

FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE

Grand Strategy Revisited

THE SOURCE: “Imperial by Design” by John J. Mearsheimer, in *The National Interest*, Jan.–Feb. 2011.

SINCE THE END OF THE COLD War, U.S. foreign policy has not produced inspiring results: The United States has been at war roughly two of every three years. The military missions in Iraq and Afghanistan have been long and costly. Three major foreign-policy problems have persisted without signs of resolution: preventing Tehran from acquiring nuclear weapons, getting Pyongyang to give them up, and settling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. “The United States is in a world of trouble today . . . and this state of affairs is only likely to get worse,” laments University of Chicago political scientist John J. Mearsheimer, a noted “realist” thinker.

The mistake the United States made was not in the execution of its foreign policy but in the choice of its grand strategy. In the decades since the Cold War, the United States has pursued “global dominance,” working to maintain its primacy and spread democracy, trying to make the world over in its own image.

There are two main varieties of global dominance: neoconservative (embodied by the Bush administration after 9/11) and liberal imperialist (embodied by the Clinton administration and now seeing a revival under President Barack Obama). The neo-conservatives have greater confi-

dence in the ability of the U.S. military to transform the globe. The liberal imperialists put emphasis on alliances and international institutions. But both seek global dominance, which “is exactly the wrong formula,” Mearsheimer contends. It only stokes anti-American sentiment and gives rogue regimes greater incentives to build nuclear weapons (in the hope of deterring an American attack).

“The United States needs a new grand strategy,” Mearsheimer believes. There are several options, but the best is to return to what has been America’s approach for most of its existence: “offshore balancing.” Washington should seek to ensure that no power dominates any of the three strategically important regions (Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Persian Gulf) in the way the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere.

This strategy requires a strong military, but one that is stationed at home or on carriers offshore, ready to intervene but not stay. It also means staying out of the business of spreading democracy, and refraining from interference in the domestic affairs of other nations. Mearsheimer argues that this is “the best formula for dealing with the threats facing America—whether it be terrorism, nuclear proliferation, or a traditional great-power rival.” Most important of all, offshore balancing is well suited to dealing with a rising China—the number one strategic concern in the years to come.

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Learning From Al Qaeda

THE SOURCE: “Becoming the Enemy” by Stanley A. McChrystal, in *Foreign Policy*, March–April 2011.

IN OCTOBER 2003, SOON AFTER he arrived in Iraq to head the U.S. Joint Special Operations Task Force, now-retired Army general Stanley A. McChrystal and his fellow commanders got out a whiteboard and started to map out the organizational structure of the recently founded Al Qaeda in Iraq. “By habit, we started mapping the organization in a traditional military structure, with tiers and rows. At the top was [Abu Musab al-] Zarqawi, below him a cascade of lieutenants and foot soldiers.” But the more information the U.S. commanders got, the less their whiteboard drawing made sense.

The structure of Al Qaeda in Iraq was defined “not by rank but on the basis of relationships and acquaintances, reputation and fame. . . . Who trained together in the pre-9/11 camps in Afghanistan? Who is married to whose sister?” That structure allowed Al Qaeda in Iraq to grow quickly and recover swiftly from losses. A young Iraqi militant could start fighting, build a reputation, and be easily integrated into the network. One of the greatest advantages Al Qaeda in Iraq had was the “alarming” speed at which it could operate.

The U.S. military was the opposite of nimble. McChrystal sketched out the shape of the U.S. organization between Baghdad (headquarters) and a team in Mosul (commanded by