

By Toby Pope

Toby Pope is an active duty captain and communications officer in the Marine Corps. He studies grand strategy and China at the Bush School and will graduate in May 2020. The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Marine Corps, Department of Defense or the US Government.

U.S. political polarization makes grand strategy much more difficult, but those who study grand strategy largely do not consider its impact in their writing. ‘Grand strategists’ have to confront polarization if a grand strategy is ever going to be more than words on paper. Realists in particular, with their focus on the international structure and the state as a unitary actor, should work with those who study domestic dynamics or risk being less influential. For the purpose of this post, although there is not a consensus on the definition of ‘grand strategy’, we can view it as a nation’s long-term plan, unifying all instruments of power, to accomplish national objectives.¹ Political polarization, likewise, has many definitions but can be viewed as the increasing tendency for Americans to view issues in party terms; parties “compete against each other in a zero-sum game where negotiation and compromise are perceived as betrayal,” and discourse is antagonistic.² This post first looks at how polarization complicates grand strategy, specifically, the use of military force and other foreign policy decisions, before providing examples of how polarization might be actively incorporated in academic work to improve policy recommendations.

First, polarization leads to bad grand strategy because it limits our ability to evaluate the merits of a series of policies or approaches, due to party identity being the most important factor. Multiple studies have shown the framing of the policy as Republican or Democrat, not the actual content, is the most significant factor in a person’s support.³ Voters from both sides of the aisle may support the substance of the policy itself, but once a label is attached, support rises or falls according to party preference. This behavior is consistent with the scholarship on group behavior in sociology, where the in-group has preferential treatment, even extending to moral behavior.⁴ While an individual policy is not a grand strategy, series of them are what grand strategy is comprised of.

This kind of posturing precludes establishing a general rule on the use of military force in pursuit of our national interest. Congressional support for the use of military force has been mostly partisan

¹ For a good synthetic overview and starting point on the grand strategy literature, see Nina Silove, “Beyond the Buzzword: The Three Meanings of ‘Grand Strategy,’” *Security Studies* 27, no. 1 (January 2, 2018): 27–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2017.1360073>, Rebecca Friedman Lissner, “What Is Grand Strategy? Sweeping a Conceptual Minefield (November 2018),” *Texas National Security Review* 2, no. 1 (2018), <http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/868>, and Paul C. Avey, Jonathan N. Markowitz, and Robert J. Reardon, “Disentangling Grand Strategy: International Relations Theory and U.S. Grand Strategy (November 2018),” *Texas National Security Review* 2, no. 1 (2018), <http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/869>.

² Zaid Jilani and Jeremy Adam Smith, “What Is the True Cost of Polarization in America?,” Greater Good, March 4, 2019, <https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/what-is-the-true-cost-of-polarization-in-america>.

³ Two examples of this bias in action are Carlee Beth Hawkins and Brian A. Nosek, “Motivated Independence? Implicit Party Identity Predicts Political Judgments Among Self-Proclaimed Independents,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 38, no. 11 (November 2012): 1437–52, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167212452313> and David Tannenbaum, Craig R. Fox, and Todd Rogers, “On the Misplaced Politics of Behavioural Policy Interventions,” *Nature Human Behaviour* 1, no. 7 (July 2017): 0130, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-017-0130>.

⁴ Annemarie S. Walter and David P. Redlawsk, “Voters’ Partisan Responses to Politicians’ Immoral Behavior,” *Political Psychology* 40, no. 5 (October 2019): 1075–97, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12582>.

after 1990, with only Afghanistan receiving majority support from both parties.⁵ Bipartisanship does not guarantee good strategic decisions (Vietnam had bipartisan support), but the idea that military force is only appropriate when ‘your’ party is in power is questionable. Responding to Syria’s use of chemical weapons in 2014, President Obama sought Congressional authorization for airstrikes, but key Republicans opposed the maneuver on the grounds it was against the nation’s interest. Some of the same Republicans praised President Trump’s airstrikes in retaliation for Syria’s use of chemical weapons in 2017, even though the strikes were without congressional approval.⁶ While domestic politics have always forced a president to shape military operations, the current degree of polarization prevents healthy debate and requisite strategic assessment. Coming when the United States is ever more reliant on the military lever of statecraft to achieve its strategic goals, discussion of the propriety and practicality of this instrument is a critical element of grand strategy.

Second, polarization makes grand strategy almost impossible by ensuring most policies meant to have long-term effects do not survive once the opposing party takes the helm. America’s grand strategy during the Cold War, often called containment, was possible not just because of the indisputable presence of an “enemy”, but also because different presidential administrations were able to evaluate their predecessor’s approach to the Soviet Union, accept parts of it, and make adjustments as needed. Additionally, all generally agreed that there was no substitute for American leadership in containing the USSR. This idea was best exemplified by the Eisenhower administration’s policies. After campaigning on a more forceful policy of rollback, the President convened Project Solarium in 1953, which evaluated three different strategic and foreign policy approaches to the Soviet Union. After careful evaluation by his staff, an approach was made that was essentially an extension of President Truman’s policy.⁷ While he made some small changes, he made them after examining different options and without an outright, wholesale rejection. Would this be possible today, even in the face of a “unifying” threat? The increasingly partisan nature of the response to the COVID-19 crisis is not hopeful.

In a democracy, the top leadership’s turnover can allow for strategic correction, but a dogmatic approach is a recipe for failure. Today, with a gridlocked Congress enacting near record low numbers of legislation, partisan jockeying leaves the president almost no other choice than to sign executive orders to accomplish anything. But when power changes hands, the new party is then incentivized to dismantle the previous administration’s efforts wholesale, regardless of merit, and regardless of how it may contribute to the overall foreign policy approach of the U.S. This creates huge policy swings between administrations, creates uncertainty for allies, and provides enemies an opportunity to fill gaps the U.S. leaves during the transition, as well as to criticize the United States.⁸

⁵ Kenneth A. Schultz, “Perils of Polarization for U.S. Foreign Policy,” *The Washington Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (October 2, 2017): 7–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2017.1406705>, 11-13.

⁶ Andrew Kaczynski, Nathan McDermott, and Chris Massie, “Top Republicans Who Opposed Syria Attack under Obama Are Now Praising Trump’s Strike,” CNN, accessed March 18, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/04/07/politics/kfile-top-republicans-syria-trump/index.html>.

⁷ For more on Project Solarium, see W. B. Pickett, ed., *George F. Kennan and the Origins of Eisenhower’s New Look: An Oral History of Project Solarium* (Princeton Institute for International and Regional Studies, Princeton University, 2004).

⁸ One recurring criticism comes from China on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), as the United States has not ratified the treaty, but follows it, yet China has ratified the treaty and does not follow it. This situation is valuable for the propaganda value. See Lu Kang, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lu Kang’s

A well-known example pertains to the JCPOA, or the Iranian nuclear agreement. Iran pledged to limit sensitive nuclear activities in exchange for relief from economic sanctions and a nuclear monitoring regime. The agreement was reached after years of diplomacy and negotiations with the P5+1, (US, UK, France, China, Russia and Germany).⁹ Believing the deal was the best possible and getting congressional support was impossible, President Obama signed an executive order to rescind Iranian sanctions. In May 2018, despite Iranian compliance with its commitments, President Trump withdrew the United States from the agreement, citing flaws with the agreement's sunset clauses. It is important to realize that most military leaders, including the Secretary of Defense and commander of U.S. Central Command, supported the agreement.¹⁰ Many commentators contend his primary reason for withdrawal was not the policy itself, but Obama's signature on the document.¹¹

Grand strategy requires a longer time horizon to work but polarization makes that almost impossible. IR scholars should take polarization and other domestic political factors into account when proposing grand strategy options. An interdisciplinary approach, incorporating insights from the field of American political science, sociology, or social psychology may be appropriate. To demonstrate how this could work in practice, I provide two examples: how to make the grand strategy of 'deep engagement' more sustainable and how to make 'off-shore balancing' more implementable.

First, if deep engagement is going to continue as a viable grand strategy, then it may be useful to recognize the disruptive effects of globalization on American workers, and how that influences voting behavior. Given the importance of manufacturing jobs in key states and how globalization impacted swing voters in the 2016 presidential election, it may be useful to directly calm their anxieties. Proposing ways to help workers who have been laid off because of the effects of globalization, such as job retraining policies, could help sustain domestic support for the rest of deep engagement.

Second, if the off-shore balancing grand strategy is going to gain support, understanding the domestic audience is key. Given the same swing voters as discussed above, it may be useful to frame off-shore balancing in economic, protectionist terms, and emphasize how it would impact the American economy. Additionally, while many realists have praised Trump's 'realist' foreign policy instincts,¹² associating Trump with realism may be unwise, as it could decrease future bipartisan support for realist approaches. This call for realists to change their rhetoric is not without precedent, as Chris Layne, an accomplished realist scholar, has called for other realists to put their policy preferences in moral terms in order to be more effective.¹³

Remarks on Statement by Spokesperson of US State Department on South China Sea Arbitration Ruling," accessed April 9, 2020, <http://si.chineseembassy.org/eng/fyrth/t1380409.htm>.

⁹ "Timeline of Nuclear Diplomacy With Iran | Arms Control Association," accessed April 17, 2020, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Timeline-of-Nuclear-Diplomacy-With-Iran>.

¹⁰ Idrees Ali, "U.S. General Signals Support for Iran Nuclear Deal," *Reuters*, March 13, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-iran-nuclear-idUSKCN1GP203>.

¹¹ Anthony Zurcher, "Three Reasons behind Trump Ditching Iran Deal," *BBC News*, May 8, 2018, sec. US & Canada, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-43902372>.

¹² Stephen M. Walt, "Has Trump Become a Realist?," *Foreign Policy* (blog), accessed April 17, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/04/17/has-trump-become-a-realist/>.

¹³ Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2007), 203.

Overall, scholars studying grand strategy should incorporate domestic political conditions into their policy recommendations. This would make the field more accessible, less pie-in-the-sky, to both general citizens and policymakers. The academic community should incorporate the causes and potential solutions of polarization into grand strategy work given its effects on international relations, grand strategic approaches, and foreign policy.¹⁴

¹⁴ There is very little current published research on this topic. For two notable exceptions see, Stephen M. Walt, "America's Polarization Is a Foreign Policy Problem, Too," *Foreign Policy* (blog), accessed April 5, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/11/americas-polarization-is-a-foreign-policy-problem-too/> and Kenneth A. Schultz, "Perils of Polarization for U.S. Foreign Policy," *The Washington Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (October 2, 2017): 7–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2017.1406705>.