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# American Grand Strategy: Patterns, Problems, and Prescriptions

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by

Robert E. Osgood

**F**or the last twenty years an uneasy feeling has been spreading throughout this land that the United States is losing its extraordinary primacy in the global arena; that it is laboring under a multitude of external and internal constraints which increasingly frustrate its efforts to support its ever-expanding global security interests. Developments in the 1970s have greatly reinforced this pervasive sense of constraint—particularly, the shift of the military balance toward the Soviet Union, the divergence of US and European views on East-West relations following the rise and fall of détente, the rising turbulence in the Third World, the collapse of the international economic system, the greatly enhanced dependence of the great industrial states on Middle Eastern oil, and finally the impact of the Vietnam War on American will and means to back global containment with military power. In addition to these constraints some new ones, such as the antinuclear movement, have become major factors in international politics in the 1980s. In the aggregate these constraints raise with new urgency an old concern that American security responsibilities and commitments may exceed American power to support them. Whether this concern is completely warranted or not, there are objective bases for it. To assess the bases for the concern that the ends of American foreign policy may have outrun the means, and to formulate the broad strategic consequences, are tasks of preeminent importance. They are tasks for *grand strategy*, which is the nation's plan for using all its instruments and resources of power to support its interests most effectively.

American foreign policy since World War II has been largely shaped and driven by repeated efforts to close the gap between ever-expanding security interests and persistently inadequate power to support them, if the hypothetical threats to these interests should materialize. Nevertheless, the United States has managed to escape the worst possible consequences of this perceived gap between interests and power. Indeed, compared to most great powers in history, it has thrived in a bounty of security with the help of an unusually favorable domestic and international environment, a number of

strategic expedients, sporadic provocations by the Soviet Union, surges of power in response to crises and local wars, the good fortune of not having to confront more than one crisis or war at a time, and a remarkable degree of economic and military primacy in the international system.

Nevertheless, the country has paid a price for its chronic power deficit. The gap between interests and power has accentuated the historic American propensity to oscillate between extroversion and introversion, between what I shall call augmentation and retrenchment, as periodic rediscoveries of the Soviet or Sino-Soviet threat have been followed by relaxation. This pattern of oscillation has misled adversaries, unsettled friends, and dissipated national energy in erratic spurts. Moreover, the evolution of the postwar international system has reached a stage at which the United States can no longer rely on the things that saved it from the worst consequences of the interests-power gap.

With the advent of the Reagan administration, the United States once again, spurred by heightened fears of Soviet expansion, launched a rearmament effort—this time an effort exceeding that following the Korean War or Sputnik and the purported missile gap—in order to close the interests-power gap. But this time the required augmentation and, even more, the effective use of existing American power have been impeded by unprecedented constraints, which arose largely in the 1970s. This time the United States no longer has recourse to some of the principal strategic expedients of the past; for example, increasing reliance on nuclear deterrence as a substitute for local resistance. It can no longer safely count on the stimulus of Soviet provocations to redress the military balance. It has irrevocably lost the diplomatic leverage on allies and others that accompanied the economic and military primacy it enjoyed into the 1960s.

The interests-power gap, as I have called it for convenience, is, of course, a simplifying metaphor for a complex and highly subjective phenomenon. "Security" is a notoriously flexible and expandable concept. "Power" is equally ambiguous. The magnitude of the "gap," for which there is seldom a clear test, depends on the intensity of the "threat," which is largely conjectural. The problem of keeping power commensurate with interests is nonetheless real. It has been the central phenomenon in the rise and fall of empires. In the nineteenth century the British had a great debate over the strategic implications of their gap—the debate between a continental and imperial priority. And their response to the gap led to the long period of retrenchment, which is such a crucial factor in America's postwar gap. The contemporary Soviet empire is also mightily affected by the gap between its interests and power. This gap, considering the intractable internal and external constraints that aggravate it, is more formidable than ours; but the ways the Soviets try to cope with it, particularly through emphasis on military power, compound our strategic problem.

In the United States keen observers of geopolitics have been anxious to close the interests-power gap by one means or another since the beginning of the cold war. Walter Lippmann made a classic statement of the problem in his famous tract for the times, *U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic*, published in 1943. His subsequent experience in trying to close the gap reveals the elusive nature of the task. Having appealed in this book to close the gap by augmenting American power through the restoration of the European balance of power in concert with Great Britain, he spent the rest of his lifetime in the cold war appealing, in vain, to close the gap by curbing American commitments and negotiating spheres of influence with the Soviet Union, which had declined to play the role of postwar collaborator that he and most others had assigned it. The greatest fulfillment of his strategy, the North Atlantic Treaty, also became the greatest charge on American power.

As the interests-power gap is both metaphor and reality, so is the oscillation of mood and effort between augmentation and retrenchment, which is integrally related to the gap. *Augmentation* and *retrenchment* are shorthand for complex phenomena. But they denote the essential reality that America's foreign relations are punctuated by cycles between efforts to mobilize material and political resources to counter the Communist threat, and efforts to reduce the risks and costs of involvement. The cycles are precipitated by unanticipated crises and wars, but they are rooted in profoundly American phenomena: the compulsion to define the tasks of foreign policy in terms of open-ended generalizations of principle, the tension between militant moral enthusiasm and an aversion to the adversities of peacetime Realpolitik, and a political system that amplifies the switch from one mood to the other, especially when new administrations come to power.

A whirlwind review of the postwar history of the gap and the oscillation will show the nature of the problem and provide the background for some questions and thoughts about US grand strategy for the future. It will show that the United States has, in fact, pursued one overriding objective—containment—with great consistency; and that successive administrations have, more or less consciously, improvised strategies of containment that, viewed in retrospect, have considerable coherence. The American problem is not the lack of grand strategy but an undifferentiated and excessively abstract view of US vital interests and of the Soviet threat to them, crisis-born fluctuations in perceptions of the threat, spasmodic responses to unanticipated crises, and the disparity between proclaimed security interests and actual capabilities, all of which impede the balancing of ends and means with steadiness. To some extent this problem is the result of crises, wars, and other adversities that were difficult to anticipate and impossible to control. In some significant measure, however, the ups and downs of American foreign policy reflect deep-seated characteristics of the American approach to foreign policy, which have become increasingly dangerous to indulge.

The onset of the cold war in the Truman administration was a period of rapidly expanding commitments and a rapidly expanding conception of security interests, which, it was discovered, only the United States could protect. It was in this era that the image of the Soviet Union changed from one of a collaborator in establishing the new international order to that of an opportunistically expansionist adversary. In effect, the United States inherited the global security role of the United Nations, pledged to maintain international order against piecemeal aggression, in accordance with the lessons of the interwar period. To implement its new role of containment the United States relied principally upon its formidable economic power (most notably in the Greek-Turkish aid program and the Marshall Plan), its nuclear monopoly, and the extension of formal guarantees of military protection to Western Europe, in the North Atlantic treaty area, and to Japan and the Pacific defensive perimeter, which ran through Japan but excluded Korea.

The extensions of American commitments to Greece, Turkey, and Western Europe were specific manifestations of a generalized commitment to containment that would prove to be as extensive as the perception of the Soviet (or Sino-Soviet) threat of expansion. Although the hyperbole of the Truman Doctrine—representing the Greek civil war as a universal contest between two ways of life and declaring that “it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures”—was intended to rouse an isolationist-prone Congress simply to provide some economic and military assistance to two strategically placed countries that the British were no longer able to protect. It was also an accurate expression of the open-ended, in fact global, conception of containment. This global conception stands out in NSC documents *before* the Korean War (for example, NSC 48/1, 48/2, and NSC 64) which spelled out America’s vital security interest in containing the spread of communism in Indochina, lest a Communist Indochina lead to a Communist Southeast Asia, and thereby threaten the security of Japan and the whole defensive perimeter.

Despite the expansive, undifferentiated conception of US global security interests, the actual implementation of containment, especially by military means, was severely restricted. It took the form of domestic political and economic constraints and a pragmatic propensity to support containment materially with no more effort than seemed urgent in order to respond to whatever immediate crisis might occur. Thus, it took the unanticipated Korean War and the unplanned decision to fight it locally and conventionally to shock the country into an emergency effort to augment warfighting capabilities. The result was a fourfold increase of the defense budget, which had been held to a ceiling of about \$13 billion, the creation of an American-commanded allied armed force to protect Europe, and the emplacement of six American divisions on German soil.

In the aftermath of the war and the defense buildup President Eisenhower came into office with a mandate to support containment more effectively at less cost to the budget and taxpayers, and without the risk of involving American forces in another local war. To fulfill this mandate of retrenchment his administration declared a greater reliance on nuclear deterrence, a substitute for dependence on limited-war capabilities, and reinforced deterrence with a network of alliances in Asia and the Northern Tier of the Middle East.

Extending the conception of American security interests even further, the administration regarded the containment of communism in Indochina as so important that President Eisenhower publicly compared the effect of its loss to a row of falling dominoes throughout Asia. In the event of an attack against the French by Chinese forces, he was prepared to strike China with a naval blockade, with interdiction of communications lines in China, and even with nuclear weapons, where "advantageous."\* Yet it is as doubtful that the United States possessed the means of supporting containment in this hypothetical contingency as it is certain that the American people and Congress would have opposed American intervention.

Lacking the military means to implement containment on the global basis envisioned, the Eisenhower administration concentrated on diplomatic and other indirect measures. It tried to encourage an attenuation of the Soviet threat through the incipient détente, signaled by the first summit meeting of the cold war and the "spirit of Geneva" that emerged from it. In the Suez War and in Latin America it also took steps that foreshadowed President Kennedy's effort to reinforce containment in the Third World by aligning the United States with indigenous nationalism and by extending aid for economic and political development. In taking this position, it speeded the collapse of the French and British positions in the Middle East and, thereby, further expanded the ambit of unassisted American containment to one of the most important strategic areas in the world.

By 1958 the Eisenhower strategy of seeking containment at less risk and cost over the long run looked generally successful. But soon it would seem to be discredited by the shock of Sputnik, the fear of an imminent missile gap, Khrushchev's instigation of the Berlin crisis of 1958-1961, his dramatic cancellation of the Paris summit—following the shooting down of America's acknowledged U-2 spy plane over Russia—and also by growing troubles with Castro, the emergence of the Congo crisis, and Nasser's turn to Moscow for arms.

President Kennedy came into office dedicated to campaign themes of restoring American power and prestige. To close the interests-power gap he set out to: strengthen and diversify the nation's military power, institute a strategy of flexible and controlled response, counter the new threat of wars

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\**The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: History of the Indochina Incident, 1950-54*, pp. 429-30.

of national liberation in the Third World with new limited-war capabilities, identify America with the forces of non-communist nationalism in Africa and elsewhere, and strengthen the less-developed countries against Communist penetration through economic development coupled with social and political reform, as in the Alliance for Progress. From a position of waning military superiority he and Secretary of Defense McNamara hoped to engage the Soviet Union in agreed reciprocal arms limitations based on a rough parity of strategic nuclear retaliatory capabilities. And he was determined to do all this while spurring the American economy to new levels of growth and at the same time, keeping inflation under control.

The promise was bound to be greater than the performance. The Rostowian promise of self-sustaining, stable, progressive developing countries, for example, was unrealistic. Nevertheless by the mid-1960s the US military buildup, a surge of domestic economic growth, the successful surmounting of crises in Berlin, Cuba, and the Congo, and the achievement of a partial nuclear test ban, together with new evidence of Soviet troubles in Eastern Europe and with China produced perhaps the greatest sense of security and well-being that Americans have enjoyed in the entire period. This euphoria and President Kennedy's chastening discovery of the limits and dangers of American power, from the Bay of Pigs to the Cuban missile crisis, became the basis for another swing toward retrenchment and relaxation.

President Johnson took office determined to concentrate his and the nation's attention on domestic social and economic improvements. But fate and the inertia of settled axioms of containment, buttressed by enhanced confidence in the efficacy of American military power, determined that Johnson's administration would be preoccupied with a war in Vietnam that could not be won—perhaps not even at the price of a protracted and expanded war, which neither Johnson nor the nation was willing to pay. The decisive strategic importance that had been attributed to containing communism in Indochina from the beginning of the cold war, enhanced by the political importance that sprang from the growing investment of national prestige in the war, turned out to be a traumatic exaggeration of the real interests that the nation was willing to support and the real threat it was determined to oppose once the costs of losing the war reached the stage of requiring even the kind of mobilization of manpower and resources that had been applied to the Korean War. Consequently, the augmentation of national effort in Vietnam led to the retrenchment of the nation's global effort and involvement in reaction to Vietnam.

The top priority of President Nixon and Henry Kissinger, somewhat analagous to Eisenhower's and Dulles' mandate, was to extricate the United States from the Vietnam War with as little damage to containment as possible and then bring American power into balance with vital interests. This was to be accomplished with the recognition that American power was

now constrained by changes in the international system, the growth of Soviet military strength, as well as by the domestic reaction to Vietnam. The overriding objective was to close the interests-power gap at a reduced level of national military effort and risk that the American people would support with some steadiness over the long run. To reconcile containment with retrenchment the administration, as announced in the Nixon Doctrine, decided to rely less on US military intervention in Third World crises (and not at all in revolutionary conflicts) and more on arms aid, while enjoining less-developed countries to rely more on self-help. To ease the burden of global containment it channeled military resources toward Iran as a regional security surrogate. To ameliorate the principal threat to American vital interests, it orchestrated a global *modus vivendi*, or *détente*, with Moscow. It applied to *détente* the leverage of rapprochement with the People's Republic of China, made SALT the centerpiece of East-West relations, and linked SALT, somewhat unevenly, to Soviet observance of rules of self-restraint in the Third World.

But, as with the Eisenhower administration, the Nixon-Ford-Kissinger strategy of retrenchment was undermined by international developments that challenged its premises. *Détente* collapsed because Moscow showed no signs of curbing its steady, massive military buildup to accommodate American notions of parity. Also because it continued to exploit new opportunities to extend Soviet influence and presence in the Third World, not only with greatly enhanced Soviet naval and air reach but also by means of Cuban intervention and East European assistance. The Soviet-Cuban victory in Angola in 1975, in the wake of the unexpectedly rapid collapse of Portugal's African empire, and the forced withdrawal of American covert action under congressional pressure portended a much more dangerous Third World than had been anticipated. The formation of OPEC in the wake of the Yom Kippur War of 1973 posed an equally unexpected and even broader constraint on American power in the Third World.

The response to these reversals was not another period of augmentation, as under John F. Kennedy, but a delayed and more sweeping shift toward retrenchment under President Jimmy Carter. President Carter set out to implement containment in a manner more congenial to the post-Vietnam retreat from Realpolitik and the search for moral redemption. Counseling against the "inordinate fear of communism" that had led the country "to embrace any dictator who joined us in our fear," he promised to reduce even more substantially the defense budget that had been declining as a proportion of the GNP during the 1970s. Instead, he would concentrate on the "global agenda" of preventing nuclear proliferation, curbing the arms trade, revising the international economic order to meet the needs of the global "South," and promoting human rights against cruelty and aggression, or at least dissociating the United States from helping regimes that violated them.



Within a year, however, the Carter administration began shifting the orientation of containment strategy toward augmentation in order to close the expanded gap between interests and power in light of a resurgent fear of the Soviet threat. After Moscow's intervention in 1977 to establish Mengistu's self-styled Marxist-Leninist regime in Ethiopia, Zbigniew Brzezinski emerged as an energetic advocate of strengthening military containment against Soviet expansion in the "arc of crisis," extending from the Soviet alliance with Vietnam, to the installation of a puppet regime in Afghanistan, the establishment of military dependencies in South Yemen and Ethiopia, and the invasion from Angola of the Katanga (or Shaba) province in Zaire.

In response to the revised fear of the Soviet threat President Carter reversed the decade-long decline in real defense expenditures, warned that détente must be based on reciprocal restraint, admonished Moscow that it could "choose either confrontation or cooperation," increased arms sales to the Middle East, led in the establishment of the Long-Term Defense Program in Nato, and after initial resistance, threw American weight behind Chancellor Helmut Schmidt's appeal for the emplacement of American intermediate-range missiles on European soil. Capping this shift toward augmentation, the President—in urgent response to the overthrow of the Shah of Iran, the imprisonment of American hostages, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan—proclaimed the Carter Doctrine. It was the most far-reaching extension of American commitments since the redefinition of the Pacific defensive perimeter after the Korean War. Further, the administration promised to increase expenditures by 5 percent a year, ordered the creation of the Rapid Deployment Force, deployed naval forces and sent heavy arms to protect North Yemen from Moscow's client South Yemen, imposed a grain embargo and other sanctions on the Soviet Union, and moved toward a so-called "strategic relationship" with China by removing a number of restrictions on militarily significant sales of technology.

This reassertion of American power in support of containment, however, did not save President Carter from the political consequences of the shift in the tide of public opinion toward augmentation. Governor Ronald Reagan, like Senator John F. Kennedy, rode into office in opposition to the initial retrenchment policies of his predecessor. He promised to restore the nation's power and prestige in response to the Soviet global threat. But he did so in the face of domestic and international constraints on American power that Kennedy never imagined.

In addition to the constraints of the 1970s, listed at the beginning, some additional constraints have become more formidable in the 1980s. Notable among these is the emergence—full-blown, in Europe and, more muted, in the United States—of the antinuclear movement, which has thrived on the American rhetoric of augmentation. The antinuclear movement is the

current manifestation of a more general constraint: the political activation of large groups of people seeking relief from the anxieties surrounding esoteric defense and arms control issues that used to be left far more to the experts. Among the pernicious effects of this phenomenon, a phenomenon which one must hope may be beneficial in the long run, is the infusion into security policies—especially arms control—of an element of theater and symbolism that confounds the difficult business of orchestrating and managing in concert with allies an equilibrium of power between adversaries.

In grappling with these multiple obstacles to augmentation in the 1980s, the Reagan administration is conscious of a formidable gap between global security interests and effective power, but it does not have recourse to many of the strategic expedients that helped mitigate the interests-power gap in preceding decades of the cold war. Thus, the enhanced reliance on nuclear weapons, the formation of new alliances, the cultivation of stable and self-sustaining democracies through economic development aid, the support of regional security surrogates, or the global restoration of arms control as the centerpiece of global détente are either obsolete or inadequate for the task of restoring American power.

I do not need to describe the central themes of augmentation with which President Reagan came into office or note the extent to which these themes have been altered in practice, if not always in rhetoric. I leave it to you to judge how much the momentum of augmentation may be declining in the face of the multiple constraints under which this administration must labor, including, perhaps, the constraint of a reaction against augmentation in public and congressional opinion. I certainly shall not evaluate the Reagan administration's performance or its prospects of surmounting these constraints. Rather, I want to suggest a framework for thinking strategically about the problems of American security policy that would afflict any administration in this period of history.

The perception and the reality of a gap between vital interests and the power to support them is the product of a complex relationship between security interests, foreign threats to these interests, and the nation's power—in all its dimensions—to support its interests against the threats. A successful grand strategy will relate these three elements to each other so as to support effectively the nation's most important interests and to do so over the long run with a steady application of resources at a level of effort and risk acceptable to the public and Congress. But for dynamic states with far-flung interests and major adversaries, there will always be a tendency for interests to outrun power. The very effort to close the gap will increase external entanglements and constraints. To mitigate this problem the nation can try to augment its power, diminish the threats, or restrict its interests and commitments.

To augment power it may increase its military capabilities, engage allies and surrogates in protecting common security interests, extend military guarantees and assistance, and issue declaratory statements of security interests. To diminish the threats the nation may seek to weaken an adversary (as with peacetime economic warfare), detach his allies, reduce the vulnerability of his targets, and conciliate or accommodate him. To restrict its interests the nation can try to devolve security responsibilities to others, specify the limits of security interests it will defend with its own resources, and disengage from, or refrain from intervening in, untenable and nonvital positions that impose excessive claims on its power.

Through a variety of policies and actions the United States has tried all of these strategic remedies in various combinations and with different emphases. But, as I have suggested, many of the international and domestic conditions that enabled successive administrations to improvise measures that spared us from some of the worst hypothetical effects of the interests-power gap no longer exist. Nor, having lost forever the kind of military and economic primacy in the international system we enjoyed in the 1960s, do we have as safe a margin of error in improvising ad hoc responses to unanticipated crises.

Indeed, it sometimes seems that the only strategic expedient of the past that is available for narrowing the expanded interests-power gap is the unilateral augmentation of American military power. But this augmentation, although crucial, cannot come close to supporting the kinds of contingencies and strategies which, with more imagination than prudence, have been formulated to justify it. Besides, unilateral augmentation is increasingly constrained by the domestic and foreign reactions that the effort itself induces.

The one thing we have not really tried wholeheartedly that would help us the most would be the substantial devolution of common security responsibilities and assets to our major allies. For they are America's greatest geopolitical assets, whose deployment of military power remains quite incommensurate to the tasks of extra-regional and even regional security in comparison to the magnitude of their security interests and resources. But although some measure of devolution is indispensable, in the interests of equity and to sustain our own security efforts in their behalf, I see no realistic prospect of amplifying or speeding the process to alleviate America's global strategic tasks in this decade. An all-out effort to do so would only lead to a spectacular failure, which would inflame the embers of American unilateralism.

Despairing of a remedy for the interests-power gap through unilateral military augmentation, some may find particularly alluring the prospect of squeezing the Soviet military effort and loosening Soviet imperial ties by compounding its economic difficulties with forms of peacetime economic

warfare. But such an enterprise is doomed to economic and political failure and probably would not achieve its desired effects on Soviet behavior even if it could be organized on a scale commensurate with the task. Nor, for that matter, are efforts to moderate Soviet behavior by entangling it in expanded commercial transactions with the major industrial-technological powers any more likely to work in the way that the proponents of economic leverage suppose.

Lacking confidence in the adequacy or utility of either augmentation, attrition, or seduction, many more are tempted to turn toward accommodation as a means of blunting the Soviet threat in order to close the interests-power gap. To be sure, there is much to be said for seeking accommodations with the Soviet Union where there are specific reciprocal advantages to be gained. For both superpowers there are many incentives to curb the arms competition. In any case, through arms control negotiations we are evidently compelled by political considerations to sustain the semblance of accommodation through the process. On the other hand, there are few signs that the United States can prevent through negotiated agreements either of the two developments that undermined the *détente* of the 1970s: (a) Moscow's persistence in seeking an advantageous military balance that exceeds our conception of parity and (b) Moscow's persistence in exploiting opportunities to extend Soviet influence and clientship in the turbulent Third World.

More promising but less satisfying to the public's appetite for drama is the negotiated accommodation or honest brokering of local conflicts that might precipitate larger conflicts with an East-West dimension and even threaten the global equilibrium. The protracted diplomatic effort to gain a Namibian settlement, like the British effort in Zimbabwe, is a case in point. A multilateral regional framework of negotiation and accommodation in Central America may yet succeed in defusing and insulating the revolutionary turmoil in that troubled area, where the limits to the efficacy of more direct intervention are painfully clear. Moroccan-Algerian overtures in the wake of the Polisario's decline and the improvement of Indian-Pakistan relations in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan suggest the opportunities for moderating potential trouble spots if the international framework of relationships, of which the United States is inevitably a part, is congenial. That the same kind of opportunities for resolving conflicts exist in the Middle East is, perhaps, too much to hope for; but already the United States has demonstrated that its unique capacity as diplomatic broker can advance American security interests in ways that the more direct forms of intervention cannot. For that matter, as an indirect instrument of policy, preventive and ameliorative diplomacy, especially when strengthened with judicious security assistance, is frequently more effective than economic assistance keyed to social and political reform as a means of resolving the indigenous sources of Third World conflict, notwithstanding our ceaseless

search for centrist good guys who need only our economic assistance to create a stable, friendly government.

Of course, crisis prevention and management can only be one of an array of instruments of security that must be integrated into some larger strategic design if they are to serve American interests. This diplomatic expedient exemplifies, however, a general requirement of American grand strategy in this period of history: Some of the most effective things we can do to contain the Soviet threat and bring power into balance with interests lie in strengthening the international environment against Soviet pressure by mitigating the vulnerability of trouble spots, eliciting the cooperation of allies, engaging regional states with convergent interests in diplomatic and economic relationships that restrain local sources of trouble, and collectively addressing the sources of financial and monetary disorder—all with a relatively low American profile.

This is not to depreciate the indispensable value of maintaining a military posture that is not only adequate for us but reassuring to those who depend on us. It is to note, however, that this is *not* a time in which containment can be advanced by major ventures in either direct confrontation or accommodation of the Soviet Union. At the same time, this *is* a time in which we need, more than ever, constructive relations not only with allies but with neutrals and even pragmatic antagonists.

It follows that the tone as well as the substance of American foreign and military policy must be one with which other countries with different interests, historical experiences, and anxieties are willing to associate on a basis of mutual advantage. This should not distress us; for, indeed, in the art of eliciting cooperation through compromise we have a tremendous advantage over our adversary.

The tone and substance of our approach to the Soviet Union—and especially the rhetoric of containment we use to exhort ourselves to mobilize for containment—become an important part of the reaction of other countries to American policies that affect them. Because our own political system, foreign-policy culture and style produce a certain hyperbole of expression—whether it is falling dominoes or eras of negotiation, doctrines of defiance or principles of international order—we are forever puzzling foreigners by the disparity between promise and practice. The resulting impression of volatility and unreliability is accentuated by Presidential electoral politics and, even more, by alternating estimates of the Soviet threat and concomitant fluctuations of the American response.

The nature and intensity of the Soviet threat has, indeed, changed in some respects over the years, but it has not fluctuated nearly as much as our public affirmations claim. Our vital security interests have greatly expanded geographically, but they are neither as numerous nor compelling as our inflated rhetoric and doctrines imply. And our power, although greatly

constrained compared to the 1960s and before, is still, if properly employed in all its dimensions, not so inadequate as we complain. The gap between our interests and our power, though real and troubling, is not as formidable as our oscillations of mood and effort make it seem. We are not in the position of the overextended British empire after World War I. And certainly we are much better off than the British after World War II. We can still make strategic choices within our means and consistent with our global interests.

I resolved not to end this essay with yet another admonition that American leaders abandon their penchant for ad hoc improvisations and bureaucratic compromises, and yet another exhortation that they approach foreign policy in the framework of a coherent, long-run grand strategy. Such advice is always followed by a disappointing vagueness about the content of the comprehensive and coherent design the author is presumed to have in mind. No wonder. It is very hard to think of such a grand design that would be operationally useful. No matter. Perhaps this country does not need a more comprehensive and structured grand strategy but only a wiser one. I note that the last prominent (now recently published) advocate of more "architecture" as opposed to his predecessor's alleged "acrobatics" in the conduct of foreign policy formulated a strategy that he spent most of President Carter's term urging him to abandon.

As I meant to suggest in the historical survey, we can see in retrospect that successive administrations, in the way they have related interests, threats and power, were, like Moliere's "Bourgeois Gentilhomme," who spoke prose all his life without knowing it, making national strategy, more or less grand, all during the cold war. We do not need to construct more elaborate strategic architecture. We do need to build more within our means, with a steadier view of the storms and furies that may threaten our strategic structure. And having constructed our strategy for all seasons, we would surely live more securely if we stopped alternating between complacency and alarm with each change of the international atmosphere.

It is my somewhat wistful thought that our sobering discovery of the limits of détente in the 1970s, following our preceding discovery of the limits of limited war in Vietnam; that our experience with the limits of anti-containment in the Carter years, followed by our experience with the limits of the *revitalization* of containment in the Reagan years, may have fostered a new sobriety and steadiness of national mood and effort. Through the strange dialectic of our process of checks and balances we may be coming to terms with an old conservative insight expressed in the title of a wise and elegant little book by Charles Burton Marshall three decades ago: the limits of foreign policy.

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Professor Robert E. Osgood has been associated with and directed many well-known research institutions, and is currently Dean of Academics of the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies.