed on December 29, 2019.

for adaptation.<sup>46</sup> Since it must also lead the employment of elements of national power towards a common end-state that will further national interests, the desired objective could be a long-term goal. Balancing the enduring with the ability to adapt will require a careful appraisal of inbuilt responsiveness and the reactive capacity of the evolving strategy. It is possible that the manner in which the end-state is achieved may not be the preferred straight line, but a meandering path. The challenge in this case is that there is no foolproof assurance that the grand strategic route being followed is the correct and optimum one.

**Unfortunately grand strategy is not a product of pure rationality, especially since it has to deal with uncertainties of a chaotic global/regional environment and, that too, with imperfect and incomplete information.**

**Challenge Nine.** Developing a robust grand strategy is a challenging process since it is a complex intellectual process, which requires a clear vision and understanding of national interests and their inherent, and at times intractable, links to national policies. The process also necessitates having to make hard decisions in allocating priorities and accepting trade-offs. As Hal Brands has stated succinctly, "In sum, grand strategy is not simply a struggle against one enemy or another; it is a fight against the complexity, disorder and distraction that inevitably clutter the global scene."<sup>47</sup> Unfortunately grand strategy is not a product of pure rationality, especially since it has to deal with uncertainties of a chaotic global/regional environment and, that too, with imperfect and incomplete information. When the human element gets superimposed on this anarchic situation, the values, experiences, ideology and a number of other elements of the human psyche interact with the process and tend to create a volatile mix from which to distil a coherent grand strategy.<sup>48</sup>

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46. Hal Brands, n. 29, p. 14.

47. Ibid., pp. 10-11.

48. The literature that deals with the human element and the cognitive biases that affect decision-making is large. For example, see Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).

## CONCLUSION

Ideally a nation's grand strategy should integrate its policies and elements of national power into a cohesive whole in such a way that going to war becomes unnecessary or a distant and rare possibility. However, it must also be constructed in such a way that if a nation does go to war, the chances of its victory are optimised and maximised to the fullest. In this context, victory is defined in a very broad manner—as being able to impose a state of relative peace, arrived at by a calculated and proportionate expenditure of resources to achieve the desired end-state.<sup>49</sup> Grand strategy, therefore, has a direct input into the efforts of a nation to develop economic and other resources to ensure that the efforts, both military and otherwise, ensure the achievement of the desired end-state and can be sustained. It goes without saying that the desired end-state in this case should obviously be advantageous to the nation. Grand strategy must also be the guiding factor in the application of the combined and focused strength of all elements of national power in an appropriate manner to cater for the context of such applications.<sup>50</sup>

Grand strategy will also determine the nation's behaviour in the international arena and define its relationship with other nations. It need not always be written down as a document or, in extreme cases, even articulated. In effect, grand strategy could be a set of core beliefs—that determine what security means for the nation—within the policy and strategic decision-making body of the State. It must never be confused with the lower-level strategy that is meant to achieve a defined objective. Grand strategy does not need a recognised enemy to be effective, it only needs to identify emerging threats to bring together all elements of national power in a balanced and focused manner to achieve national objectives. It is a long-term idea that could last for centuries if it is correctly formulated. By the same token, it is a living entity, its dynamism and flexibility providing the vitality for it to grow unhindered.

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49. B. H. Liddell Hart, n. 22, p. 357.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 322.

The appropriate and contextual application of national power must also be regulated to ensure that the future state of peace, security and prosperity, which must normally be the desired end-state, can be achieved and maintained for at least a reasonable period of time. A composite grand strategy could be applied to achieve the end-state and could have a medium-term life cycle in doing so. It is the evolution and integration of policies that must be able to stand the test of time—at least for a few decades, if not more. From such strength in policies, grand strategies derive their own resilience, flexibility and robustness.

Two important factors regarding grand strategy need to be re-emphasised. Firstly, a successful grand strategy does not cease to exist when the actual war/conflict is over; a point made very clear by Clausewitz in his succinct statement that war is “a continuation of policy by other means”.<sup>51</sup> Secondly, a grand strategy is not only about optimally balancing the ends, ways and means and not only about bearing in mind the factors that directly and indirectly contribute to the fundamental consideration of “how to win?”. At the core of a good grand strategy must be the pragmatic consideration of the cost of victory—the cost counted in its broadest sense. It must be able to answer the question “at what cost was victory achieved?” and “were the benefits worth it?”, while taking into account the resources and expenses that would need to be exhausted to ensure victory, whether or not the nation could really afford it.

At the very foundational level, grand strategy defines the way in which a nation achieves its political objectives through the employment of all elements of national power, cohesively and contextually, such applications being determined by the implementation of carefully crafted policies and finely balanced decisions at the strategic political level, which cannot be preordained.<sup>52</sup>

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51. Ibid, p. 353.

52. M. L. R. Smith, “Why Strategy Is Easy but Difficult (at the Same Time): A Short Study on the Complexities of Escalation”, in *Infinity Journal*, vol. 5, issue 4, Article 2, Summer 2017, pp. 10-13, at [https://www.infinityjournal.com/article/192/Why\\_Strategy\\_Is\\_Easy\\_but\\_Difficult\\_at\\_the\\_Same\\_Time\\_A\\_Short\\_Study\\_on\\_the\\_Complexities\\_of\\_Escalation/](https://www.infinityjournal.com/article/192/Why_Strategy_Is_Easy_but_Difficult_at_the_Same_Time_A_Short_Study_on_the_Complexities_of_Escalation/). Accessed on December 29, 2019.