



**Simon Reich, Peter Dombrowski.** *The End of Grand Strategy: US Maritime Operations in the Twenty-First Century.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018. 252 pp. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5017-1462-7.

**Reviewed by** Harry Halem

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**Commissioned by** Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

Winston Churchill's *The World Crisis: 1911-1918* (1923), his account of the Great War, is a unique writing on major warfare. Churchill experienced the conflict at the strategic level, as both First Lord of the Admiralty and Minister of Munitions, and in the physical trenches, serving as a battalion commander on the western front. The confusion and brutality of combat may have made others reconsider their conception of warfare as an instrument of high policy; despite not seeing significant frontline combat, Churchill personally made thirty-six excursions into no man's land. Nevertheless, Churchill remained convinced of the unity between strategy and politics, particularly at the apex of decision making. As he wrote in *The World Crisis*, "at the summit, true politics and strategy are one." [1]

Strategy, however, has multiple aspects. It can be defined as a contest of wills. Therefore, any situation with counterpoising forces involves strategy; each side attempts to force the other to conform to its will. Strategy defines international politics in particular. Nevertheless, one can distinguish between different levels of strategy, from the technical through the operational, theater strategic, and at the highest point, grand strategic.

This last, highest, and most elusive sort of strategy is Simon Reich and Peter Dombrowski's topic in *The End of Grand Strategy: US Maritime*

*Operations in the Twenty-First Century.* Their selection is particularly relevant, given the defining role of debates over grand strategy in the US policy community. Grand strategy can be understood as the relationship between all of a state's potential implements of power and its ultimate desired end state. Such a concept demands a set of foundational principles about the world, nature of politics, and a state's role, and a set of deductive conclusions following from those principles that link nearly every aspect of policy into a cohesive whole.

Naturally, commanding personalities will define a field obsessed with such a topic. Constructing policy despite the natural inconsistencies of political interaction, the scope of issues a great power encounters, and the range of threats policymakers must respond to demands a confident articulation of organizing principles and resulting state actions. The grand strategist must believe that a great power can force the world to conform to its vision, provided policy is derived from the proper assumptions and executed with sufficient political will. This perspective explains the intensity of grand strategic debates in the United States; proponents of each strategic paradigm are convinced of the fundamental accuracy of their own approach, and by extension, must conceive

of pursuing an alternate path as foolhardy at best, and suicidal at worst.

In the context of such discussion, Reich and Dombrowski advance a provocative thesis that bluntly challenges the concept of grand strategy itself. They contend that changes in the contemporary geopolitical environment, in the form of “new threats, actors, and forms of conflict,” combine to make American grand strategy “less than the sum of its parts” (p. 2). If this is indeed true, the vigorous, often acrimonious debate over grand strategy in the US policy community is not only counterproductive but also dangerous; premised on the illusion that America can manipulate the surrounding world with the right policies and sufficient willpower, the pursuit of grand strategy blinds policymakers to the actual facts on the ground that should dictate American action.

Reich and Dombrowski’s project has a number of strengths. Challenging conventional thinking is always beneficial in an innately conservative community. At a minimum, it forces members of that community to articulate their core premises more fully and develop their logic more explicitly. Moreover, Reich and Dombrowski’s approach offers a description of US grand strategic theory found in no other text and a set of developed case studies that flesh out each identified strategic approach. Nevertheless, upon examination, their argument falls short of its ultimate goal of dismantling the grand strategic approach.

Two general understandings of grand strategy exist, the “narrow” and the “broad.” The narrow conception restricts grand strategy to solely traditional security issues. Barry Posen’s “theory of security” approach serves as an example; he contends that a state’s grand strategy is its conception of what makes itself secure against physical threats.[2] By contrast, the broad approach integrates a number of nontraditional issues and elements of power into its viewpoint: B. H. Liddell Hart’s study is a form of this perspective.[3] Reich and Dombrowski avoid asserting themselves on

either side of the debate, instead developing arguments using each criterion for grand strategy. Such an approach strengthens their overall case, by avoiding the chronic disagreements between narrow and broad views of grand strategy.

The American strategic community can be separated into three distinct, but overlapping, schools of thought. The first of Reich and Dombrowski’s major analytical strengths is explicating the assumptions that underpin each of these schools and indicating the specific sub-variants of all three approaches. Two of the three strategic perspectives will be well known to the informed reader. Hegemony is contrasted with its traditional rival, retrenchment. While the former entails unilaterally exercising American power or ensuring America’s visible leadership role, the latter entails only selectively engaging in relevant security issues and otherwise refusing to expend resources on missions tangential to physical security. Reich and Dombrowski’s sponsorship strategy, however, is both novel and coherently explains a number of American policy decisions. It involves manipulating formal and informal international institutions (used in a broad sense) to encourage other actors to take the lead on issues important to American security, but which the US lacks the resources to address.

Reich and Dombrowski’s second greatest analytical strength is their explication of each grand strategy’s specific sub-variants in the context of maritime operations. Maritime policy is a reasonable focus for a discussion of strategy; issues ranging from traditional warfighting to counterpiracy, counterterrorism, and humanitarian relief all fall under the maritime domain, meaning American maritime and naval policy is indicative of the United States’ approach to different situations. The authors use their detailed descriptions of specific situations to contrast the contexts in which different strategies are applied. Of particular note are their detailed discussions of the US Navy’s maritime exercises in the Pacific; American mar-

itime counterterrorism, counterpiracy, and counter-proliferation efforts; and US lack of engagement in the Arctic. At a minimum, *The End of Grand Strategy* presents highly comprehensible policy overviews and histories of each topic engaged with.

Third, Reich and Dombrowski demonstrate the degree to which civilian policy choices have transformed the military's role from a purely warfighting arm to a humanitarian and law enforcement organization. The authors avoid the pitfalls of biased discussions that castigate the degradation of the military's warfighting capabilities or praise the growth in its ability to respond to nontraditional policy issues. Instead, they remain objective, assessing the mechanical results of American policy choices through the prism of naval operations. Their evaluation reveals the precise effects of the policy insistence on Military Operations Other Than War on the navy, specifically detailing how the service is forced to use high-end platforms for what are essentially maritime police actions.

*The End of Grand Strategy's* three major strengths make it a worthwhile text for those interested in contemporary American maritime operations. However, the authors fail in their ultimate, more ambitious goal of refuting the concept of grand strategy itself. Reich and Dombrowski premise their argument on the assumption that a distinct difference exists between the contemporary international environment and its historical antecedents. New threats, new threat sources, and new means of responding to these threats are thought to have modified the international environment sufficiently to preclude traditional grand strategy. Unlike other commentators, Reich and Dombrowski do not argue that changes in the international environment entail a complete abandonment of traditional paradigms. By contrast, each detailed case study they present offers a scenario in which a specific grand strategy applies to a certain context. However, they do contend that

the changes they identify in the international system make it impossible for any specific grand strategy to respond to all issues facing the US. From this statement, the authors derive the conclusion that the employment of multiple, contradictory strategies tailored to each threat and situation is not probable but "inevitable" (p. 31). Grand strategy, by contrast, never evolves with these threats. Instead, strategists employ the same deductive approach, prioritizing certain issues (state or nonstate, traditional or nontraditional) and producing largely static frameworks that are increasingly divorced from reality.

However, the new trends they identify—the diffusion of capabilities, increasing creativity of American adversaries, growing strength of non-state groups, and rise of nontraditional hybrid conflicts—are not necessarily new, nor relevant. Technological diffusion may be a greater issue over time, but the resource base of the nation-state seems likely to preclude a challenge from substate actors in the foreseeable future. The growing creativity, and strength, of terrorist groups does present a challenge to state security. But it is increasingly apparent that these non-state groups are typically connected to, or facilitated by, a state benefactor. Even when fully independent of state control, in the case of ISIS and its franchises, one cannot help but think that these non-state groups lack independent relevance. ISIS's graphic beheadings remain a distinct moral crime and a marker of the group's innate savagery. However, now that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's self-proclaimed caliphate lies in ruins, it is clear that ISIS's primary effect was in facilitating the growth of Russo-Iranian power. Absent the collapse of the Iraqi state, Iran would still struggle to link its Lebanese proxy territories with its Persian heartland. Iran therefore owes its position in the Near East today to ISIS's rise and fall. Similarly, Russia has gained a significant foothold in the Mediterranean for arguably the first time in its history. Vladimir Putin used ISIS, along with the existence of radical elements of the Syrian opposi-

tion, to insert Russian forces into the Near East. Despite ISIS's high profile, it seems that the group's main aftereffects will be related to state action. The fundamental changes predicted in the international system, therefore, are likely not as fundamental as Reich and Dombrowski predict. In such an environment, strategy remains critical.

Moreover, Reich and Dombrowski ultimately make a normative argument that does not follow from their positive evidence. They may be correct that strategic debate in the US has stagnated. As they note, military bureaucracies tend to suppress innovation and prioritize institutional replication absent vigorous efforts to the contrary. However, judging the relative importance of the changes in the international system Reich and Dombrowski identify should not be contingent on policy attention. As they repeatedly argue, not only are US legislative objectives drastically different from the military's preferences, but policymakers also create policy based on internal domestic pressure, often vice actual strategic thinking. Reich and Dombrowski explicitly attempt to avoid "normative prescription" (p. 5). But their contention, that grand strategy is impossible in the present age, rests on the unequivocal, uncritical acceptance of American policy priorities. The US clearly employs a number of distinct strategies depending on the policy issue and uses high-end naval assets for low-end missions. This does not mean that it should act as such. The US military primarily used F/A-18s, F-16s, and F-15s for air support missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. It would obviously be absurd to argue that, because the US employed such high-end platforms for low-end missions, the traditional concept of strategy is dead. If anything, Reich and Dombrowski's text indicates the need to refocus policy discussions on strategy and avoid whittling away the US military's combat power by employing multi-billion-dollar surface warships as glorified Coast Guard cutters. Simply because American policymakers demand that the military respond to a whole spectrum of threats does not mean that such a policy is wise. Reich and Dom-

browski's book has relevance in prompting discussion over the structure and shape of grand strategy, but not its end altogether.

All strategy is inexact. By definition, it involves an adversary unwilling to submit to one's will. The randomness of events and multiplicity of issues any nation must face makes strategy creation a difficult task. Even during the strategically idealized Cold War, the US selected several different grand strategies to counter the Soviet Union, shifting between aggressive and defensive approaches depending on the overall balance of forces and specific contexts. Absent a unifying principle around which to collect strategy, the US has drifted from crisis to crisis without a broader direction in foreign policy. The result of this disunified policy has been the deterioration of America's strategic position over the past three decades. Russia is poised to replace the US as the predominate foreign power in the Near East, facilitated by contradictory American policy *apropos* Iran and ISIS. A theatrical, totalitarian cult-of-personality dictatorship holds a global superpower's undivided attention, after decades of failed negotiations and policy neglect. A kleptocracy with a GDP less than half of the United States' dictates the pace and intensity of events from the Baltics to the Black Sea, a situation enabled by vacillation between faux firmness and reset attempts with the Kremlin.

The United States' inability to articulate a unified, coherent response to these issues does not indicate the futility of grand strategy but the inadequacy of the Washington policymaking apparatus. The question therefore becomes, can America's leaders articulate a grand strategy in an increasingly unstable world and meet the challenges that the Republic faces? Reich and Dombrowski unintentionally offer an answer. It provides no cause for optimism.

Notes

[1]. Winston S. Churchill, *The World Crisis: 1911-1918*, abridged and rev. ed. (New York: Free Press, 2005), 294.

[2]. Barry Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 1.

[3]. B. H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Faber & Faber, 1967), 322.

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