

## A Proto-Theoretical Approach to Analysis

In matters of business and affairs of state there is never any need to avail oneself of the work of academics [dottori] since with their excessive subtleties they are more likely to ruin them than bring them to a good conclusion.

Pope Clement VIII, *La Legazione di Roma di Paolo Paruta (1592-1595)*

What is grand strategy analysis and why is it important? Grand strategy can be understood to be any national strategy “in which all factors bearing on the evolving situation – including economic, political, and psychological factors as well as military – are taken into account over long periods of time, including times both of peace and war.”<sup>1</sup> It is an attempt to unify national policies to achieve long-term goals. Few considerations have the power to trump its importance to a nation’s leaders and citizenry. How does one understand and anticipate grand strategy, as well as the foreign policy behavior that flows from it, or more precisely, how does one do grand strategy analysis?

The short answer is that it takes a dedicated and sustained effort by some of the best minds a society produces. Today scholars, analysts, and strategists collaborate in think tanks, research institutes, and policy groups to share information, insight, and expectations about the way the world works in an attempt to deepen their understanding of strategic situations. Their efforts, as well as this paper, flow from the assumptions that

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<sup>1</sup> Paul H. Nitze, “Strategy in the Decade of the 1980s,” *Foreign Affairs* 59, no. 1 (Fall 1980), 82. This work uses the term “grand strategy” the way Nitze described it.

1) more accurate strategic analysis leads to better-informed strategists and 2) better-informed strategists make better grand strategies.<sup>2</sup> The demand for compelling analysis and effective grand strategies is always very high. Political leaders have sought reliable forewarning of international events since time immemorial. Their governments must have some sense of the future so they can develop effective strategies to meet it. Will neighboring tribes appear suddenly with goods for trade or rocks in their hands? How long until Athens feels powerful enough to attack Sparta? Will a declining Soviet empire rain ICBMs on American cities in the night rather than accept its fate as a collapsing superpower? The future, and indeed often the present, is difficult to discern and very rarely what it appears to be, especially in the field of politics.

The nature of any field of academic research is nonstop investigation and opinionated contentiousness; international relations scholarship is no different. Experts investigate, identify, and debate influences at work throughout events that are yet to occur, happening at the moment, or long since absorbed by history. How important were various structural pressures in the Japanese decision to attack at Pearl Harbor? How justified were Western fears of a Russian plot to expand toward the Persian Gulf? Will China rise to become the next superpower? Unlike the “hard sciences,” international affairs never offers definitive answers, for, human opinions being highly individualized,

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<sup>2</sup> Sun Tzu first formalized this assumption when he stated, “Know the other and know yourself: Fight one hundred battles without danger; Know not the other and yet know yourself: One victory for one defeat; Know not the other and know not yourself: Every fight is certain defeat.” *International relations, of course, will always contain an element of danger. Grand strategy analysis is an attempt to provide decision makers with the knowledge wisdom necessary to make the most successful strategic decisions possible, usually defined in terms of security and prosperity. Available at <http://www.chionline.com/war/Chap-3.html>, accessed 30 January 2005.*

it is usually impossible to find two scholars who say anything is certain to happen, is happening, or happened in precisely the same way, or for the same reasons.

This fog of uncertainty is unsatisfying to intellectuals, of whom are demanded omniscience, and unacceptable to professionals, of whom are demanded prescience. Those who deal in international relations have long been compelled to find means of penetrating its murkiness. Caesars sought auguries in animal entrails. Incan priests studied the stars from mathematically astounding architecture. Military institutions and think tanks simulate countless possible and impossible scenarios. One observer noted, “This was a very natural way of trying to solve a very old problem – decision-making under conditions of uncertainty.”<sup>3</sup>

Decision makers and their advisors gain their required confidence in the decisions that must be made in political life through the belief that they are using the best available means of understanding the forces guiding the future. Techniques vary from age to age, but the methodology of international relations forecasting and strategy formulation remains the same – seek portents of events by the best available methods, then use the best knowledge and wisdom available to analyze their meanings. From these a leader can devise an appropriate grand strategy.

Confidence in any particular method or combination of methods for achieving a measure of foreign policy prescience comes from a combination of methodical analysis of available data and informed intuition. Ultimately, foreign policy predictions and the decisions made in the light of them will always be informed guesses. They vary in

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<sup>3</sup> Shlomo Gazit, “Estimates and Fortune-Telling in Intelligence Work,” *International Security* 4, no. 4 (Spring 1980), 36.

accuracy according to the relevance of the techniques employed, the ability of those involved to acquire, synthesize, and use the information at hand, and plain dumb luck.

The rewards of a successful quest for reliable predictors of international political behavior, whether pursued by mysticism or political mathematics, are great. They include such gains as national survival, prosperity, and security. Yet no single approach to understanding international relations has lasted the twin scrutiny of informed criticism and time.<sup>4</sup> An important reason for this is that no expert or group of experts has or can have an understanding of the entire discipline. While seemingly obvious, this is often a pitfall of theoretical analysis, in which one can mistakenly attribute one particularly sophisticated or novel worldview to all political actors.<sup>5</sup> In actuality, each actor learns his or her own lines best of all. This skews their understanding of the play toward the importance of their own scenes. Positional views will be influenced further by their own beliefs. It matters that Marlon Brando played the Godfather and Winston Churchill led Britain through the Second World War. Complex, thorough, descriptive, and useful analysis of international relations requires understanding of all levels of analysis, from international structures to individual persons.

Within the complexities of international relations are identifiable trends in behavior that can be seen throughout all models and belief systems. They are born of

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<sup>4</sup> *The closest approach to hegemony has been political realism, founded in the United States and Great Britain on Renaissance methodologies, German writings about power, and Western experiences in the aftermath of the First World War. It has lasted longer than any other approach, yet can hardly claim sustenance as universal, since it has an impressive array of detractors.*

<sup>5</sup> *An assumption of worldview homogeneity is a necessary technique of game theory. However, when the context of game situations translates into analysis of real world behavior, this assumption must be discarded in favor of individuality. The reasons for doing so will be addressed throughout this work.*

human strengths and frailties, common to individuals and political entities. These include such well-known phenomena as arms spirals, policy oversteers, and the insecurities inherent in projecting unfavorable power differentials. The identification of such behaviors and the circumstances often surrounding them is the reason for theoretical research.

Yet the problem remains that in the study of grand strategy it is not enough to build models and identify similarities. Every situation brings forth a very different set of players *and* circumstances. Indeed, it cannot always be simplified even this much.<sup>6</sup> Typically prevalent beliefs and goals in a situation are reliable but not infallible indicators of behavior. For example, self-interest and security are overwhelmingly dominant considerations in most foreign policy decisions. However some goals, such as the maintenance of honor or the protection of the powerless, sometimes override broader goals of security, power acquisition, or international peace.

Bernard Brodie noted, “Whether with respect to arms control or otherwise, good strategy presumes good anthropology and sociology. Some of the greatest military blunders of all time have resulted from juvenile evaluations in this department.”<sup>7</sup> It is not merely that “irrational” pursuit of such “extraneous” purposes eventually affects the

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<sup>6</sup> Barry Buzan and Gerald Segal argued, “All human beings carry multiple identities, and these identities are all defined in relation to the surrounding society . . . sets of identities carried by individuals can range from quite simple (self, family, clan) to extremely complicated (self, family, gender, profession, interest group, nation, religion, civilisation, humankind) . . . This double-edged quality of identity – unifying on the one hand, dividing on the other – has been central to the making and breaking of human civilisation throughout history, and seems certain to remain so.” Barry Buzan and Gerald Segal, *Anticipating the Future* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1998) 117.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 332.

overall calculus of power – it often does – but that the degree to which these purposes are either vital or extraneous varies widely depending on who is making the judgment.

Several examples illustrate the veracity of this frustrating inconvenience for the pursuit of general and unified theories of international relations. Recapture of Christian holy lands on several occasions became more important considerations than the usually bitter rivalries among European chivalric states. German leaders believed achieving domestic racial purity outweighed the immense costs of their persecution of Jews. They pursued this goal at a time during which all available resources might have been more efficiently mobilized for their exhausting attempt at German mastery of Europe. These kinds of decisions cannot be understood without an approach to analyzing them that embraces precisely the scholarship that parallels the thinking of those who made them.

### *Purpose and Structure*

This approach to grand strategy is a work of international relations analysis, rather than international relations theory or international history. Its purpose is to find new and more efficient ways for international relations scholarship to assist understanding and projection of grand strategy. It is therefore a work designed to create a reliable, proto-theoretical approach to the study of grand strategy. This is regardless of whether those strategies are static or fluctuating, explicit or unrecognized, successful or failed.

Hans Morgenthau noted all great contributions to political science, from Plato and Aristotle to *The Federalist Papers* and Niebuhr, were responses to challenges arising

from political reality.<sup>8</sup> Modern political reality is that people and their political entities have become so interconnected that grand strategy analysis has become more important and more difficult than at any point in human history. Very few uses of power in one situation do not resonate with great effect elsewhere. Pakistan's assistance in the Afghan War contributes to the decline of Soviet military strength (and diminishes a formerly steady supply of weaponry and parts to its areas of interest, such as India). This induces India to surprise Pakistan, and the world, by testing a nuclear weapon. A boycott of French products by American consumers hopes to punish the recalcitrant ally by lowering the value of French stocks. Many of these are in the portfolios of American investors. Contributors to international events, large and small, often do foresee that their efforts would have such unexpected and profound consequences, especially for themselves.

Interconnectedness enhances the reach and importance of most foreign policy decisions and actions. Yet vast differences in the way policy makers and analysts view the ways in which events affect the international situation persist. These views are important factors of behavior and cannot be ignored by any analyst seeking a true understanding of the situation. Western values, for example, dominate theoretical models and Western policy-making circles, largely because this body of work resides largely in the West. Indeed, Western policy makers can often be classified according to the scholarly terms of "realist" or "liberal institutionalist" as easily as their academic counterparts. However, as R.B.J. Walker reminds us, "The West is not the world."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, "Power as a Political Concept," in *Power*, ed. John R. Champlin (New York: Atherton Press, 1971), 30.

<sup>9</sup> "European philosophy is not the only discourse attempting to give meaning to human experience. The problems confronting modern industrial societies are not entirely the same as those facing most of humanity, although they are undoubtedly structurally

These differences in view and approach are increasingly important as events, decisions, and people integrate ever more tightly. Grand strategy itself has changed with the times. Whereas a long term approach to international relations was once understood to last fifty to one hundred years, today a grand strategy of ten to twenty years can be considered to have completed a full life cycle. As a result, grand strategy analysis is becoming more complex at a time when decision makers seek more urgently to increase the accuracy of their projections. If political reality is that foreknowledge has become simultaneously more difficult to achieve and more imperative, then the challenge arising is to find more effective and more efficient ways of applying the best international relations scholarship to the conduct of international relations.

The task of this paper is to present a way to make international relations scholarship more beneficial to analysts. John Nash's theories on manifolds were breathtaking in their perceptiveness, but would not have earned him a share of a Nobel Prize if they had not been applicable to game theory. It is only when discoveries become useful that they receive recognition for their importance. Today many of the best insights of international relations scholars lay dormant in journals because no methodology has shown how they are useful for understanding real world problems.

The lack of a consistent and impartial methodology for approaching grand strategy analysis has become increasingly indefensible as the world has grown more complex. Non-methodological application of scholarly insights and area knowledge was more effective when the world's great powers were few and fundamentally similar. This

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*related (emphasis added).*" R.B.J. Walker, "East Wind, West Wind: Civilizations, Hegemonies, and World Orders," in *Culture, Ideology, and World Order*, ed. R.B.J. Walker (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984), 6.

is no longer the case. To understand, for example, a terrorist attack by suicide bombers requires more than an understanding of international power differentials. The analyst must first identify the worldview of those involved in making strategic decisions. This requires investigation of traditions of martyrdom, the wide variance in interpretation of Islamic concepts of just war, and other situation-specific concepts. Then the analyst identifies works of scholarship that help explain the ways in which this worldview informs their perceptions.

This puts the analyst as close as possible to the position of the decision maker and allows the most informed and accurate projection possible of the grand strategy that will take shape. Until recently documentation of many beliefs and views was not comprehensive enough to make such an approach to analysis very useful. There was simply not sufficient information and experience available to allow for accurate representation of specific strategic viewpoints. Individuals with expertise in area studies were fewer and access to them was limited. Information technology was not up to the task of gathering and disseminating information about views in sufficient volume and with sufficient accuracy for to be useful for textured analysis in a reasonable amount of time.

Recent advances in documentation and information technology are changing this. At this moment in human civilization it has become possible for researchers to gain sufficient insight into situations to begin to address more comprehensively the milieu of situational peculiarities, belief systems, and divergent goals. Years of delving through endless shelves of dusty books and reams of forgotten paper can be accomplished in minutes or hours in computerized books and electronic document collections. While

complete mastery of an era or even a single event remains impossible, it is possible for such efforts to be effective. International relations scholarship requires new approaches no longer constrained by the limitations of previous research methods and offering a richer type of analysis that takes advantage of the rising tide of information available.

Drawing from seemingly disparate disciplines, this paper examines differences in human perception and the ways in which they factor into the formation of grand strategies. It seeks to take the best ideas of international relations theory and blend them with the unprecedented ability of the modern era, with its massive documentation and dissemination of information, to move closer than ever to an understanding of the people, places, and events specific to any given situation. It offers a means for using international relations scholarship effectively for grand strategy analysis.

Traditional international relations methodology consists of arguing the merits of a particular theory and then testing it against the facts of history. Apart from its logical shortcomings, this is not very useful for the policy maker, who usually knows only a fraction of the information about any given situation. This does not necessarily mean that grand strategy is the result of short-term crisis control thinking. However, historical accounts of grand strategy are written with the benefits of leisurely research and can often lend uncharacteristic coherence to periods that were in actuality highly chaotic. It often seems the grand conspiracies of history are the creations of historians.

Historical accounts contain as many relevant facts as the historian can gather in a reasonable amount of time. National strategy must be made from current perceptions, which are almost always based on less data than is made available to historians. Therefore it makes sense to examine grand strategies in such a way that they account for

available knowledge and prevalent modes thinking at the time grand strategy is made.<sup>10</sup> This is often very difficult to do.<sup>11</sup> When used to evaluate the past, thinking in these terms is very much like an actor's speaking his lines in such a way that he does show awareness of the events that will take place in the next scene. A proto-theoretical approach requires this type of cognitive process, reflecting the information and intellectual predispositions of their day.

### *Why a New Approach?*

What is the relationship between theory and practice in international relations? Ideally, scholars and policy makers can, and should be expected to, work together to produce relevant research and informed strategies. Knowledge of when and how to apply scholarly insights can help practitioners visualize patterns, tendencies, decisions, and outcomes in international politics. Deeper comprehension of generalities in political behavior aids those trying to understand its specifics, and vice versa. Paul Nitze, an architect of American containment strategy, argued strenuously for a strong partnership between academia and government. "The two are inseparable; theory and practice being complementary, they constitute harmonic aspects of one whole."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Jerel A. Rosati discusses the difficulties and procedures for doing so in *The Carter Administration's Quest for Global Community: Beliefs and Their Impact on Behavior* (Charleston: University of South Carolina Press, 1987), esp. Appendix "B: Research Method."

<sup>11</sup> For an example of a methodology of information categorization and decision making, see Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers* (London: Free Press), 1986.

<sup>12</sup> Paul H. Nitze, *Tension between Opposites: Reflections on the Practice and Theory of Politics* (New York: Scribner's, 1993), 15. Quoted in Joseph Lepgold and Miroslav Nincic, *Beyond the Ivory Tower: International Relations Theory and the Issue of Policy Relevance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 1.

The utility of successful collaboration can be seen clearly by taking a moment to recall the development of an American intelligence community. In 1941 Japan surprised the United States with a devastating sneak attack on its naval installation in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The American national security apparatus was deeply embarrassed at its inability to foresee Japanese strategy, and few things cause more action in Washington, D.C. than embarrassment. President Franklin Roosevelt sought William Donovan, a well-known policy maverick, and offered him wide latitude to fix the situation.

Donovan's search for ways of improving analysis took him directly to Archibald MacLeish, Librarian of Congress. MacLeish told Donovan what intelligence experts have been saying ever since, that the best sources of foreign intelligence were books, magazines, newspapers, and maps. The volume of data contained therein is so vast that only professional researchers, with general ideas about the structure of international relations, could prioritize the information and develop coherent analysis of it. The best people for the job, therefore, would be scholars.

Systematic academic research did not play much of a part in American foreign policy until Donovan's professors began turning out their estimates in the 1940s.<sup>13</sup> The Institute for International Studies at Yale had been running intelligence seminars with the state department since the mid-1930s, tackling problems sent up from Washington in small study groups and forwarding the results back every couple weeks. These groups engaged in strategic analysis in its purest form: Arnold Wolfers examined British and

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<sup>13</sup> Ray S. Cline, *Secrets, Spies, and Scholars: Blueprint of the Essential CIA* (Washington, DC: Acropolis, 1976), 42.

French inter-war foreign policy, A. Whitney Griswold weighed American policy toward the Far East; Samuel Flagg Bemis judged American efforts in Latin America.<sup>14</sup>

Their studies made their rounds within the state department, but most officials viewed the Institute as a somewhat superfluous organization that only occasionally provided something interesting or useful for policy makers. Donovan's group of professors initially drew similar derision from State, which believed the experience and intuition of Foreign Service officers were the only reliable indicators of foreign relations. Charles Lindbergh scoffed the group of academics was nothing but a group of Ivy League types, full of politics, ballyhoo, and controversy.<sup>15</sup>

One of the starkest contrasts between the military mindset and that of academia can be seen in performance requirements. Whereas services and bureaucracies rely on clear chains of command and performance of duty to the letter, academia favors the idiosyncratic individual, the person of odd curiosity and distinctive knowledge. The freewheeling thinker who transcends tradition and conventional wisdom receives the highest accolades. In any academic community there are scholars of whom it is said that they have twenty fresh ideas a day, ten of them quite mad, five naïve or stupid, three without point, and two exciting and potentially of great value.<sup>16</sup> Most bureaucracies, seeking to homogenize their members, produce fewer ideas, almost all spoken in whispers until men of rank endorse them. A state department official who proposed two

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<sup>14</sup> Robin W. Winks, *Cloak & Gown: Scholars in the Secret War, 1939-1961*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 42.

<sup>15</sup> R. Harris Smith, *OSS: The Secret History of America's First Central Intelligence Agency* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 1.

<sup>16</sup> Winks, *Cloak & Gown*, 23.

ideas that are dismissed as madness over the course of a year would be cleaning out his desk.

Spurred by MacLeish's advice, Donovan built an analysis apparatus of academics that were specialists in the field of foreign affairs.<sup>17</sup> Many of them kept offices in the Library of Congress, spending their days reading the vast amount of material the library contained dealing with their respective specialties. Gathering information from their field offices around the globe, the scholars would hammer out a picture of events and present a range of policy options and recommendations to be given to policy makers.

This system of consultation and cooperation evolved from these early efforts at collaboration into the modern intelligence and foreign policy communities. Comprised of research institutions, think tanks, policy institutes, and government organs, this set of top minds in international relations scholarship and practice meets continuously to inject academic research into policymaking and political reality into scholarly research. The group of individuals involved fashions an epistemic community of top experts in international relations.

Despite the development of a modern foreign policy community comprised of academics, analysts, and policy makers, within all three groups is a tendency to criticize their colleagues for a lack of cooperation. Joseph Lepgold and Miroslav Nincic noted in their 2001 study of the relationship that academics and policy makers often do not make

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<sup>17</sup> One of Donovan's first recruits was Dr. William Langer, Professor of European History at Harvard. Langer became Chief of the Research and Analysis Branch and brought a number of notable scholars to assist him, including Dr. Sherman Kent from Yale (later Director of the CIA's Office of National Estimates). For a time the group of scholars set up shop in the Library of Congress and around Washington, DC and comprised the bulk of Donovan's staff. Professional research scholars would do the vast majority of research and analysis under the COI, as well as the OSS and early CIA.

very good use of each other's work. "Many scholars no longer try to reach beyond the Ivory Tower, and officials seem increasingly content to ignore it."<sup>18</sup> They point out that these sentiments have become much more common in the last few decades. Arthur Stein points to two other reasons collaboration is not always the rule: "Scholars focus narrowly, with the consequence that what a policymaker needs to know is to be found across disciplines and fields. Moreover, scholars focus on the general and generic, and policymakers are interested in the particular."<sup>19</sup>

One reason the academic and policy communities do not choose to work more closely in all areas is that international relations scholarship is not designed exclusively for use in the policy-making world. The academic world is a protected enclave in which scholars can conduct pure research. Although not quite Jonathan Swift's flying island of Laputa, Academy at Lagado or, mystical island of Glubbudubdrib, research institutions can appear to be incomprehensible and forbidding for those not familiar with them.<sup>20</sup> At first blush many scholars and much of today's scholarship may seem either irrelevant or inaccessible to policy makers.

David Newsome relates, "From a practitioner's perspective, it often seems as if university scholars are increasingly withdrawing . . . behind a curtain of theory and

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<sup>18</sup> *Lepgold and Nincic, Beyond the Ivory Tower*, 2-3.

<sup>19</sup> Arthur A. Stein, "Counselors, Kings, and International Relations: From Revelation to Reason, and Still No Policy-Relevant Theory," in *Being Useful: Policy Relevance and International Relations Theory*, ed. Miroslav Nincic and Joseph Lepgold (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 57.

<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Swift's satirical novel, *Gulliver's Travels* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986 reprint) contains three archetypes of academicians. The mathematical philosophers of Laputa spend their lives in contemplation and only emerge when flapped about the face by servants; the scientists of the Grand Academy at Lagado conduct endless and completely inapplicable research, such as trying to extract sunbeams from cucumbers; Glubbudubdrib is the home of a sorcerer-historian who has the power to summon great figures from the dead and quiz them about their times.

models that only insiders can penetrate.”<sup>21</sup> Practitioners either do not know about many scholarly advances or cannot understand how such progress affects their work. It is here that the work of the analyst is most important – bringing together the work of both fields and making them relevant to each other. Think tanks, policy institutes, round table discussions, and speaker series of scholars and policy makers are very important to the process of bringing their work together and have done much to bridge the gap.

Nonetheless, more remains to be done.

Some theorists, in turn, insist international relations theory is not supposed to be relevant to those investigating foreign policy. An area of intense debate among international relations scholars, this line of reasoning seeks to exclude theoretical models from criticism that they are inapplicable. One of the field’s most influential theorists, Kenneth Waltz, argues research efforts into theory should remain separate from the world of policy.<sup>22</sup> Yet even Waltz and his fellows cannot avoid making policy statements from time to time.<sup>23</sup> Colin Elman criticizes Waltz and other neorealists for their incongruity: “Neorealists who believe that their theories are unable to make foreign-policy predictions, should stop making them . . . In addition, neorealists who believe that they

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<sup>21</sup> David D. Newsome, *The Public Dimension of Foreign Policy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 138.

<sup>22</sup> See Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1979), 69-73, 122-23; Kenneth Waltz, “Reflections on Theory of International Politics: A Response to My Critics,” in *Neorealism and Its Critics*, ed. Robert O. Keohane (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 330-34, 343-44; and Kenneth Waltz, “The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory,” in *The Origin and Prevention of Major Wars*, ed. Robert I. Royberg and Theodore K. Rabb (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 42-3.

<sup>23</sup> Colin Elman, “Horses for Courses: Why Not Neorealist Theories of Foreign Policy,” *Security Studies* 6, no. 1 (Autumn 1996), in particular 10-1 and notes on pages 10, 12-4.

are unable to make foreign policy predictions should start criticizing neorealists who do.”<sup>24</sup>

What this sometimes overstated debate eclipses is the unspoken consensus that pure research has an important role in international relations scholarship. It is the role of the analyst to bring the results of scholarship to policy making, while providing feedback from policy to academic investigations. Just as policy makers benefit from schooling in theory, many theorists benefit from the practical experience of politics. Leggold and Nincic concluded, “Unlike literature, pure mathematics, or formal logic, the study of international relations may be valued largely for its practical implications and insights.”<sup>25</sup> Paul Nitze agreed, “It is by action – in my terms, by the practice of politics – that theory . . . can be kept in touch with reality”<sup>26</sup>

A strong working relationship between academics, analysts, and policy makers is essential to scholarly progress, informed analysis, and effective strategy. Those who make grand strategies get their ideas from somewhere – philosophy, faith, education – regardless of whether their intellectual sources are explicit. Often obscured through filters of practical experience, the elements comprising their worldviews nevertheless are almost always found in the writings of academe. And very few academic ideas cannot find expression in contemporary or historical situations. If done successfully, this approach can make it possible to not only remove persistent errors in strategic analysis, but also will make it possible to retrieve less widely known, but still quite valuable

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<sup>24</sup> Colin Elman, “Cause, Effect, and Consistency: A Response to Kenneth Waltz,” *Security Studies* 6, no. 1 (Autumn 1996), esp. 61.

<sup>25</sup> Leggold and Nincic, *Beyond the Ivory Tower*, 6.

<sup>26</sup> Paul H. Nitze, *Tension between Opposites*, 15. Quoted in Leggold and Nincic, *Beyond the Ivory Tower*, 1.

theories from the dusty shelves of research libraries and place their unique insights in the hands of policy makers.

*Elements of a Proto-Theoretical Approach*

Theoretical models are reliable for discovering the commonalities of international political behavior, but they cannot be employed effectively for grand strategy analysis without identification and understanding of relevant assumptions and differences – in individuals, in cultures, in beliefs, in histories, in worldviews. Only through an understanding of the specifics of a given situation can an analyst begin to understand international behavior and make generalized statements about such elements as grand strategy.<sup>27</sup> At the level of grand strategy analysis one must start from a position of theoretical neutrality. An analyst cannot express a preference for a favorite model and apply it to all of recorded history. The way to achieve this is for the analyst to suspend theoretical preferences and personal beliefs in favor of a pre-theory state.<sup>28</sup> This pre-theory state, or proto-theory, permits the analytical mind no presuppositions about human political interaction. All theories and models from which the analyst may choose are equally valid in that they – and their assumptions – do not yet exist in the analyst’s mind.

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<sup>27</sup> Whittle Johnston, professor of Government Foreign Affairs at the University of Virginia, used to say to the author repeatedly during his lectures, “Foreign affairs are in the details, and if you don’t know the details you don’t know anything.” This statement can be disheartening to any student devoted to broad international relations concepts, which are supposed to abstract from details, but nevertheless remains true.

<sup>28</sup> “Proto” refers to the primordial state from which descendants arise, a proto-theory being a pre-theory state from which any theory can arise. Proto-theory is a concept that applies across many fields of inquiry. See the collaborative study by James Mahoney, Department of Sociology at Brown University, and Gary Goertz, Department of Political Science at University of Arizona, “The Possibility Principle and Case Selection: Choosing Negative Cases in Comparative Analysis,” July 2003, available at [http://www.compass.org/mahoney\\_goertz2003.pdf](http://www.compass.org/mahoney_goertz2003.pdf), accessed 7 November 2004.

The first information, that which disrupts the proto-theoretical state and catalyzes analysis, is an examination of the fundamental beliefs and views held by the entities involved – such as nations, non-state entities, individuals. These views include political ideology, religious obligation, cultural norms, and national style. From these the analyst can distill an aggregated appreciation for “the national view.” National views quite often have counterparts in international relations theory.

The informed analyst can recognize parallels between the foundations of a national view and the assumptions of international relations theories and models. Selecting those academic understandings that “fit” the scenario allows the analyst to bring to bear on the situation the tremendous power of academic insight. The stunningly diverse nature of theoretical inquiry and modeling dictates that, at the level of grand strategy analysis, theoretical insights should be working together. Each approach chosen is modified with specificities of the situation and combined with other applicable approaches. Thus academic insights function as component parts of a single approach that appreciates as many characteristics as possible without applying those insights in ways and to areas that do not fit.

This can be a difficult task. Each analyst is encumbered by his or her own beliefs about international relations and human behavior. In most situations this body of knowledge, wisdom, and assumption serves the analyst very well. It is, in fact, the type of expertise one seeks to develop prior to and during one’s term in office as a policy maker. However, this same set of beliefs can be detrimental – even fatal – to attempts to understand international behavior if it contaminates the first stage of analysis. It prejudices the choice of insights and models used to illustrate a situation. This can cause

mistakes ranging from decreased explanatory power (if the differences between the analyst's assumptions and those in play are minor) to a complete lack of correlation between expectation and outcome. In the absence of unified field theory (which remains unlikely), a proto-theoretical approach to grand strategy analysis is not only the best that can be achieved at the moment, but perhaps the closest approach to one that can be considered valid.

A proto-theoretical state, by definition, cannot be created and has no definable structure. It is not achieved through the laying of foundations. Rather, it is found by removing structures and foundations. This process of "un-creation" has several elements. The following section will discuss five key themes that will assist the analyst's attempt to remove prejudicial theorizing and corrupting tendencies that typically afflict one's thoughts during the analytical process.

### 1. Accepting Limitations of Theoretical Work

George Santayana advised, "Scepticism is the chastity of the intellect, and it is shameful to surrender it too soon or to the first comer."<sup>29</sup> It is important to uphold traditions of scientific skepticism when approaching the study of international phenomena. An analyst should be cautious about embracing too enthusiastically and too often one particular approach to international relations. A healthy reserve of caution can only strengthen a field in which there often appears to be sufficient evidence to support nearly any claim about the workings of the international system. E.H. Carr noted, "No

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<sup>29</sup> *George Santayana, Scepticism and Animal Faith (New York: Scribner, 1923), 69-70. Santayana's approach to philosophy analysis parallels closely a proto-theoretical approach to grand strategy analysis.*

science deserves the name until it has acquired sufficient humility not to consider itself omnipotent.”<sup>30</sup>

Three common potential missteps in this area limit the scientific validity of international relations research. They are the result of a lack of scientific training among professionals. This is hardly surprising; diplomats, policy makers, and international relations scholars tend to come from backgrounds of politics, history, business, and law. Yet as strategic analysis grows and develops into a mature field, it must accept the responsibilities of validity and falsifiable output that are the hallmarks of good research.

The first possible misstep is a propensity for theoretical misapplication. During their examination of the fundamental forces of international politics theorists can often fall to the temptation of applying their work to situations that do not parallel their theoretical assumptions. It is tempting to make logical connections and speculations that are quite often correct and very useful, but nonetheless unsupported by their research foundations. Doing so is akin to abandoning mathematics for numerology; an international relations theorist seeking to convince colleagues of a model’s explanatory power and utility can devolve accidentally into a historical conspiracy theorist.

The second potential misstep is more common to academic research, but especially probable in the creation and application of international relations theory. It is what Stephen Brooks dubbed rather fittingly “the pathology of zero-sum paradigm

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<sup>30</sup> E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1964 reprint), 9.

wars.”<sup>31</sup> William Wohlforth, investigating the use of newly available documents from the Cold War era, noted:

There is no documented case of a noted scholar of international relations (IR) who has changed his or her view of any theory in response to fresh historical evidence. There are, however, cases of scholars who have abandoned theories whole hog in response to other sorts of evidence, such as statistical findings, events, or failed predictions.<sup>32</sup>

He argued that lost in the competitive atmosphere is any concept of how degrees of confidence might be revised to accommodate new data. “It is international versus domestic influences, power versus ideas, or institutions versus interests. Historical researchers find this sort of language off-putting, naive, and obviously wrongheaded.”<sup>33</sup> In a case involving theoretical debate that becomes an all-or-nothing methodology dispute, the possibility of advance by interactive scholarship is excluded because each side dismisses the findings of the other on methodological grounds. In the few situations where this occurs, the possibility for effective strategic analysis evaporates.

Rather than deny the limits of theorizing, why not embrace them? Proficiency with a large variety of analytical tools and appropriate situational selectivity are not only signs of a well-rounded theorist, but denote also an effective analyst of grand strategy.

Describing the forces underlying international events requires a flexible methodology that

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<sup>31</sup> Stephen G. Brooks, “Dueling Realisms,” *International Organization* 51, no. 3 (Spring 1997), 445-77.

<sup>32</sup> In one of the best examples, a founder of regional integration theory abandoned it in part because it failed to anticipate one perturbing variable: Charles de Gaulle. See Ernst Haas, *The Obsolescence of Regional Integration Theory*, Research Series no. 25 (Institute of International Studies, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975). This is similar to Isaac Asimov’s concept of “The Mule,” a man whose extraordinary political abilities invalidate mathematical predictions of historical trends. Isaac Asimov, *Foundation* (New York: Gnome Press, 1951).

<sup>33</sup> William C. Wohlforth, “A Certain Idea of Science: How International Relations Theory Avoids the New Cold War History,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 1, no. 2 (Spring 1999), 47.

allows for updates, changes, and reversals of modes of thought. This should include the use of theoretical knowledge in its appropriate context, taking into account the dynamic nature of the situations to which they are applied.

Doing otherwise is akin to choosing to complete all tasks by using only the hammer in one's hand. No tool is appropriate for every chore. In fact, the more jobs a tool does, so the axiom goes, the less effectively that tool does each one of them. Therefore it makes sense to carry a toolbox filled with different devices for different aspects of the overall work. When all nails have been driven and only screws are left, the best thing to do is put down that hammer and pick up a screwdriver. Likewise, when a group of strategists stops behaving like internationalists and starts acting like realists, it is appropriate to adjust analyses of their motivations, tendencies, and projections accordingly.

A third common misstep is a more extreme version of a zero-sum debate: striving for universality. Advances in theoretical understanding demonstrate very effectively many of the salient features of various international systems and behaviors.<sup>34</sup> The nature of theoretical investigation, however, is that the more situations a general theory describes, the more poorly it describes specific expressions of them. The closer any theory gets to universalism, the less it useful it becomes. A unified theory of

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<sup>34</sup> *Examples of these attempts include Samuel Huntington's civilization theory, Paul Kennedy's study of great power rises and declines, and various studies of arms spirals, deterrence, and interest balancing. See Samuel P. Huntington, The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986) and Paul Kennedy, The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers, Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000 (New York: Random House, 1987).*

international behavior, therefore, is self-defeating.<sup>35</sup> While universalism remains the Holy Grail of international relations theory and, like the venerable object itself, will most likely never be found, it nonetheless has proven an irresistible quest.

Theories of international relations are built on rules – rules such as the drive for security. But these rules are not universal; every actor has the capacity to define an individualized set. While some rules are commonly held, none are universal – there will always be actors for whom assumptions of a theoretical model do not apply. Structural realist analysis, for example, pursued at all times and through power calculus alone becomes impossible. The variables that comprise power can never be truly distinguished in any objective sense. For pure structural realism to work it would have to be based on universally accepted philosophies of power and identical perceptions of comparative strength. Such homogeneities of opinion and perception are not a characteristic of humanity. Differing philosophies of the nation-state and differences of opinion over the quantity and quality of power held by one's self and one's neighbors have marked every conflict in recorded history. Were this not the case then actual contests of power would be unnecessary—anyone could do the math and know the outcome beforehand.

Theories of international behavior can never fully embrace the complexity of understanding the individual goals and situations of a fixed set of over seven billion souls at any particular moment, much less a constantly regenerating and evolving world

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<sup>35</sup> Harry Eckstein noted, “International relations theories are written to explain relations among states in all times and places. As a consequence, the degree to which their validity hinges on the explanation of any one episode is always unclear. For this reason, “critical cases”—that is, events that must conform to a theory's expectations if the theory is true—never occur in international relations.” Harry Eckstein, “Case Study and Theory in Political Science,” in *Strategies of Inquiry, Handbook of Political Science 7*, ed. Fred I. Greenstein and Nelson Polsby (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1975), 79-137.

population over a significant period of time. No method for understanding how individual perceptions of even one common influence on behavior, such as power, can even justifiably claim widespread and enduring acceptance of academic or policy-making circles. 'Ends' being individual and disparate, 'means' always will be defined and weighed differently.

Faced with the inconvenience of its impossibility, the pursuit of universality seeks inexorably to avoid admitting its fate by one of two ways: complexification or oversimplification. Complexification places theory in the position of attempting to model the entirety of international relations by inclusion of as much data and as many models as possible. The eventual end of this attempt must be a model so saturated with information that is indistinguishable from the world itself and therefore not very useful.

Oversimplification, the more common error, begets a tendency to attempt an explanation of the entire milieu of international politics as the result of one or a few tangible causes.

Unfortunately human perceptions, desires, and actions are never that simple.

Oversimplification, a necessity for theorizing, leads to some useful abstractions but not very useful models.

Humanity has a nasty habit of invalidating even the most advanced predictive techniques. The reality of international political behavior is that, while historical tendencies can be demonstrated, specific behavior cannot be predicted with absolute certainty. There is no universal theory of international relations because people and situations are fundamentally different from one another in ways that disrupt all attempts

at certainty.<sup>36</sup> The conditions of history and politics fluctuate from satisfying the conditions of one theory to another, or none at all. Rather than seek a “theory of everything,” proto-theory seeks to make every theory potentially useful.

## 2. Broadening Theoretical Concepts to Examine International Behavior

Abstraction from reality is vital to good research. It is the means by which scholars discern patterns amid the swirling clouds of data. Grand strategy analysis, however, occupies the space between theorizing and perception and requires both to be effective. Scholarly insight combines with situational peculiarity to create a picture of both individual perception and likely method of response. These are the driving factors of international behavior and cannot be considered extraneous to grand strategy analysis. Only when international relations scholars ask broader questions of how the influences they identify relate to international behavior as a whole does their work move from the fringes to the center of debates over grand strategy.

The overwhelming majority of competition transpires outside the realm of any particular expression of behavior, such as war, and affects national power far more profoundly than a series of skirmishes or even decisive battles. Turnover of British Hong Kong to communist China, development of a European identity, and the sudden emergence of industrial powerhouses in previously unremarkable places are examples of developments altering dramatically the perceptions, calculations, and foreign policies of

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<sup>36</sup> Edward Lorenz demonstrated the ways in which very small, almost imperceptible changes in initial conditions can cause significant changes for expected outcomes in complex systems. His equations described what came to be known as the “butterfly effect,” a metaphor in which a butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil causes a snowstorm in Japan. See Edward N. Lorenz, *The Essence of Chaos* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993).

the world's nations. Limiting analysis, therefore, to any particular variable removes the majority of history from the data set and is therefore not very useful for the study of grand strategy. It forces evaluation of broad generalities based on uncommon occurrences.

William Wohlforth, commenting on the developments in international relations scholarship, concluded that writings in the field show an increased preoccupation with the special problems inherent in the study of world politics. "Not only is international politics a "complex, path-dependent system" in Robert Jervis's words, but the phenomena we seek to explain tend to be extremely rare events: wars, crises, alliance changes, extended rivalries, and arms races."<sup>37</sup> International relations theorists act, albeit correctly, from their belief that such spheres can be studied separately. Studies of war initiation, economic patterns, trade policies, and other international phenomenon yield valuable insights into the foundations of particular policies.

This research agenda, however, can become entrenched in one particular aspect of international behavior and ignore the fact that, for grand strategists, all these seemingly separate spheres are part of the larger picture. An adversary in one sphere cannot be an ally in another at this comprehensive level of analysis, for linkage occurs far too often in political maneuvering to be ignored. Aggressive political maneuvers bring about grain embargos. Human rights concerns affect trading preferences. By separating what is, in the minds of policy makers, inseparable, international relations theorists create their own

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<sup>37</sup> Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Social and Political Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997). Quoted in Wohlforth, "A Certain Idea of Science," 42.

theoretical conundrums and render their work less useful to those trying to understand behavior.

Broadening examination from one particular concept to international behavior as a whole allows an analysis to call upon the entire realm of scholarly work on international relations. A model examining major war initiation, for example, becomes a model for the severity of change in overall strategy when its conceptualization expands beyond the decision for war. It then becomes useful for identifying systemic influences that could lead a nation to join OPEC or request Soviet military advisors. Studying the whole of behavior, rather than a specific expression of it, can provide early warning of evolving grand strategies.

A proto-theoretical approach should not be misunderstood as a comprehensive treatment of concepts and traditions that inform the making of *all* grand strategies and foreign policies. Such a generalization would be self-defeating, for it violates the central assumption of the approach – namely, that the concepts and traditions in the minds of decision makers at the times of decision making, rather than general concepts or universal theoretical models, are the most reliable guides to understanding international behavior.

Development of theoretical models remains an important pursuit in the vocation of international affairs and plays an important role in the work presented herein, but the development of models is not the goal of this work. It demonstrates instead a means of fitting these models to international events more effectively by describing ways of choosing them appropriately and making adjustments to theories to help them apply to reality. This work seeks not to advance theory itself, but the application of it.

It is important to note that, when examining grand strategies of the past, the theoretical models one selects need not have existed during the time under examination. The views prevalent at the time can and usually are most effectively described by theories and models devised after the fact. A true picture of the strategists' worldviews must be limited to the theories and models available at the time, but analysis of the behavior that flowed from these views should not be. History is frozen in time, but analysis can and must be responsive to progress.

The task here is not to criticize the policy maker for missing something that appears obvious to modern eyes; it does little good to upbraid Franklin Roosevelt for being oblivious to an insight of dynamic differentials theory.<sup>38</sup> Instead modern tools of analysis can be used to identify important influences at play in historical situations, much in the way modern theories of evolution and genetics offer a better understanding of species long extinct. Illustrating influences that could not have been understood at the time is instructive for those using those same theoretical tools to analyze present and future scenarios.

### 3. Choosing Applicable Scholarship

Expanding the area of inquiry to international behavior has two important effects for the use of theoretical models. The first is that it makes the choice of model dependent

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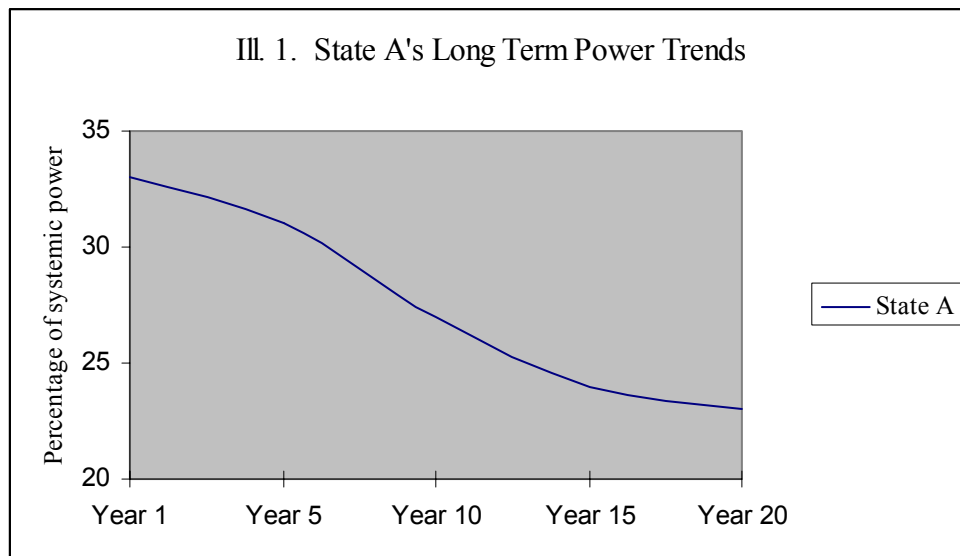
<sup>38</sup> Bernard Mennis writes, "Of course, an especially knowledgeable person, through introspection, may ...become cognizant of the fact that the beliefs he holds are not isolated entities. The relatively few individuals who have achieved this level of sophistication are aware of the systemic nature of their political thinking." Bernard Mennis, *American Foreign Policy Officials: Who They Are and What They Believe Regarding International Politics* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1971), 149.

upon the situation. This opposes the traditional scholarship of testing of a model by choosing case studies that fit its assumptions. In practical international relations preset behavioral rules do not always define the progression of situations—situations often define behavior in unexpected ways. Incorporating this feature into analysis prevents the observer from influencing results prematurely with analytical frameworks.

If the situation is one in which a state's decision makers believe their military strength can be used to secure economic stability through conquest, then analysts would do well to select scholarship that incorporates these views. If the situational parameters are different – for example, if they are leaders of a theocracy that maintains the consequences of declining relative power position are less severe than the disfavor of the Supreme Being – then theoretical assumptions made about goals, beliefs, and rationality must be different as well. This calls for an altogether different set of theories and models to describe it.

The second effect of broadening the area of inquiry is the type of strategic response indicated by theoretical models may vary drastically from the expectations of those model's original designers. For example, in an illustration of relative power trends State A perceives itself about to undergo certain and inevitable decline (Ill. 1). How will its leaders respond? A theory of war initiation indicates the time is ripe for violence. A theory of trade policy indicates the state will deny trade of strategic resources to its competitors. But threat and response need not flow from the same set of theoretical assumptions. A state feeling threatened economically can respond militarily, and vice versa. Proto-theory accounts for the likelihood those scholarly insights best describing

the way a nation perceives its situation may not be the same ones that best describe its strategic response.



Information about a state's perceived capabilities and situational peculiarities, therefore, is vital for understanding grand strategy. Does a state have temporary offensive military superiority and leaders who believe it can be used successfully? Or does it have instead abundant natural resources and little domestic industrial capability? A threat indicated by realist analysis of relative power levels, for example, might be met by a response flowing from idealist belief in the influence of international institutions.

In his investigations into Soviet worldviews, for example, Wohlforth found that perceptions of power could be more dynamic than measurements of material relationships. "Rapid shifts in behavior may be related to perceived shifts in the

distribution of power which are not captured by typical measures of capabilities.”<sup>39</sup> Even during periods in which actual power did not appear to change, he has found perceptions of power that shifted and demonstrated how those shifts influenced behavior.<sup>40</sup>

Theoretical examination of grand strategy begins with a series of questions. Who are those who make grand strategy and how do they view the world and their place in it?<sup>41</sup> What do they want for themselves and their nation? What traditions, values, and events influence their decision-making? Are their policy circles thinking about the lessons of Munich, Vietnam, or 9-11? Once a picture of how a state sees itself and its goals emerges, it is time to look at that state’s options and capabilities. What does the state have at its disposal? On which battlegrounds are its leaders most familiar and most comfortable—international institutions, military campaigns, business practices? A nation run by its business elite tends to maneuver better in the more familiar fields of trade and finance than armed conflict and can be expected to steer conflict toward financial areas where they have a comparative skill advantage.

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<sup>39</sup> William C. Wohlforth, *Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions during the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 294.

<sup>40</sup> “All policies are future-oriented . . . A decision to reform, retrench, or go to war reflects expectations about future trends and assessments of the likely effect of today’s policies on tomorrow’s distribution of power resources.” William C. Wohlforth, “Realism and the End of the Cold War,” *International Security* 19, no. 3 (Winter 1994/95), 98.

<sup>41</sup> There are two important areas that fall under the concept of “worldview.” The first is the worldview of the individual policy maker. This view is difficult to determine beyond a reasonable level of precision. For one attempt to build models of individual worldviews in an administration, see Rosati, *Carter Administration’s Quest*. The worldviews of individual policymakers often have determinate effects on specific policy. The second is the aggregate national worldview taken from the multitude of individual views, which typically align themselves into several recognizable viewpoints and wrestle for prominence as “the aggregate worldview.” It is this emergent “mainstream” worldview that determines a nation’s grand strategy.

Beliefs define perceptions.<sup>42</sup> It should be clear that, strictly speaking, an individual does not usually express a “belief system.” Rather, policy makers express preferences regarding the issues on his or her desk. It is up to the analyst to detect patterns and impose structure to their beliefs.<sup>43</sup> Understanding grand strategies requires that events be described according to the viewpoints of those perceiving them prior to application of theoretical models. A volcanic eruption may seem an unambiguous event, but viewpoints, defined according to belief systems, matter a great deal. Someone who believes gods reside in underground may define volcanic activity as outbursts of a god dissatisfied. Someone who believes gods do not exist at all may perceive the activity as a dangerous geologic event. These viewpoints have profound consequences for the strategies that a state will follow.

In many situations an understanding of deep-seated beliefs can help define choices far more profoundly than an understanding of relevant experiences. Christian tenants against suicide hold firmer for someone who truly believes that God watches, ready to inflict terrible punishment for taking one’s own life. On the other hand, the good

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<sup>42</sup> *The interaction of beliefs and perceptions was the subject of a study headed by social psychologist Milton Rokeach. His group conducted the Great American Values Test in 1979, an experiment in which the researchers broadcast a television program of the same name designed to influence viewers to adopt or strengthen support for a specific set of values, attitudes, and behaviors. The study then sampled for viewers and tracked its effects on their beliefs. Sandra J. Ball-Rokeach, Milton Rokeach, and Joel W. Grube, The Great American Values Test: Influencing Behavior and Belief through Television (New York: The Free Press, 1984). In his earlier writings, Rokeach pointed out that belief systems serve two powerful and conflicting sets of motives: “the need for a cognitive framework to know and to understand and the need to ward off threatening aspects of reality.” Milton Rokeach, The Open and Closed Mind; Investigations into the Nature of Belief Systems and Personality Systems (New York: Basic Books, 1960), 67. See also Milton Rokeach, Beliefs, Attitudes, and Values: A Theory of Organization and Change (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1969).*

<sup>43</sup> *Mennis, American Foreign Policy Officials, 149.*

graces of Allah and an eternity of bliss with seventy virgins can be a powerful incentive for a young Islamic man considering martyrdom. And death means something much different to one who believes good works are rewarded by reincarnation onto a higher path of life, encouraging a strategy of nonviolence by Buddhist monks that utterly confuses Chinese soldiers in Tibet. Analysis that begins with proto-theory and then selects those works of scholarship that parallel the views and assumptions of the strategists involved can account for these differences.

#### 4. Reducing Reluctance to Use Mathematical Representation

A primary obstacle to effective use of international relations scholarship is a prevailing reluctance among policy makers and analysts to use mathematics to examine and display long-term trends. “The attitude of mainstream scholars of world politics toward the relationship between science and history is much like the Bolshevik’s attitude toward the relationship between socialism and capitalism.”<sup>44</sup> This is not surprising, given the non-scientific backgrounds of most practitioners and scholars. However, this reluctance to embrace such a powerful set of analytical tools is inappropriate, given the numerous pressures for clarity and precision. Verbal depictions of a nation’s relative power, for example, are often quite useful, but far more effective are visual illustrations of the approximate scope and velocity of perceived long-term trends.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Wohlforth, “A Certain Idea of Science,” 39.

<sup>45</sup> This is not to say that all international relations scholars eschew mathematical representation. Several journals of international relations, such as *American Political Science Review* and *American Journal of Political Science*, can be considered to concern themselves primarily with mathematical representation. Yet the field as a whole tends to shy away from the technique. For a list of authors that work in this area, see Claudio A. Cioffi-Revilla, *Mathematical Models in International Relations: A Bibliography*, Institute

While a certain areas of international relations scholarship lend themselves easily to scientific descriptions and have done so (i.e. international economics, population growth), mainstream approaches rarely chose to use them for grand strategy analysis. One reason for this is lingering confusion about the scientific method. Initial attempts to imbue the field of international relations with scientific credibility brought about nearly universal embrace of the scientific method in works of or involving theory. Researchers specify theories (hypotheses), lay out variables, make predictions, and compare them to historical situations (evidence) in the case studies (tests) that follow theoretical writings. While useful for many fields of scientific research, this method does not make sense for the study of international affairs. Why not? Simply put, the scientific method rests on a set of preconditions that international relations cannot satisfy.

First, the conditions of international relations situations are never repeatable. While laboratories can be functionally alike, nations cannot. Similarly the date on a calendar can be eliminated when studying the behavior of molecules, but a border conflict between India and Pakistan after they tested nuclear weapons looks very different than it might have in 1983. People and events in history are stochastic; no two sets of conditions in international relations have ever been alike in any scientifically absolute way.

Second, grand strategists are never equivalent. Two hydrogen atoms may be expected to behave exactly the same under the same circumstances, but two leaders cannot. Neville Chamberlain was not Winston Churchill and certainly not Adolph Hitler. Third, results, even in similar situations with similar decisions, do not occur in exactly

the same way or to the same degree. Facing a rising colossus on its eastern border, the German general staff twice enacted the grand strategy underlying the Schliffen Plan – defeat the West and turn to face Russia. It failed both times, but came a great deal closer to succeeding in the 1930s than it did in the 1910s. The study of international political behavior simply cannot meet the criteria under which the scientific method is valid, for nothing in international relations is truly repeatable.

While the dynamic nature of the international environment precludes use of the scientific method, this need not deter completely use of quantitative techniques for the study of international behavior. Scholars often encounter situations in which a foreign word or phrase conveys the overall conceptions or minor subtleties of a situation far better than the language in which one is writing. Similarly, there are certain nuances in analyzing international relations, such as changing power differentials over time, that offer their insights more readily through mathematical representation than through the written word.

John Gillespie noted, “The inconvenience of clumsy language becomes a hazard when constructing complex arguments.”<sup>46</sup> In many cases, the “picture” produced by demonstrating graphically various elements of behavioral logic, here most often in the language of differential calculus, is worth a thousand written words of explanation. James Rosenau explained, “While mathematical tools are not inherently superior to any others, and while their use does not necessarily preclude reliance on other modes of inquiry, they are distinctive . . . They require explicit premises and procedures that clearly

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<sup>46</sup> John V. Gillespie, “Why Mathematical Models?” in *Mathematical Models in International Relations*, ed. Dina A. Zinnes and John V. Gillespie (New York: Praeger, 1976), 47.

differentiate them from historical, case-study, quantitative, and journalistic forms of investigation.”<sup>47</sup>

It is important to note one should not believe everything that flows from quantitative analysis, nor should it be considered *a priori* “scientific” because it has an identifiable result. The greatest utility of quantitative analysis lies in its ability to illustrate trends in situations that may have gone unnoticed otherwise. Numerical outputs do not “prove” ideas of international relations any more thoroughly than any other logical argument. If there is one great lesson of international relations scholarship, it is that there are no immutable laws dictating human behavior, only general tendencies identified by historical expertise and contextual similarities.

It is important for grand strategy analyses to avoid discussions of exactitude. Theoretical works examine perceptions, trend lines, and critical points, none of which correspond precisely with objective reality. The “wooly” quality of international relations scholarship—such as the inevitable inexactitude of measuring perceived power – make exact numbers or percentages impossible, and the promulgation of such figures inherently misleading. International relations theories and models, properly conceived, are imprecise and do not provide predictions. They illustrate tendencies and probabilities in international behavior.

While Rosenau stated correctly the potential utility of quantitative analysis, everyone who studies political science discovers the truth in Mark Twain’s quip that there were “lies, damn lies, and statistics.” The use of mathematical techniques such as

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<sup>47</sup> James N. Rosenau, “Intellectual Identity and the Study of International Relations, or Coming to Terms with Mathematics as a Tool of Inquiry,” in *Mathematical Models in International Relations*, ed. Dina A. Zinnes and John V. Gillespie (New York: Praeger, 1976), 5.

differential calculus can be highly misleading to both practitioners and observers, especially when done incorrectly. Special care must be taken to define variables when possible, describe the limitations of representing intangibles, such as relative power, and above all ensure the end results of using these techniques are relevant and understood properly in the context of that which they describe. Rosenau cautioned of the possibilities of misusing advanced mathematics:

All of this [mathematical descriptiveness] is the case, of course, only if the axioms and model are sound, creative, and relevant and the analyst knowledgeable and skillful as a mathematician. As in everything else, mathematical analysis is no more cogent than the creativity with which it is used. There can be poor mathematics, just as there can be poor history or poor quantitative interpretation. In addition to mastering the discipline of mathematics, the analysts must have a feel for the substantive problems to which the discipline is applied, if the full power of the mathematical tools is to be realized.<sup>48</sup>

Recognition of the possibility of inaccuracy and misrepresentation should not deter international relations analysts from examining work that uses such techniques. They need not be suspicious of the results of such studies solely because they are untrained in and insecure about the methodologies involved. The test is not whether one can follow the progression from one equation to the next, but whether one is impressed with the insights application of mathematical reasoning yields.

The largest obstacle to the use of advanced mathematical techniques in the study of geopolitics remains lingering bashfulness on the part of scholars, policy experts, and policy makers. Gillespie described the question as follows: “Why mathematical models? Because of the precision of the language for handling difficult and complex questions. Why not mathematical models? Because it is a language not shared by many

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

international relations scholars.”<sup>49</sup> This justification is hardly sufficient, for it is unconscionable for the study of international phenomena to be hobbled by unwillingness on the part of international relations scholars to learn a new language.

Rosenau echoes these arguments powerfully with his own views on the matter:

Few would dismiss an analysis written in German or Arabic because they lack knowledge of these languages. On the contrary, the tendency is to assume it is sound and valuable (why else would it be available?) And to seek help in getting a translation of its essential thrust. Why should we take any less constructive an attitude toward mathematics! It too is a language.<sup>50</sup>

Not only is mathematics a language; it is the most widespread language in the world. All those with at least a rudimentary education speak its basics. Indeed, mathematical representation can be considered humanity’s only truly universal dialect.

#### 5. Altering Analysis for Each Significant Change in Perception

National viewpoint and strategists’ choices of best grand strategy available are both the result of a collection of ideas and beliefs that must be understood prior to choosing the theoretical concepts that will help better understand international behavior. A static picture of perceptions, however, is insufficient for a full understanding of the way grand strategy forms, evolves, and changes. To be truly effective for the policy maker this kind of analysis must be dynamic and respond to the acquisition and development of new information.

Relative power analyses tend to remove the first level of analysis on the misconception that the vicissitudes inherent to individual perceptions contaminate

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<sup>49</sup> Gillespie, “*Why Mathematical Models?*” 59.

<sup>50</sup> Rosenau, “*Intellectual Identity,*” 8.

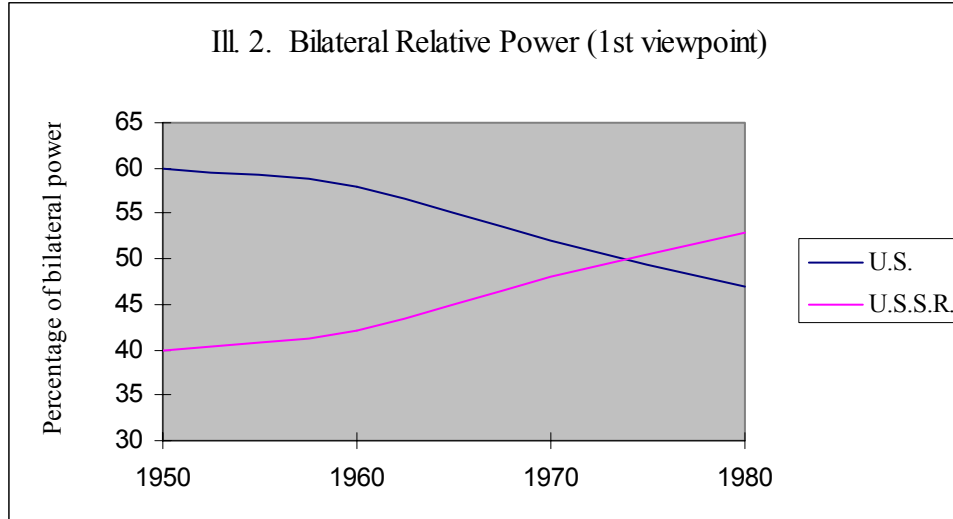
scientific results. In many fields this can be the case, but in international behavior this is not so. It is rather like studying how hard a pitcher can throw a baseball without taking into account how motivated the pitcher is to do so at that moment; intangibles such as anger and resolve are 'scientifically' excised, leaving one with a pure but highly inaccurate projection of what will happen. Factoring in the way perceptions influence beliefs about the future is an important step toward accuracy.

Emerging events and situations will alter perceptions of future trends. This, however, is only half the battle, for the concept of constantly variable perceptions must be applied to all moments leading up to the point of analysis. Perceptions of the past alter as easily and often as perceptions of the future. How effective was the Monroe Doctrine at keeping European Powers out of the western hemisphere? Why did Japan attack the United States? How significant was détente in American efforts to rein in Soviet adventurism? As the answer to these and similar questions changes with each news item, journal article, or book, perceptions of long-term trends change as well.

A nation whose policy makers have an understanding of a situation in the past that differs significantly from the understanding of that situation held in earlier days has its own particular understanding of present trends and projections of their nation's course in the future. Analysis of grand strategy must be changed each time decision makers' historical perceptions change, regardless of whether that change is the result of shifting opinions among a group of decision makers or changes in that group's composition.

History abounds with examples of individual behaviors that do not fit any prediction made by pure theorizing. The Mongol general Mongke brought his unstoppable horde to the gates of Vienna, but reversed course and marched back to

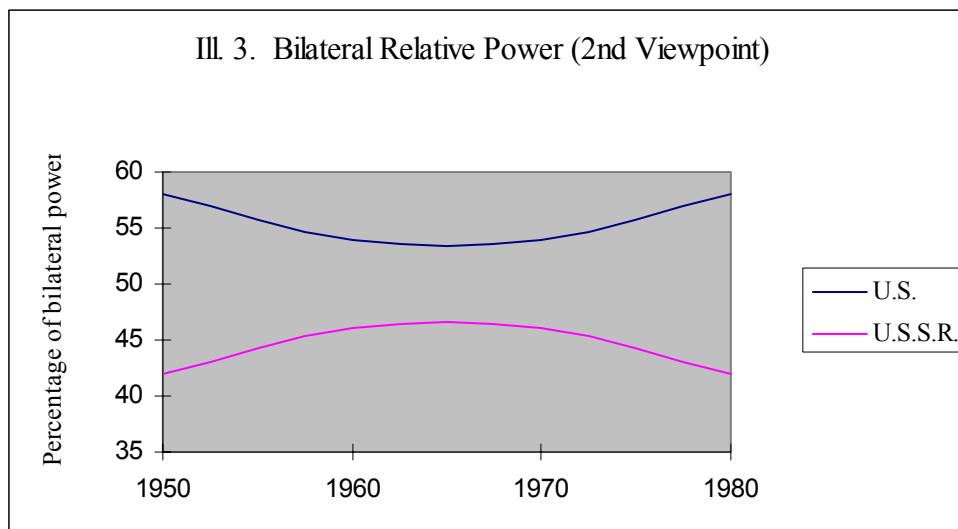
Karakorum to attend the Khan Ogodei's funeral and help choose his successor. Charles de Gaulle refused to employ tactics brutal enough to quell the revolt of the *pied noirs* in Algeria, allowing instead a sizable and valuable portion of France to declare independence. The Truman administration refused to use the American nuclear monopoly to establish its dominance over a rising and increasingly belligerent Soviet empire, a decision that seemed incomprehensible to Saudi king Abdul Aziz.<sup>51</sup>



Belief and circumstance affect the way people perceive past, present, and future trends. Analysis of grand strategy must not be blind to new information that may alter drastically the insights that are useful. Perhaps in the latter half of the Cold War much of the U.S. policy community believed they had been in a state of power parity with the

<sup>51</sup> An account of his reaction can be found in Robert Lacey, *The Kingdom: Arabia and the House of Sa'ud* (New York: Avon Books, 1981), 281.

Soviet Union since 1950 (Ill. 2). If the waning years of the Cold War brought about the view that the United States had always been the stronger of the two adversaries and destined to win the struggle, that revision in historical viewpoint makes the long-term trend look very different (Ill. 3). Subsequent policy in the waning years will be reflective of this shift in view.



Recognizing a change in the way history informs understanding is an important step in understanding how policy makers perceived long-term relative power trends throughout the period studied. Only when this information is incorporated in a continuous fashion can the grand strategies chosen at the time begin to reflect perceptions accurately and be useful for understanding current and future grand strategies.

### *Conclusions*

The knowledge and experience of a master poker player are required to grasp fully the relationships between a few people holding small portions of a 52-card deck and seated in a tight circle. How, then, is an analyst to grasp fully the relationships of seven billion people holding a wide range of interests and residing in nearly two hundred nations? The unsatisfactory answer is that such a task is, of course, impossible. Like poker, grand strategy forecasting remains an art, a game of calculated risks. International affairs professionals, bearing responsibilities of national security and increasing demands for prosperity, engage in this unending search for a competitive edge. What are the other players' tells?<sup>52</sup> Are true intentions any easier to read across national borders than a baize-covered table? Are bluffs more visible in a stirring national address than a highly raised bet?

What this approach offers is a way of counting cards, a methodology for using the most relevant international relations scholarship to analyze state behavior. A proto-theoretical approach to grand strategy analysis is by no means infallible, but it provides a reliable guide to understanding a wide range of international behavior. The analytical techniques seek to give scholars, analysts, and statesmen a way of pooling their efforts for the betterment of all three fields of endeavor.

Ultimately, the study and exercise of international political power require an instinct and talent for the field that cannot be replaced by scholarship and analysis – a

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<sup>52</sup> *In poker a player's tell is an action, usually unconscious, that lets other players gain insights into that player's cards. Twisting a wedding ring, holding one's breath, and darting one's eyes around are common tells associated with bluffing. Nations often exhibit similar "tells," such as troop movements or aggressive posturing, that experienced diplomats recognize as giveaways of that nation's unseen objectives.*

truth largely obfuscated as mathematical understanding and computing power have become increasingly potent. The technological and methodological advances of the twenty-first century provide an endless series of new and powerful tools of analysis. These can augment greatly the descriptive power of an idea, but can never replace the intangibles of talent, creativity, and imagination that impart quality to the work produced. Applying the methodology described in this section will yield new, different, and hopefully more accurate understanding of grand strategies, specific developments, and the course of human events. Misapplied, this approach can produce outright falsehoods and also, more dangerous, the most pernicious and misleading of truths. Combined with the inherent abilities of a strong analyst, it can be a powerful addition to the field of international relations, both for scholars and practitioners.