

**U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Armed Services
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations**

Hearing: A New Grand Strategy for the United States

**Testimony of Mitchell B. Reiss*
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I would like to thank the Committee Chairman for inviting me to testify today on a new grand strategy for the United States. I can think of few more important topics to discuss, given the number of challenges and opportunities that confront the United States and given that we will soon have a new president and administration.

With your permission, I'd like to submit my written remarks for the record and offer an abbreviated version for my oral testimony.

It seems that we've been searching for a new "Mr. X" -- or "Ms. X" -- for over a decade now, since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the demise of the Soviet Union and our ultimate triumph in the Cold War. As we continue to conduct this search, it is important to recall that the grand strategy conceived by George Kennan in his April 1946 "long telegram" and known by its shorthand formula as containment, created more than its share of controversy and criticism over the years. This criticism started with Kennan himself, who believed that subsequent American administrations overemphasized the military aspects of the policy and undervalued its political, diplomatic and economic aspects.

Over the years, containment was also challenged by both the left and the right on the American political spectrum. The left argued that containment encouraged the United States to enter into alliances with unsavory dictators, as long as they were anti-communist, and to fight unnecessary and bloody proxy wars across the Third World as it competed for influence with the Soviet Union. Others argued that it over-militarized and distorted our foreign policy priorities; no less a figure than President Jimmy Carter warned us against having an "inordinate fear of communism."

On the right, critics complained that containment's concept of applying counter-pressure wherever the Soviet Union probed was too passive and reactive; it ceded the initiative to Moscow. Containment's step-child -- détente with the Soviet Union -- attracted vocal criticism, most famously by the Committee on the Present Danger, which believed it legitimized a fundamentally illegitimate regime. These critics also developed a counterstrategy to containment designed to "roll back" Soviet gains around the world.

This thumbnail sketch of the history of containment is useful to remind us that any grand strategy is almost certain to have its critics. Consensus will be elusive.

This has not deterred a number of foreign policy experts in the past few years to try to answer the call to become the next Mr. X. Frank Fukuyama, Fareed Zakaria and Phillip Bobbitt have all written excellent and insightful books on different aspects of our world and offered different policy prescriptions to guide us forward. Thomas Barnett has offered his concept about the "core" and the "gap." Parag Khanna has envisioned a future tri-polar world order. The Princeton Project for National Security launched an ambitious, multi-year study that calls for "a world of liberty under law." The first George W. Bush Administration's 2002 National Security Strategy emphasized America's preeminence and military preemption. And in his second inaugural address, President Bush boldly called for "the expansion of freedom in all the world."

Despite the generally high quality of these efforts, none has won the Mr. X sweepstakes. Public and elite opinion has not coalesced around one of these attempts. It is interesting to ask ourselves: Why?

There are three possible reasons as to why we haven't been able to arrive, either individually or collectively, at a new grand strategy. The first possibility is that there's no single, unifying threat that galvanizes the attention of the United States, and its friends and allies around the world. There is currently no "glue" to bind countries together like the glue that the Soviet Union provided during the Cold War. The global war on terror, which some would maintain is the unifying force around which a grand strategy can be constructed, simply doesn't provide the same amount of glue; among other reasons, many countries do not prioritize counter-terrorism as highly as the United States does.

A second possible reason, which is related to the first one above, is that the world is too complex. In place of a single, overarching threat, there are today a wide

variety of lesser threats that impact different countries differently, thereby discouraging collective action. These threats fall into two general categories: country-specific threats, like Iran and North Korea, and transnational threats such as climate change, WMD proliferation, mass migration, terrorism and infectious diseases. It is humbling to think that today George Kennan would not only need to have a deep understanding of Russian politics, history and culture, but would also need a deep understanding of China's military modernization, global economic flows, demographic trends, environmental degradation, WMD proliferation, and the sources of Islamic extremism, among other topics. That's a very high bar for anyone to surmount.

The third possible reason why we are still searching for a new grand strategy has less to do with the supply side than with the demand side. Our political system today is too fractured, too divided, to accept a grand strategy. And it's not just divisions between the Republican and Democratic parties; it is also divisions within the different wings of each party. There is simply not a lot of receptivity to grand, unifying ideas.

In particular, there is no consensus over five key concepts – what might be termed the building blocks of any new grand strategy.

The first key concept is *American primacy*. The 2002 National Security Strategy was a rousing call for extended American primacy, declaring that “Our forces will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States.”

For some, this language about American preeminence was viewed as aspirational, a distant goal on a faraway shore, and certainly unobjectionable. After all, why wouldn't we want the United States to remain the dominant power for as long as possible? Others saw this goal as a realistic and achievable objective, assuming we kept our economy strong, made the necessary military hardware and manpower investments and employed our strength wisely. And still others viewed it as arrogant and objectionable, perhaps even horrifying. If power corrupts, perpetual preeminent power would corrupt absolutely, this thinking went. Perhaps these differences reflect old divisions dating from the Vietnam war or new ones from the Iraq war. But whatever their sources, differing views of American primacy have important implications for the size of our military budget, the mission of our intelligence services, the maintenance of our alliances, the role of international institutions and how we respond to a rising China in the coming decades.

Significant differences exist around a second key concept: *the use of American military force*.

Few people disagree that the United States should defend its vital interests. But this begs the larger question of how these vital interests should be defined and bounded, a task made more complex by the increasing interconnectedness of the world in which we live. George Kennan was concerned about Soviet expansion into Western Europe and East Asia. Today, the Persian Gulf, with its immense oil and natural gas reserves, is widely seen a vital interest as well. But what about the Horn of Africa? The Panama Canal? The straits of Malacca? The Balkans? Different administrations may answer these questions differently.

Some would maintain that the prevention of humanitarian disasters, such as genocide, is a vital interest of the United States, under an inchoate “responsibility to protect.” This altruistic argument is sometimes supplemented by a more traditional national security claim that humanitarian disasters can destabilize countries or entire regions, and can lead to the creation of lawless zones where terrorists and criminals flourish.

Even assuming that the challenge of determining where to intervene can be settled, questions over the lawfulness and legitimacy of intervention remain. As the recent National War Powers Commission Report, co-chaired by former Secretaries of State James Baker and Warren Christopher, stated: “The Constitution provides both the President and Congress with explicit grants of war powers, as well as a host of arguments for implied powers.”

But what are the sources of international legitimacy? A few would argue that the United States should not use force without the imprimatur of the UN Security Council. Others would argue that the United States does not need the approval of any international or regional organization before it uses armed force. And still others would argue that such prior approval is impractical, given the difficulty of getting the Permanent Five members of the Security Council to reach agreement on issues of war and peace; this approach risks holding America’s freedom of action hostage to the preferences of China, Russia, France and Britain.

This leads directly to a third key concept where there isn’t consensus: our attitude toward *international institutions*. We know that they can augment U.S. strength, but we also know that they can constrain U.S. options in important ways.

The classic reasons for establishing international institutions are well-known – they reduce transaction costs, they provide a forum for regularized contact and information exchange, and they institutionalize a cadre of professional expertise. However, critics argue that these institutions often take a lowest common denominator approach and are unable to respond nimbly and effectively to fast-moving crises. They point to the inability of the IAEA to thwart the nuclear ambitions of North Korea and Iran, the UN’s oil-for-food scandal and the gross misbehavior of some of its African peace-keepers. They prefer instead “coalitions of the willing,” ad hoc groups of like-minded states that form and reform, amoeba-like, depending on the contingency.

A fourth key concept is *democracy promotion*. On no other Bush Administration policy has there been a greater disconnect between soaring rhetoric and meager budgetary resources than on democracy promotion. And on few Bush Administration policies has there been less agreement over how best to proceed. Is democracy promotion about holding elections? Is it about building civic institutions? Alleviating poverty? Education reform? Women’s rights? Transparency and the rule of law? All of the above?

Do we promote democracy differently depending on the country or region? Or is democracy promotion the same for China, the Congo, Saudi Arabia and Belarus? Even assuming we can find the right tools, how do we measure success? What metrics are the most relevant? And how urgently do we push democratic elections? What time-frame do we use?

Even if we learn how to promote democracy, after the war in Iraq, Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, does the United States have the moral authority and international credibility to do so, especially in the Middle East? Or should the United States let other countries find their own way, helping instead by serving only as a positive example as we try to perfect our own great experiment in democracy? Needless to say, answers to each of these questions range all over the political spectrum.

The fifth key concept is *globalization*, which in its various guises (e.g., cultural, economic, financial) is the most powerful and pervasive force in the world today. The globalization debate in the United States has largely been restricted to strongly held views on trade. The gap between the Republicans and Democrats on this issue was highlighted during this election season, when John McCain, a staunch supporter of free trade, told the auto workers in Michigan that some of their jobs simply weren’t coming back. In comparison, both Senators Obama and Clinton

refused to endorse the free trade agreements that are currently pending before Congress and called for a do-over on NAFTA.

These are serious divisions, and it is unclear whether they will be bridged or reconciled anytime soon. But more importantly, they mask an even greater shortcoming that threatens America's security.

As in George Kennan's time, America's diplomatic standing, military power and financial influence are a product of its economic strength. Without a strong economy, our ability to promote our values and defend our interests, to support properly our men and women in uniform, to help our friends and allies overseas and to safeguard our country, will be gravely weakened. Without a strong economy, all talk about a grand strategy is illusory.

As a first step, I strongly urge the Committee to hold hearings on developing a strategy for sustaining and enhancing America's economic power. Such a strategy would include the following issues:

- Reducing the national debt, which now stands at record levels, and has placed great stress on the middle and working classes;
- Tackling the coming crisis in entitlement payments (especially health care); driven by the "bow wave" of the boomer generation, U.S. citizens 65 and over will increase by a projected 147% between now and 2050;
- Reforming immigration laws to ensure that highly skilled and motivated people can come to the United States to work, create jobs and receive an education;
- Revitalizing our industrial infrastructure; and
- Developing a new national energy strategy to reduce our dependence on foreign oil, including greater investment in alternative energy sources.

These are just a few of the hurdles that we will have to surmount in the coming years if we wish to keep America strong. Undoubtedly, there are others. None of them will be easy to accomplish. But it is important to remember that small countries do not attempt such things. Only great ones do.

Thank you.

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