THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

FALK AUDITORIUM

STRATEGY AND GRAND STRATEGY

Washington, D.C.

Friday, March 21, 2025

This is an automated transcript that has been minimally reviewed. Please check against the recording for accuracy. If you find any significant errors of substance, please let us know at events@brookings.edu

DISCUSSION:

MARA KARLIN
Visiting Fellow, Strobe Talbott Center for Security, Strategy, and Technology,
The Brookings Institution

MICHAEL E. O'HANLON
Philip H. Knight Chair in Defense and Strategy, Senior Fellow and Director of Research,
Foreign Policy, The Brookings Institution

JOSHUA ROVNER
Associate Professor, School of International Service, American University
Nonresident Senior Fellow, Strobe Talbott Center for Security, Strategy, and Technology,
The Brookings Institution

* * * * *

O'HANLON: I'm Michael O'Hanlon with the Foreign Policy program at Brookings. We're starting at exactly ten o'clock. You are very good to get up early on a cold spring morning and be here for what's going to be an excellent discussion. I'm very happy to be able to introduce Professor Joshua Rovner from American University and Brookings to talk about his book, Strategy and Grand Strategy. And we're here with also Mara Karlin, one of our superstars from both academia and government. So the game plan for this morning, after a couple more words of introduction will be that. Josh will come up and give an overview to the book, and then Mara and I will join him on stage for a discussion, and then we'll bring you in. And we've got also some audience questions from online, but welcome those who are watching on the web, but very much welcome you as well. Look forward to your comments and questions when we get to that part of the conversation.

Just a couple more words on Josh and on the concept that he's exploring in the book, and then we'll hear from him directly. He hails from San Diego, at least in terms of his undergrad college. and then came northeast to Boston and did his PhD at MIT. He's been a professor now at American University for some years after having been at SMU and with the Naval War College for a stint. He's an award-winning author who's written on intelligence a fair amount in his career previously, including a book 15 years ago that won a couple big awards, Fixing the Facts, a discussion of intelligence and politics in the United States in the making of national security policy. And just one quick sort of tease about the book. I'll give you, there are a number of historical examples and by the way, he'll be signing books afterwards for anyone who would like to purchase a book. But one little tease that I know both Mara and I really enjoy this part of the book and I'm sure we'll hear more about it later.

But we know who won the American Revolution, right? We won and we benefited both militarily and politically. But there were two other big powers that were involved in that war, Britain and France. France was on our side, so they won militarily as well, Britain lost, but Josh will have some interesting insights as to who benefited more between the two of them in the long term in grand strategy. And he'll explain the difference between strategy and grand strategy and how you can win the war and lose the peace or vice versa. But with a lot of good examples that give meat and elucidation to these concepts. So without further ado, please join me in welcoming Josh Rovner.

ROVNER: Well, thank you very much for the kind introduction, Mike. Thanks to Brookings for organizing, especially Emily Kimball for her help in setting all this up. And most importantly, thank you all for coming out on this blustery Friday morning to talk about some big issues, strategy and grand strategy. Now, these are big theoretical concept and big abstract ideas. Strategy is a theory of victory and war. grand strategy is a theory of security and peace time. But I would also argue that these are pressing concerns today. These are not just abstract academic ideas. One observation, war is spreading. War is spreading fast. The number of armed conflicts worldwide has doubled in the last 10 years. We've spent a lot of time, understandably enough, of talking about Ukraine, Gaza and those conflicts, but worldwide incidents of violence is going way up. So we need to study strategy in these cases as well and try to figure out what is going on.

Grand strategy is also a very pressing concern here in the United States because our grand strategy after many decades of continuity is suddenly in question. The very familiar ideas about the liberal rules-based order, which were the foundation of American grand strategy after World War II, are now very much an open question. We're not sure exactly where the direction of the administration's grand strategy will go forward, and where the direction of American grand strategy will go in the future. So we should talk about these issues, both because they're theoretically interesting, I think, and because they explain a lot of history. as Mike teased in the introduction, but because they have very real implications today. So what do we mean by these two ideas?

Well, again, strategy is a theory of victory. How do you win a war? Now, conceptually that sounds simple, but it's anything but. Because if you think about strategy, the basic problem is how do you translate something which is inherently destructive, military force, into something politically constructive. How do you break things in the service of creating a better piece in the aftermath? This idea is fundamentally intentional. And soldiers and officers and scholars and theorists and political leaders have wrestled with this problem for millennia. How do you translate a destructive instrument into something politically constructive in the aftermath? Grand strategy is a related but different idea. It's not a theory of victory, it's a theory of security. How do you make yourself safe in an unsafe world? What is your theory of politics?

How do you translate all of the instruments of national security into durable national security? Now, while these two ideas are related, they're not the same. often use them interchangeably in public discussions, strategy and grand strategy, but they're actually quite distinct, and the differences matter a great deal. Indeed, failure to distinguish these two terms can get you into a lot of trouble. If you assume that strategic success is the same as grand strategic success, you likely to misunderstand the implications of war. You may find yourself in the position of Great Britain after the American War of Independence, which had lost the war in strategic terms, but clearly came out ahead in terms of grand strategy. There's a lot of peculiar ways in which these two ideas interact historically.

In the book, I run through some of them, both in a theoretical discussion and a series of historical cases. I'll talk about some of the main themes now and we'll have a nice discussion with Mara and Mike and then hopefully open it up to Q&A. So first big theme, strategic blunders can undermine even the best grand strategy. You can have a very coherent and practical theory of security. You can design the perfect military. You can have very wise diplomats executing your grand strategy but if you make big mistakes in a war, you can ruin it all. As a way of illustrating this idea, I look at the Peloponnesian War, the famous war of Greek antiquity between Athens and Sparta. And in the book, I walk through both countries, both of the Greek great powers' grand strategies. And they both had good grand strategies. Like Sparta and Athens, they should have been secure for a long, long time. They had crafted their economies.

They had crafted their militaries in order to keep themselves safe. And they had built on their comparative advantages. Sparta, the land power, and Athens, the dominant sea power in ancient Greece. The problem was they fought very badly. They went into war with each other with a series of strategic fantasies about how they could win without challenging the other side directly. The upshot of this was that neither of them could win, but neither of them were willing to give up. What followed was nearly 30 years of fighting a desperate, long, exhausting war of attrition, and it ruined them both. Bad strategic decisions can undermine an otherwise excellent grand strategy. Second theme in the book. Strategy and grand strategy often work at cross purposes. What's good for strategy may not be good for grand strategy.

What's good for grand strategy might undermine your ability to fight and win. The key case of this, as I illustrate in the book, is the American War of Independence. France fought brilliantly. French strategy was excellent in the American War. If you like the Fourth of July, thank a Frenchman. Their strategy was brilliant. Their joint operations were great. Their diplomacy in support of the war was great. The problem was the war was incredibly expensive. And it saddled France with a huge debt burden that it was unable to accommodate in the aftermath of the war. It played a non-trivial war in the French Revolution that followed. So strategic success for France meant grand strategic failure later on. The British experience was opposite. Losing the war was the best thing that ever happened to the British Empire.

Losing the war dramatically and shockingly forced a hard conversation in London about the real sources of their national security. And British leaders finally came to the realization that they were, after all, a naval trading empire. They did not need to dominate the North American landmasses. They didn't have to sit on huge swaths of territory in order to prosper and grow their navy and be secure. So in the British case, strategic failure leads to grand strategic success. A third theme, uncertainty about grand strategy can lead to half-hearted hedging strategies in war. If you're not sure about your grand strategy, you're probably not going to fight coherently and well. This happened to the United States and Vietnam. The major period of US escalation and the Vietnam War came between the Cuban Missile Crisis and detente. In this period of flux, where Americans were still fighting the Cold War, but they were very, very reluctant to provoke another major crisis with the Soviet Union.

They weren't sure about their own grand strategy in these critical years of escalation. And the result was a half-hearted, frustrating, and ultimately unsatisfying series of approaches towards the war in the mid and late 1960s. A fourth theme. Some policies make sense at one level and make no sense at the other. Some decisions which seem fundamentally absurd at one level make a lot of sense at the other. For instance, nuclear weapons. A nuclear war is a logical absurdity in terms of strategy. No political object could possibly be worth the cost of fighting. There is nothing quite important enough to suffer the effects of a nuclear exchange. So in terms of strategy, nuclear weapons just don't make sense. and yet we keep building them.

And yet we keep modernizing them, and not just the United States, but other nuclear powers as well. China, Russia, both in the midst of nuclear modernization programs. Why would they spend so much time and energy investing in weapons that they're probably never going to use? This doesn't make sense in terms of strategy, but it makes a lot of sense in terms of grand strategy. Nuclear weapons and the use of those weapons in can help with things like alliance diplomacy, coercion, bargaining leverage. So there's other purposes that make sense at the level of grand strategy, even though nuclear weapons don't make a lot of sense in terms of old-fashioned strategy. The final theme is about the influence of new technologies on strategy and grand strategy.

And this I think is particularly important given the amount of time we're spending talking about AI and other emerging technologies today. I went back historically and asked how past strategists looked at new technologies when they first arrived. So for instance, the advent of modern large capital ships in the 16th century or modern bombers in the 20th century. How did people look at those at the time? Well, there's a strange pattern seems to attach to all of these cases. When people first see a new technology like this, they get really hopeful, really optimistic. Ha, this is the new thing, if we master this technology. We can not only win our next war very quickly, but we can dominate the international politics after the war. This will serve our strategic needs and our grand strategic needs. At the same time, after that period of optimism and hope, they get scared. They get fearful.

What happens if our adversaries master the technology first? What happens if our great power rival figures out how to use a capital ship? What happens if our enemies figure out how to organize a bomber fleet before us? Well, we will be in tremendous danger of losing quickly and dramatically, and of being permanently in an insecure position. But after a while, the hope and the fear give way to a kind of resignation, because it turns out that it's really hard to operationalize new technologies. for practical reasons. It's hard to organize a battle fleet. It's hard to organize a bomber fleet. There are practical real-world inhibitions and organizational limitations, which makes it hard to actually use these remarkable new technologies. This isn't to say that they're not used. Only that the initial burst of hope and of fear gives way to a kind of resignation about the limits of technology for national security. And what does that say about today?

Well, let's think about AI for a second. This is dominating our attention, especially dominating our conversations of the US and China. There's clearly a lot of hope and a lot of fear. We see value in these technologies is taken lead to more effective use of national security instruments, more effective use of the armed forces. But we're also frankly terrified about them. The next war might be won by whoever's robots work the fastest. And there's an idea that in future wars, things will happen really, really fast because of AI. So we better get there first. We're not yet to the point of resignation. I think that at some point we will. I think that at some point people will realize the difficulties in translating new technologies into real bureaucracies and to making them work effectively both in wartime and in peacetime. But we haven't got there yet. My hope is that we get there before we get to any real conflict, because if we don't, we're in for, I think, a very rude surprise. So, I'll leave it there, and I look forward to questions and comments from Mara Karlin and from Mike. Thank you very much.

O'HANLON: Josh, that was great, thank you. Very provocative, I love the framing, the clear concepts, the big picture thinking, but also the references to history and examples. So thank you and congratulations for strategy and grand strategy. And Mara, I would just love to invite you to offer your reactions at whatever level and whichever cases you wanna focus on.

KARLIN: Yeah, super. Thanks y'all so much for coming today to talk about this terrific book. It is really delightful. Thank you for writing it, Josh. And it gets at, you know, a wide range of historic case studies, helps us think about the future, as he was noting as well. It talks about the problems of poor guidance, as we see in the case of the Brits talking to themselves and disagreeing over what they should actually try to do. And in particular, it talks about the importance. of telling a good story, and that's a really hard thing to do in strategy-making, which is often seen as like wonky, if you will, but ultimately if you think about it, that's actually quite short-sighted, right?

If folks don't understand what is it you're trying to do, if they can't figure that out in a compelling narrative, it kind of doesn't matter, right? You're not going to convince them. I also really appreciate how much This book talks about the danger. of obsessing over strategy or grand strategy at the expense of the other. Now we just heard that there may be contradictions, there may even be some mutual exclusivity as you're pursuing one of these, but you sure have to be cognizant of that, right?

You sure want to be able to figure out kind of those costs and benefits of what you're trying to do. And I think that kind of leaves us with an important takeaway that I'll get to after to speak a little bit about two more. big takeaways. So what I appreciated most about this book is it kind of helped me figure out how to think about two sets of conflicts that I've obsessed a bit over. So the first is America's post-9/11 wars. And, you know, Josh has this wonderful line. He's not talking about the post-9/11 wars, per se. It's right at the intro, and he says policymakers wonder why they entered into a war without a coherent strategy and why it is so hard to keep fighting, excuse me, to stop fighting.

Soldiers wonder why they were sent. That's the post-9/11 wars in two sentences, it seems to me, right, where the United States spends two decades waging wars in far-off lands with ambiguous at best results. And I found that a lot of how he kind of offers this frame of strategy versus grand strategy. these kind of contradictions of where was this ephemeral theory of victory, while obsessing over this subjective feeling of security, very much colored how the United States pursued these post-9/11 wars. In my last book, The Inheritance, America's Military After Two Decades of War, I point to two crises that actually, I think, are related to what we've seen in this good piece of work. A crisis of confidence within the US military, where folks are effectively saying, what are we doing? What are we achieving? It feels like we're pouring sand into the desert.

The other is this crisis of caring, where a public doesn't really pay attention or frankly even care about what's being done in its name, not much is being asked of it. And effectively, I think you see these crises manifest through these post-9/11 wars. And they can be explained in many ways by these disconnects that he points out in this book. You know, you all might remember that in the months just after 9/11, there was this pretty controversial piece written by the British historian Michael Howard. And he says, we should think of this like a police operation, a law enforcement operation. And now, sitting here a couple decades later, in many ways, I think that that's exactly what this book pinpoints us toward. The other case study that I think this work does such a nice job helping elucidate is the Middle East wars, where folks are so obsessing over security, where many don't even think about victory.

Victory is just inconceivable, incomprehensible, so it becomes all about security. And there are inevitably going to be some major costs to doing so. So given that, what's kind of the big takeaway, if we wanted to operationalize some of what we're seeing in this book? And it seems to me that big takeaway is that you have got to engage in regular and consistent assessment of what you're doing and what is being achieved. You need to have some serious and meaningful feedback loops so you can figure out where are the contradictions in my strategies, in my grand strategy? Where is there a mutual exclusivity? And am I actually privileging one over the other in ways that make sense?

O'HANLON: Mara, that's great. Josh, if you don't mind, I will offer a couple of thoughts myself and then give the floor back to you. And then we'll have just a little more conversation before bringing in others. Mara, thank you for your excellent reactions. I wanted to begin by thanking Josh for a way you've helped me with my forthcoming book, because people define grand strategy differently. And you helped me clarify the distinction. So yes, there's a big distinction between strategy and grand strategy. There are also. differing nuances and how different people define grand strategy. And I guess my thought here will be partly a question to you to wrestle with this as well. In my forthcoming history of U.S. defense strategy over the 250 years since the revolution, I say that grand strategy, for the United States at least, is about promoting our security, but also promoting our power.

And I don't believe you can understand American history. by thinking of our westward expansion and then the rest of our military activities just in terms of making ourselves more secure. I read us as being fundamentally ambitious, not just pursuant of security. And so for me, grand strategy, depending on the country and the options before it, is not just about making your existing territory and people safe, but potentially also expanding your long-term power. I think you were alluding to that a little bit with the British in the 19th century who were about to have this masterful, worldly empire. So they were much more ambitious than just protecting the islands. For them, I think their grand strategy was about promoting their national power as well. So I just wanted to put that question before you, but also thank you for your very clear, helpful definition of grand strategy and especially the distinction between grand strategy and strategy.

The other point I wanted to raise and really just building on Mara, but maybe in my own way and maybe even more as a provocation, not to you two, but to the way we think about American history. And this also builds on themes I've been wrestling with in my last two books. I think our grand strategy since 1945 has been astoundingly successful, at least until now, in terms of promoting a peaceful world, in terms of great power peace, you point out correctly, Josh, there are a lot of smaller conflicts today, and there's the threat of great power war. But we've had 80 years without it, essentially. And we have helped the international order become the most democratic and prosperous in its history by far.

So those are pretty big accomplishments that I think the United States and its grand strategy deserve considerable credit for. But our strategies on the battlefield have been our worst in history. And it's not the fault of our men and women in uniform, although I do think everybody deserves blame for Vietnam. I think Vietnam was an abomination in how we fought it. Not the individual people who wore the uniform, but the leadership, both civilian and military. I think that was our worst war in my opinion. but in general, we've struggled because the wars themselves were hard, because we weren't sure if we were going to go for goal A, B, or C. In Korea, we changed our mind about goals. In Iraq and Afghanistan, we try these enormously complex state-building enterprises.

And depending on how you want to code victory and defeat, we sort of fought to a stalemate in Korea. We lost in Vietnam. We won in Desert Storm. But our long-term, 35-year experience in Iraq is a stalemate at best, and then we lost in Afghanistan at least in terms of the military operations. But when you think about the grand strategic effect, the fact that we would fight so hard in Korea and Vietnam in the Cold War, places we didn't really even care about that much in terms of George Kennan's definition of the five vital centers of world power, in terms of our own declaratory posture in the 1940s and 50s. We fought so hard in these places that we certainly signaled we would be willing to fight for Europe and Japan to anybody who would have thought otherwise.

So I would argue, and here is a compliment and a gratitude expressed to the men and women who fought in Korea and Vietnam, even though in Vietnam in particular we failed, and in my opinion didn't even fight very well. Nonetheless, the national resolve that was demonstrated there had a certain

grand strategic benefit in terms of undergirding our commitment to our major allies and our willingness to fight in their defense. And then secondly, and related to the wars time the broader war on terror, if you will. Even though we lost in Afghanistan, and I'll focus on Afghanistan in particular, we lost on the battlefield because the Taliban won. They're in power, our friends are not. We lost militarily. But we also spent 20 years killing a lot of al-Qaeda and a lot of Taliban to the point where I don't see the new Taliban government in Afghanistan looking for a fight with the United States. I was strongly opposed to the withdrawal in 2021.

But having said that, so far at least, my worst fears have not been realized. Because we signaled and demonstrated through 20 years of ultimately a failed military strategy that our grand strategy of resoluteness in terms of protecting ourselves and our allies was still pretty robust. We were not the paper tiger Osama bin Laden accused us of being in the late 1990s. And so even by losing that war, we showed a certain grit and resoluteness and frankly even strategic patience and resolve that I think make it hard for anybody to think they can attack the United States and get away with it, or even our allies, and get away with it. So in that sense, I would wanna say that this distinction between strategy and grand strategy helps me make sense of the last 80 years in a way that would not be nearly so clear in my own mind, at least, without your book. So thank you and back to you.

ROVNER: Thanks very much. A few comments in response. Maybe I'll work backwards and I'll start with those and then come back to Mara. Part of the reason I wrote the book was to try to make sense for myself of these very same issues. One of the interesting things that I find in studying history of war, not just U.S. wars, but others, is this pervasive sense of puzzlement in the aftermath of what just happened, right? What did we do this? Why were we doing this? What happened? How do we understand the results? And you see this historically across time and space, right? The dominant emotional reaction to War is bewilderment, right? So I'm trying to help. I'm trying to. use a fairly straightforward framework for trying to answer some of these puzzles about what happened and why did we just experience that.

I start with trying to simplify the meaning of grand strategy to get to your question What do I mean by the term? It's true, for anybody who has read the grand strategy debates over the last 30 years knows

that there are a zillion definitions of grand strategy. Everybody has a particular approach, and that's fine. I think that's healthy, to have lots of people coming at the subject from different directions. I choose simplicity, maybe because I'm a simple-minded person. But I like simple, straightforward concepts that At least I can remember. And so I define grand strategy as a theory of security. What is the story you tell about how you are going to use your resources to make yourself safe? Now, Mike, you're absolutely right that this is a narrow conception of grand strategy. Others define grand strategy as the pursuit of security and power. Others define it as the pursuit of security and power and wealth. Others define it as the pursuit of security and power and wealth and values. That there's a normative goal associated with grand strategy.

Those definitions aren't wrong, but you'll note that the one thing they all have in common is security. Security is the necessary prerequisite for everything else. If you are not secure, you cannot expand your power. If you are not secure, you cannot increase your wealth. And if you are not secure, you cannot successfully push your values and your normative beliefs in other places. Security is the foundation. So if you can craft and implement a theory of security, then you have choice. Then you have the ability to increase your power or increase your wealth or to live up to your values. But security is the foundation. And that's why I start with that simple definition. starting with that simple theory of security, I think does shed a lot of light on the post-9-11 history of counter-terrorism operations. And you both raised this in your comments. The United States just last week announced an airstrike in Somalia. It was barely a blip in the news. Substantial airstrike, right, against al-Shabaab in Somalia as part of a long-running counterterrorism campaign which has been going on decades.

The United States has been pursuing, in addition to the wars, the big wars in Afghanistan and Iran, has been pursuing this continuous campaign of counterterrorist operations basically nonstop since 9/11. That campaign doesn't make a lot of sense in terms of strategy, because there is no clear moment of victory. It's really hard to define what victory means in an open-ended counter-terrorism campaign, right? It does, however, make a lot of sense in terms of grand strategy. It makes a great deal of sense. It is, as Michael noted, a kind of policing. And in the book, I use an analogy from Great Britain's experience before World War II. Great Britain was involved in using its early air force, the Royal Air Force, in what it called air policing.

Great Britain did not have the financial resources between the two wars to try to garrison its empire. Great Britain was under increasing financial stress. It simply could not hold all of its. imperial possessions, right? But he didn't want to let the rebels win. So it looked for some way, some relatively low-cost way, to keep rebels at bay, and it used its air power and what it called air policing. The goal was not victory. The goal was not to comprehensively defeat its rivals. No, it was just to mitigate the threat enough so that it could carry on. And there are some similarities between the British approach to air policing and the American approach to counterterrorism. What do we do? Well, we use intelligence-driven operations that rely on special operations and autonomous vehicles. These are relatively inexpensive operations, especially compared to large wars. They're not terribly controversial.

They barely make a blip in the American public conversation. They're not politically radioactive in any way. So multiple administrations from both parties have carried on. But again, the logic of these operations isn't to win a war. It's to keep militant groups, non-state actors, from getting too dangerous. We I don't wanna see another al-Qaeda emerge. We don't want to see groups that are that powerful and wealthy and well-organized emerge who could conduct other spectacular attacks against the United States. I guess that gets me to Mike's other comment about how we evaluate the war in Afghanistan. How do we evaluate the post-9/11 experience? I would also commend Mara's book. It's I agree entirely in terms of the war in Afghanistan, it's a failure. In terms of achieving the strategic goals that we set out, replacing the Taliban with a durable, self-sustaining government, that's obviously a failure. It's a clear strategic loss.

But in terms of grand strategy and counter-terrorism, I think the record is much better. Al-Qaeda was very rapidly undone after 9/11. The Bin Laden, Al-Qaeda was quickly unraveled. Its leaders were sent either killed or captured or sent into hiding. Its resources were attacked as well. And Al-Qaeda was never able to replicate what it did on 9/11. So in terms of the grand strategical of reducing our own sense of insecurity, those operations have been successful. But in terms of strategy, in terms of winning the war, it hasn't. And I think that this framework helps explain those. Finally, just a word on or two words on Mara's comments.

First, I agree that storytelling matters. Human beings love stories. We do. We love stories. And not just because we want to be entertained. but because stories help us understand, right? Tell me the story about how using your army in this way at this time will lead to some political goal. Tell me the story about how you will use your other instruments of national power, diplomatic and economic and so forth, for this broader goal of making yourself feel safe. If you can tell an effective story, people will work for you, right? And this makes me concerned about the present. This makes me very concerned about the present. The Trump administration is, well, the nature of its grand strategy, I think, is a little bit unclear. I think it's unclear because Trump wants it to be unclear.

Trump views uncertainty as something to be desired. He thinks that it's bargaining leverage. Being unclear and uncertain and having a reputation for being untethered, he thinks. gives him coercive leverage in bargaining with allies and adversaries alike. So I understand, I think, the appeal of that to Trump. But there's a real danger that if you cannot articulate a clear grand strategy, it's going to be very hard to organize the national security bureaucracy. It's going to be very hard to achieve lasting unity of purpose and unity of effort if your grand strategy is based on this uncertain and transactional approach to national security.

O'HANLON: Fantastic, and we have some questions from the online viewership or in anticipation of the event, and I'm sure here in the audience that will want to get at grant strategy and strategy today. Before we get to that, though, let me dust off a couple of the questions that have a more historical framing that we've already received and interject those. And then, Mara, if you wanted to also offer other thoughts at this point, please go ahead. But let me just, for both of you, tick off the three or four questions that I don't think we've gotten to yet in our comments, but that were received prior to the event. Do democracies have unique difficulty in adhering to long-term grand strategy, and are there good historical examples?

And then, of course, the United States in particular. We've been talking about some American grand strategies that we can infer, and some of them were stated, containment as a concept. But does the U.S. political system tend to struggle over its history? That would be a second question. And then, finally, what's the real goal of grand strategy today, victory or security, victory or peace? And there

may be a distinction. So I thought it was a smart question. So let me put those before you, and then we'll come back and invite you all to get into this in a couple of minutes. Josh, you wanna start?

ROVNER: In terms of, is it harder for democracies to build and execute a grand strategy? I think it's hard for everybody. I think that democracies and autocracies struggle with grand strategy but for different reasons. So democracies struggle with grand strategy because democracies our raucous political spaces. And democracies encourage political arguments. Democracies encourage opposition. They encourage different parties to try to undermine each other. They accept that this is a fact of political life. So maintaining coherence over the long term is difficult. Now, it's easier if there is a clear anchoring threat around which your grand strategy revolves.

In the Cold War, for instance, the Soviet Union was the main adversary for decades, and there was no real debate about that. So even though you were going to have domestic political fights about the best way to implement grand strategy, at least you had that anchor, At least you had that thing that you could argue about. Without such an anchor, it's really hard to get coherence. It's really hard to get people all on the same page. If you surveyed, I would guess that if we surveyed this room and asked the folks in this room, what do you think is the most important security issue, there would be nothing like consensus. Is it China? Is it Russia? Are it new technologies which are undermining our own sense of social cohesion? Is it climate change, the fact that the earth is changing? Is it terrorism? Is it drugs? Is it transnational issues? Is it pandemics?

There's no clear obvious answer to that question, which makes it hard to organize a grand strategy. But even when there is an organizing anchor, an organizing principle. Even then, it's not clear that you're always going to have a consistent grand strategy. I talk about this a little bit in the book on the chapter about grand strategy in the Cold War. The coherence of American grand strategy in the era of the Soviet Union went up and down. There were times in which there was a strong, durable consensus, but there were times in which people were unsure about what to do and how much to risk in it. Now for non-democracies, this doesn't mean that they have it easy. I think sometimes we have this presumption that dictators have it easy.

They don't. Authoritarian powers have their own weird pathologies which make it hard for them to execute a coherent grand strategy. One particular problem with authoritarian powers is they don't always get very good advice. Mara talked, I think. correctly about the importance of assessment and reassessment, like how good are we doing? What's the quality of our grand strategy? Are we achieving our goals? Try having an open candid conversation with a ruthless tyrant along those lines. Hey boss, I don't think your grand strategy is tops. I don't think it's going very well. Oh no, you're not going to have an environment in those countries, which encourages the kind of candor you need to do the assessment and reassessment that Mara talks about. And that's a big roadblock to effective grant strategy over the long term. So I'm not sure that it's fair to say that it's harder for democracies than it is for non-democracies. I just think there are different kinds of problems that different kinds of governments face. That's a great answer. Mara, over to you.

KARLIN: Yeah, I largely agree with that terrific answer, but would be slightly more in favor of democracies, figuring this out a little bit better. And it's because I'm particularly influenced by your very last point. Democracies are obviously designed to constrain action, and they are designed to encourage debate and dialog. And fundamentally, I think that's the only way you can really see your way through difficult and thorny problems. You know, it's the democracies in the post-World War II era that get us the most prosperous, most secure period of time in world history. And now that we're watching the dismantlement and destruction of those 80 years or so, I think it is particularly notable to see which democracies are able to step up to that challenge and which democracies are slipping into more authoritarian tendencies instead.

This second question, looking at issues of victory and security. is I think a really fun and intriguing question. Obviously, the answer one would like to say is actually both are important, and you should get both right, but that might be a butterflies and unicorns approach. And so it probably seems to me like if you have to bias in favor of one, it is fundamentally security because that's what your public is going to care about. And this is really manifested in the post-9/11 wars. The American public cares about being secure.

It also appreciates that not much has been asked for it hasn't had to. say, serve, we continue to have an all-volunteer force, it hasn't had to pay more money in terms of taxes or anything like that, but to the extent the public feels secure, then they are more likely, I think, to give a leadership sort of the writ to do the other things they may want to that could lead to victory or perhaps not. So I suspect that that's probably the one that is going to be the more important.

O'HANLON: And I'll just add a word as we invite you to get ready with your questions that I think if we think about the future of U.S.-China relationships and the prospects for how they are likely to unfold, I would submit that we have to be very careful not to prioritize victory over security. If a U.S.-China war begins, to me the top priority is to end it as soon as possible, irrespective of who historians 20 years later will call the victor. If we lose one rock in the Western Pacific. And so we have a net territorial loss for the West, but we prevent escalation, that's much a better outcome than winning the war but having 100 million people die because we use nuclear weapons. So anyway, I don't wanna make too much of the distinction, but it's so common in American strategic culture and perhaps Chinese strategic culture to talk about victory as the essential goal of any military operation that we really have to be careful. And this question gets to that.

KARLIN: I think that's right, I think not least because victory feels good, right? It feels like you've achieved something, you immediately come up with like World War II or World War I and that's like satisfying, and yet that sort of satisfaction can ultimately have its own danger as well.

O'HANLON: Okay, so please, we'll take two at a time if that's okay. We've got about 15 minutes left and.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi there, I'm Robin Walker. I work at the Pentagon. These are my personal views. I'm told in the executive orders, I have to say that now. But also on behalf of the National Security Bureaucracy, I'm glad you brought this up, it's really interesting. I would actually disagree a little bit that the Trump administration's story that they're telling, their strategic narrative, is a little incoherent or uncertain. I would say the story they're telling publicly is for the most part that for a couple of decades now, if not longer, the United States is being taken advantage of by immigrants by

bad trade deals, by defense national security freeloaders, by our allies not paying enough, and that they're trying to rectify all those decisions. The difference comes in the Pentagon, the discussions that we have are not about that necessarily, but all about China, China, China, and we're told China is the pacing threat, et cetera, and I can't count the number of war games that I've played on China scenario, trying to fight them in various scenarios, etc. which all of which get after the strategy element of it and the winning element that we talk about so much. And there's a whole lot less discussion about the grand strategy element. So I'd like it if you just dive in a little bit deeper on that that you were getting at the end there on maybe an evaluation of how we're doing on the grand strategy versus strategy elements that have come out of the administration so far.

O'HANLON: Actually, I'll change my own ground rules. That was so pointed and well put that I'm just gonna go right to both of you right away in response, if I could, to Josh.

ROVNER: I was hoping for another question. So I can think of what to say. No, it's a terrific question, and it's a fundamental question. How have we organized grand strategy so far with specific respect to China? Because clearly, for the better part of a decade now, China has been the pacing thread, has been the thing that has replaced terrorism as the thing that's taking up the most bandwidth in the Pentagon. I hope you're right, but I'm a little less sure about the White House's approach towards security in the Asia Pacific. The reason I say that is that Trump has gone in different directions over time. Sometimes he has been quite belligerent, rhetorically at least, towards Beijing, and other times he's been quite accommodating and open.

The same is true with Trump's relations with U.S. partners and allies in the region. Sometimes he has done outreach, for instance, to Taiwan. Sometimes he's been quite harsh in demanding that they pay more or demanding that they do more and putting the U.S. commitment to the region into some doubt, right? So it might be where some clearer grand strategic idea emerges going forward, but so far it hasn't. And I suspect that it won't. I think that Trump's operating approach is pretty deeply ingrained in how he goes about politics at this point. I don't think that's likely to change. He does see value in wanting to remain flexible and wanting to cultivate this idea of uncertainty for bargaining leverage. That's not to say that that's the main view in the Pentagon.

I think you're surely right. I think the view from the Pentagon is a little bit different and that's to be. expected. On the broader point about thinking about strategy and grand strategy in the shadow of a possible conflict with China, I think this is the most important security question that we face this century. I think it's unmistakable. We cannot get this wrong. So we have to look at it and we have to look at it from both directions. It's certainly the pacing threat from me as well as in the Pentagon. So there are a couple of dilemmas here. One dilemma is how to avoid a war in the first place. A war with China would be a disaster. A war with China I think would be a disaster for everybody concerned. That said, you can't automatically assume that it won't happen. A lot of great powers have gone to war even though they were aware that it could be disastrous.

They have found themselves fighting one another. Great power politics, historically, is a tragic story, great powers that end up fighting, even though they probably shouldn't. So you gotta think about how you would go about it. What worries me is that the pattern of events which would cause China and the United States to come to blows would not happen overnight. It would happen after a period of dramatic escalating tensions, and both sides getting increasingly fearful and angry at one another, right? And to overcome that fear of war, to take that gigantic risk, you would have to assume that they would be really whipped up. They would be really passionate about fighting. Otherwise, they wouldn't take the risk in the first place. The problem in that scenario is that getting them to think about long-term grand strategy is really hard, because in that passionate moment, all they're thinking about is victory, victory, victory. Win at all cost. And that sets the conditions for wartime escalation. So, maintaining a view towards long-term grand strategy and long-term security is really hard when you're in the moment. Really hard when you're in the moment.

The other thing that I think is worth considering ahead of time, especially for defense planners, is how you fight the war using new technologies might affect the landscape of technology in the aftermath. So, speaking hypothetically, imagine that offensive cyberspace operations play a big role in a war with China. I can imagine that both sides would take this seriously, that the first volley in would be an electronic volley, and that both sides would use a heck of a lot of malware against their adversaries for understandable reasons. I couldn't imagine why they would do that. But the question that I would have in terms of post-war grant strategy is what would that do to the information ecosystem globally?

How much malware would we be sending in the wild in the course of trying to win a war, a big war. How confident would people be in the aftermath of such a war of returning to their normal online lives? How secure would information networks be in the aftermath of a war featuring lots of counter network operations? That's one sort of narrow question about how strategic decisions in wartime might affect your grand strategy in the aftermath.

KARLIN: Thank you for that tremendous set of observations and question. I think there's a couple takeaways. First of all, you just gave us a fantastic endorsement of the 2022 National Defense Strategy. And I say that because if you've read the strategy, you know it says China has to be the priority. And if we were sitting here five years ago, that would not have been the case inside the Department of Defense. You would not have seen that energy. So that's fantastic. Two. You know, what makes this all a little bit complicated is there are these profound cleavages among folks who are senior in this administration in terms of how they see those priorities, right? You have some folks who say, China, it's all about the war with China.

This is going to happen. It's inevitable. What do you do? You have others who say, actually, maybe we need to work with them much more. Maybe we need to cooperate them. Maybe even we need to think about spheres of influence. Turn to the Middle East. You hear some who say, don't worry about the Middle East. It's just not that important. We wasted decades and decades thinking about this minor region, a nuclear Iran potentially isn't that big of a deal. You then have other folks who say, actually, Iran is the weakest that it's been since 1979 with just a little bit of effort. By the way, that's really wrong. with just a little bit of effort, you can eliminate any Iranian nuclear capability. So two major issues. We could walk through Russia-Ukraine as a third one, obviously. And so it's worth noting that these profound divisions will lead you to very different understandings of security, both regionally and globally, and also very different definitions a victory. And so it may be, in fact, that we have perhaps the worst-case scenario that one could see through Josh's framework, where you're not even necessarily privileging one or the other, but you're actually failing on both.

O'HANLON: Okay, now it's time for lightning round, given the way I've done a bad job moderating, but those were great answers. And so now we're gonna take three altogether, and then you guys can wrap up. So please, ma'am, here in the middle. And then we'll go here, and then over there.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yeah, so I remember the day of 9/11, like we all do, and one of the things I remember most clearly about the day is the conviction with which people around me were very, very sure we were going to war. In retrospect, it does seem clear to me and to many people that the engagement of the people, which is the third pole, not only created the for the global wars on terror, but also drove decision-making. and probably drove strategic decision making. with the undeniable global shift towards the right and the empowerment of authoritarian movements in mind, to what extent is the third pole currently driving strategic thinking? And in what is on this very windy Friday still a democracy and thinking about both democracies and non-democracies, what do you think are really the most powerful factors behind this global trend?

O'HANLON: Sir, here right in front. Please identify yourself. I should have asked you both.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I wanted to ask you about the role of private commercial interests in strategy and grand strategy. You mentioned that when you spoke of technology that it produced hopes and fears, and it occurred to me that the fears are promoted also by some of the same companies that are involved in the technology and fuel the hopes. So is there a component of private commercial interest in formulating strategy and grant strategy.

O'HANLON: Thank you, Jim, and please to wrap up and then we'll go back to the panel.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hello, my name is William Stiegel, I'm a founder of the Ukraine Knitting Resistance. My question is about Ukraine and Russia. What is your opinion of Russia, that is to say Putin's strategy and grand strategy in the world that we exist today, that is to say post-collapse of the Warsaw Pact? What is their strategy and grant strategy?

O'HANLON: Thank you, so why don't we go in reverse order. We'll give Mara the chance to answer one or two of those, let's say, and then Josh to back clean up.

KARLIN: Yeah, fantastic. So maybe I'll take the first and the third and leave Jim's smart question to Josh. So what's kind of interesting is we've seen the disengagement of publics for decades, right? The post-9/11 wars continue. The US is at war for two decades. And the American public doesn't really pay attention. It doesn't have to, right? You have one half of 1% of Americans serving in the US military. You have money that just continues flowing through the Department of Defense, and the threat really starts to dissipate, and folks say we just need to keep on doing that. So this is why I term it a crisis of caring, because you have a public that hasn't had to do anything and is effectively okay with a warrior class that is going to fight those wars and then leaders who will make the decisions on those wars. That's actually fundamentally corrosive to the military institution and fundamentally unhealthy for a democracy.

So it's good to see publics wake up. What is unfortunate is when that awakening actually gets so tinged by fear that it pushes folks in such problematic ways. Now, in terms of where we see Putin and where he's heading, I think he probably had some different ideas of what was possible a couple years ago. Where he is now in terms of security, he would like as much of Ukraine as possible. Now he's got about 20 percent. And he's probably going to get to keep that for a while, given what is likely going to be an agreement brokered by the Trump administration. And that probably feels pretty good to him in terms of security, being able to show that Ukraine doesn't have sovereignty over all of its territory. Where your question gets extra interesting is on this idea of theory of victory. Because I don't know that Putin could have imagined that you could have seen the U.S. in many ways weaken its approach to European security, right?

You now hear real questions across Europe about the relevance of U.S. extended nuclear deterrents about the potential of substantial, if not all, U.S. troops being pulled from Europe about whether or not the U.S. military will continue to hold the role of the Supreme Allied Commander of Europe, right, a role the U.S. has had since NATO was stood up. You hear questions about whether or not the U.S. military will continue to participate in NATO exercises even. That, in my mind, is just a perfect

manifestation for Putin of a theory of victory that he have fantasized about but couldn't have perhaps even imagined achieving.

ROVNER: Very quickly, and it's a wonderful question, thank you, Jim. Private sector always matters for grand strategy and for strategy. Going back to antiquity, the Athenians could not have built an empire without working very carefully with wealthy Athenians who built triremes, paid for rowers, and kept them afloat. And a consistent concern in Athens was working with private citizens for the national good. This is also the case in the ages, the British Empire relied on healthy relations with private dockyards and shipyards and with labor. So this has always been a part and parcel of grand strategy, is figuring out how to get the most out of private sector industry and private sector technology.

In some senses, this is more important than ever, just because in current technology a lot of the places that matter the most are actually owned by the private sector. If you think about cyber security, for instance, we're talking about a majority of the networks, a vast majority are owned and operated by the private sector itself. So there's no escaping it, right? And clearly, this is a very controversial time. But it's not that this is the first time that powerful private sector interests have had an influence on grand strategy or on strategy and more.

O'HANLON: I'm tempted, before thanking and congratulating Josh, one more time to ask Jim Mann if he's going to write a book about the Trumpians. This is the Jim Mann who wrote, “The Rise of the Vulcans and the Obamians,” and I'll talk to you maybe privately about that, but let me thank all of you for coming to this and participating with excellent questions and commentary as well. And Mara, thank you so much, and really Mara, one of the great scholar practitioners of our generation, serves so admirably in government, so when she was asking and answering questions about. the U.S. government's ability to do different things. She's seen it from the inside in both Republican and Democratic administrations. But Josh, most of all to you, excellent book. We really have enjoyed the intellectual exchange and it'll be a treasure on our bookshelves for years to come. And again, Josh will be signing books just out here if you're able to stay and purchase one.