

Values, Interests, and American Grand Strategy

Compared to diplomatic history, the study of international relations (IR) tends toward the faddish, overly transfixed with the present at the expense of the past. It is therefore refreshing to see Melvyn Leffler link the current National Security Strategy with its historical antecedents in “9/11 and American Foreign Policy.” It is worth stressing at the outset that although I take issue with some of Professor Leffler’s assertions, these areas of contention are dwarfed by the extent to which I concur with his empirical assessment of the continuity within America’s successive formulations of its grand strategy. However, IR theory does offer some challenges to Leffler’s theory (explicit and implicit) of American grand strategy.

At the core of Leffler’s essay is a theoretical assertion about the relationship among threat perception, values, and interests in the creation of American foreign policy: “At times of heightened threat perception, the assertion of values mounts and subsumes careful calculation of interests.”¹ On the question of balancing of ideas and interests, international relations theory does offer three points of conceptual contention and clarification. First, it is far from clear that the dichotomy of ideas and interests is as stark as Leffler presents. Second, time is a powerful constraint on the push for value-heavy foreign policies. American grand strategies are constantly revised over time—and even during periods of heightened threat perception, the power of ideational factors in determining grand strategy wanes as uncertainty about the state of the world decreases. Third, the distinction between rhetoric and action needs to be stressed—and on the latter account, it is unclear just how value laden the Bush administration’s foreign policy really is. These factors should be considered in evaluating the relative uniqueness of the Bush administration’s National Security Strategy and the current state of American foreign policy.

The role of ideas in the formulation of foreign policy is a subject of long interest in international relations.² While some IR paradigms present ideas as

1. Melvyn P. Leffler, “9/11 and American Foreign Policy,” *Diplomatic History*, this issue, 396.

2. E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919–1939* (New York, 1939); Lincoln Bloomfield, “From Ideology to Program to Policy: Tracking the Carter Human Rights Policy,” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 2 (January 1982): 1–12; Judith Goldstein, *Ideas, Interests, and American Trade Policy* (Ithaca, NY, 1993); Judith Goldstein and Robert Keohane, eds., *Ideas and Foreign Policy* (Ithaca, NY, 1993); Daniel W. Drezner, “Ideas, Bureaucratic Politics, and the Crafting of Foreign Policy,” *American Journal of Political Science* 44 (October 2000): 733–49.

a counter to interest-based approaches,³ most scholars agree that the two factors are not mutually exclusive. Judith Goldstein and Robert Keohane develop a typology of ideas that separates them into “principled beliefs” and “causal beliefs.” The former enunciates accepted values of right and wrong; the latter articulates cause-effect relationships about the state of the world. When Leffler refers to “values,” it would seem he is referring to principled beliefs. While these kinds of ideas are ever-present in American foreign policy, principled beliefs are always married to a set of causal beliefs, and the role of the latter should not be underestimated in assessing the merits of different grand strategies.

Goldstein and Keohane posit that causal beliefs will play a more prominent role in policy formulation during periods of uncertainty: “If actors do not know with certainty the consequences of their actions, it is the expected effects of actions that explain them. And under conditions of uncertainty, expectations depend upon causal beliefs.”⁴ This is a logically straightforward proposition—when real-world events contradict cognitive heuristics for understanding that world, one should expect a search for new theories to explain those events. In U.S. foreign policy, periods of heightened threat perception should be expected to trigger uncertainty about the wisdom of preexisting grand strategies—because, presumably, those ideas failed to anticipate the perceived increase in threat. At these moments, ideas serve as a useful road map to reduce real-world complexity. Whether these ideas help or hurt material interests depends on how accurately they explain the world. If new causal beliefs generate a more accurate model of cause-effect relationships, then they advance rather than deter interests. Leffler’s critique of the power of values in current foreign policy is only trenchant if the causal beliefs that underline those values are ill-informed—a question that has been and will be debated for a good long while.

Causal beliefs and principled beliefs often mutually reinforce each other. However, the history of U.S. grand strategy suggests that as circumstances change, so do causal beliefs—and that these changes are reflected in reorientations of American foreign policy. At pivotal moments in recent history—1941, 1945, and 1991—U.S. policymakers have articulated boldly idealistic visions of American grand strategy. Upon entering the Second World War, the Roosevelt administration made the decision that U.S. efforts should be focused on the European theater of operations at the expense of the Pacific campaign—despite the attack on Pearl Harbor. Indeed, U.S. military planners conceived of a cross-Channel invasion of the European mainland as early as 1942.⁵ As World War II came to an end, American policymakers focused their attention on constraining the potential power of the Axis states for the future. Treasury Secre-

3. I am thinking here of the constructivist paradigm. For the exemplar work in this area, see Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge, UK, 1999).

4. Goldstein and Keohane, *Ideas and Foreign Policy*, 13.

5. Walter LaFeber, *The American Age*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1994), 414–19.

tary Henry Morgenthau's plan to strip the German economy of heavy industry in favor of an emphasis on agricultural production is but one example. After the Gulf War, President George H. W. Bush spoke ambitiously of a "New World Order" of multilateral frameworks that could properly function without the shackles of the Cold War.

In each of these cases, the articulation of grand strategic ideas evolved after just a few years. In the case of the Second World War, the U.S. military and political leadership quickly recognized that the lack of trained personnel, combined with the British preference for a littoral strategy, made it impossible to implement an early cross-Channel invasion. The rise of the Soviet threat forced U.S. policymakers to reverse course in the Japanese and German occupations.⁶ American frustrations with the United Nations over Somalia and Bosnia caused the Clinton administration to shrink from its commitment to assertive multilateralism; the United States acted outside UN auspices in its military actions of the late nineties.⁷

In each of these cases, U.S. policymakers' initial causal beliefs about the proper way to advance American interests was revised in response to reduced levels of uncertainty about other actors' capabilities and intentions. The concomitant shifts in grand strategy reflected those revisions.

Even as the ideas underlying grand strategies are tempered by events, bureaucratic politics often acts as another constraint on value-centered foreign policies. Kathryn Sikkink observes: "Rarely do new ideas thrive in the modern world outside of institutional networks. Ideas within an institution become embodied in its statement of purpose, its self-definition, and its research or training program, which in turn tends to perpetuate and extend the ideas."⁸ Without capturing or creating powerful institutions, values cannot be persistently implemented as policy.⁹ Already, the first few years of the Bush administration have witnessed repeated clashes between political appointees infused with the administration's set of foreign-policy ideals and bureaucracies founded on a different set of ideals that clash with those views.¹⁰ To be sure, Bush's reelection—and his intent to insert loyal allies at the helm of key cabinet departments—will mean continued clashes for the next several years. Even Bush officials, however, acknowledge that this approach will not succeed in eliminating organizational conflicts.¹¹

6. See Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire* (New York, 2004), chap. 2; and Kazuo Kawai, *Japan's American Interlude* (Chicago, 1967).

7. David Halberstam, *War in the Time of Peace* (New York, 2001).

8. Kathryn Sikkink, *Ideas and Institutions* (Ithaca, NY, 1991). See also Goldstein and Keohane, *Ideas and Foreign Policy*, 20–24.

9. Drezner, "Ideas, Bureaucratic Politics, and the Crafting of Foreign Policy."

10. Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York, 2004); Ron Suskind, *The Price of Loyalty* (New York, 2004); Richard Clarke, *Against All Enemies* (New York, 2004).

11. Dana Milbank, "Bush Seeks to Rule the Bureaucracy," *Washington Post*, 22 November 2004; Elizabeth Bumiller, "In the New Bush Cabinet, Loyalty Trumps Celebrity," *New York Times*, 22 November 2004.

There is a final critique of Leffler's argument from an international relations perspective—it focuses too much on words and not enough on deeds. Regardless of what the codified grand strategy says, American actions display a recognition that tactical interests trump values in times of heightened threats. In the case of the Bush administration, the emphasis on fostering “a balance of power that favors human freedom” and “extend[ing] the peace by encouraging free and open societies on every continent” in the National Security Strategy must be contrasted with actions taken by the administration to prosecute the war on terrorism.¹² However, in order to invade Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States has befriended several authoritarian and semiauthoritarian regimes, including China, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Uzbekistan.¹³ The administration has trumpeted Libya's return to the fold of respectable nations in exchange for relinquishing its WMD program—despite the fact that Libya essentially remains a one-man dictatorship. Values may be invoked as a means to rally support for a strategy—but that does not mean these values are consistently implemented across the spectrum of foreign policy.¹⁴

The implications of this analysis on any assessment of the effect of 9/11 on American grand strategy are straightforward. Regardless of articulated doctrine, the role of material interests remains paramount even in times of heightened threat perception. The search for new ideas during periods of threat may promote a different set of principled beliefs, but that does not mean they necessarily trump material interests. If new causal beliefs about the world provide a more accurate assessment of the state of world politics, the pursuit of interests is helped rather than hindered.

12. Quotations from “The National Security Strategy of the United States,” September 2002, p. 1, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nssall.html>.

13. To be fair, the Bush NSS also states in the same paragraph that “We will preserve the peace by building good relations among the great powers.” No mention about the regime type of these powers is made.

14. This is a fact that is embraced by even the most diehard neoconservatives. Charles Krauthammer observes, “The danger of democratic globalism is its universalism, its temptation to plant the flag of democracy everywhere. It must learn to say no. And, indeed, it does say no.” Krauthammer, “Democratic Realism: An American Foreign Policy for a Unipolar World,” 2004 Irving Kristol Lecture, American Enterprise Institute, pp. 15–16.