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Nina Silove. "Beyond the Buzzword: The Three Meanings of "Grand Strategy."" *Security Studies* 27:1 (2017): 27-57. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2017.1360073>

Review by **Alex Roland**, Duke University

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Nina Silove argues that “the popularity of the term ‘grand strategy’ has increased exponentially since the end of the Cold War” (1). This bold and questionable claim will warrant closer examination later. But its underlying point is nonetheless true. A key-word search for “grand strategy” in articles in refereed journals for the year 2015 produced 21,444 hits.¹ If scholarship is what scholars do, then grand strategy is an important area of study by any standard. In her article, Silove asks what scholars mean when they use the term. Many scholars, she finds, use their own definitions. Some use one or more definitions proposed by others. Some scholars even invoke “grand strategy” to question the importance, coherence, and even the existence of grand strategy.² In her view, dissensus reigns in the existing literature. Her purpose in “Beyond the Buzzword: The Three Meanings of “Grand Strategy” is to develop a taxonomy of “grand strategy” as scholars use the term.

Grand strategy, she maintains, is a whole divided into three parts: Grand Plans, Grand Principles, and Grand Behaviors. Her article explains those categories, articulates the common features of the three versions of grand strategy, and provides examples of how her taxonomy works in practice.

¹ My university library uses a customized version of the search engine “Summon.”

² See for example, Richard Betts, “Is Strategy an Illusion?” *International Security* 25:2 (Fall 2000): 5-50; and Hal Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

Grand Plans, she argues, are “deliberate, detailed” articulations, usually written, of a state’s long-term goals and the means necessary to achieve them (3). She traces grand strategy’s modern efflorescence to B. H. Liddell Hart (1895-1970), the British soldier, journalist, and self-trained historian. Liddell Hart’s *Strategy* appeared in the run-up to World War II, making the case for an “indirect approach” in warfare, a strategy that substituted maneuver, deception, and surprise for reliance on brute force.³ In Liddell Hart’s view, grand strategy was a higher form of military strategy, considering the overall goals of the state and all the means at its disposal, not limited to military force. Silove credits historian Paul Kennedy, a protégé of Liddell Hart, with having introduced one of only two definitions of grand strategy to have achieved longevity in the existing literature and with having contributed to the post-Cold War enthusiasm for grand strategy with his 1991 edited collection, *Grand Strategies in War and Peace*. She notes that Liddell Hart and Kennedy use the term “grand strategy” in the sense of Grand Plans, though she makes no mention of Kennedy’s insistence that “the crux of grand strategy lies . . . in policy.”⁴

Silove cites classic examples of modern Grand Plans, all from the United States: George Kennan’s “Long Telegram” (but not his subsequent “X article”), the Harry Truman administration’s National Security Council (NSC) 68, and the results of President Dwight Eisenhower’s Solarium exercise. She also addresses the quadrennial U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) documents, noting that they are generally perceived as not living up to the requirements of their congressional mandate.⁵

Grand Principles are a kind of grand strategy that provides an “organizing principle” or “overarching ideas” to frame the formulation of policy (13, 23). These are less detailed than Grand Plans. It is possible, for example, to think of containment as a Grand Principle and NSC 68 as a Grand Plan. In this sense, a Grand Plan can operationalize a Grand Principle. Because Grand Principles need not be written, as Grand Plans usually are, they must be discerned by studying the ideas of key leaders or “the activities of the individual or the state” (16). This second variety of grand strategy, Silove notes, raises the problem of equifinality. Can the principle be isolated as the sole cause of the observed behavior of the state?

Grand Behavior is simply what the state does. The only requirement is that there be some discernible, sustained pattern of state behavior: “the pattern *is itself the grand strategy* (17; italics in original). If there were not some unspoken consensus about prioritizing the state’s ends and means, then there would not be a long-term pattern. Students of Grand Behavior may take any of three approaches to the question of intentionality, i.e., did the state actors consciously intend to abide by some plan or principle in behaving as they did? Students may simply ignore principles or plans; the behavior is what it is, a kind of grand strategy. They may concede underlying principles or plans and focus on the pattern of behavior (the grand strategy) as the

³ B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy: The Indirect Approach*, 3rd ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1954); first published as *The Decisive Wars of History* (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1929).

⁴ Paul M. Kennedy, ed., *Grand Strategies in War and Peace* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991). This book contains Kennedy’s definition of “grand strategy” in his chapter on “Grand Strategies in War and Peace: Toward a Broader Definition,” 1-10, quote at 4. The other definition to achieve longevity in Silove’s opinion appears in political scientist Barry Posen’s *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984). Posen stresses ends and means.

⁵ This failure may be attributed to the unwillingness of successive administrations to publicly prioritize the shopping list of national goals laid out in the documents. See below.

operationalization of plans or principles. Or, students may assert that the behavior was the result of adherence to some unspoken, underlying cultural or political consensus, a kind of Rousseauian General Will.

All grand strategies, be they plans, principles, or behaviors, must, according to Silove, meet three general standards. First, they must have “two constituent elements, ends and means” (23). The state must tailor its national goals to the resources at its disposal. Second, grand strategies must be long-term, holistic, and important. This means that they must look years and even decades into the future. They must encompass “all spheres of statecraft,” which Silove limits to the categories of military, diplomatic, and economic (23). And the grand strategy must be “important,” as understood by the state. Grand strategy should address state survival, of course, but it can also tackle imperial, economic, political, and humanitarian goals, to name just a few. All states prioritize survival first, but each state will have its own sense of what else might be important. Third, grand strategies should be coherent and balanced. They should allow the state to make policies that are consistent with one another and to balance ends and means. Silove notes, however, that these two qualities may not be necessary. Incoherent or unbalanced grand strategies may simply be bad grand strategies.

With these definitions in hand, Silove subjects her paradigm to a series of stress tests against “Foundational Conceptual Questions about Grand Strategy” (23). For example, she asks “is grand strategy intentional” (23)? She believes that plans and principles are, and behavior may be. The last is, in her view, an empirical question: “Can Small States Have Grand Strategies” (25)? In theory, yes, but in practice, she believes, not so much. She does not ask whether non-state actors can have grand strategies, or if states can have multiple grand strategies simultaneously. “To What Extent is Grand Strategy Constant or Flexible” (26)? For plans and principles, grand strategies must be long-term in scope but not necessarily long-lived. Patterns of behavior must be long-term enough to qualify as a pattern.

No summary of the argument in this article can do justice to its rigor, erudition, thoughtfulness, or plausibility. The following comments and observations are not designed to call into question either the quality or usefulness of this analysis. Rather they are intended to suggest ways in which this stimulating and provocative interpretation of the literature might be expanded and refined.

Several topics received less attention than they might warrant. Silove addresses the importance of prioritizing grand strategies, but more attention would be welcome. Many grand strategies have multiple goals, begging the question of their relative importance of the means to be applied to each.⁶ In the U.S., how do grand strategies compare to the ‘doctrines’ that come to be ascribed to presidents and their administrations. Beginning with the Monroe Doctrine, and continuing through most presidents from Truman to the present, signature plans or principles have been singled out as a kind of shorthand for what a president sought to achieve on the world stage. Were these grand strategies? Were they Grand Plans or Grand Principles? Did they constitute Grand Behavior? Or were they just, as George Kennan said of the “Kennan Sweepstakes” to theorize a post-Cold War successor to “containment,” catchphrases to reduce grand strategies to “bumper stickers” (14)?

⁶ See, for example, Stephen Biddle and Peter Feaver, “Assessing Strategic Choices in the War on Terror,” in James Burk, ed. *How 9/11 Changed Our Ways of War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 30-31. The authors claim that U.S. grand strategy since the end of the Cold War consistently had four or five “pillars” through Republican and Democratic administrations.

Silove makes clear the role of history and historians in the conceptualization of grand strategy, especially Grand Plans. More might be said, however, about the different ways in which historians and political scientists treat grand strategy. History, as a discipline, tends to be less fully theorized than other social science disciplines, and for that reason historians are prone to fall in love with topics like “grand strategy,” as they have done, for example, with “ways of war” and “military revolutions.”⁷ Their technique in such cases is to scour history for other examples of the phenomena, invariably finding what they went searching for. Usually this scholarship takes the form of what historian and philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn called “normal science.” By that he meant that the scholar sets out to confirm the existing theory or “paradigm.”⁸ In contrast, political scientists approach a field like grand strategy with the goal of revising or overthrowing the existing theory. The process breeds too many theories and too little convergence.

Silove notes that one of the key characteristics of grand strategy throughout the literature is the means that state leaders deploy to achieve their ends. The generic term is “all spheres of statecraft.” This is the same kind of language that B.H. Liddell Hart used to distinguish military strategy from grand strategy. Silove defines “all spheres of statecraft” as “military, diplomatic, and economic” (5-6). This list might well be expanded to include culture (think Walt Disney and Louis Armstrong), psychology and propaganda (Radio Free Europe), institutions (United Nations, North Atlantic Treaty Organization), geography (Panama Canal, islands in the South China Sea), technology (reconnaissance satellites, cyber meddling), public opinion (human rights), ideology (democracy), and perhaps others. Finally, Silove might say more about perspectives from different fields and disciplines; for example, her mention of Ionut Popescu’s idea of emergent strategies, derived from business history, is apt but brief.⁹

Silove’s opening assertion about the exponential growth in the field of grand strategy studies prompts some larger, overarching observations about the way in which this article approaches the literature. I cannot find any evidence that the scholarship on grand strategy might be growing exponentially. The number of scholarly articles with “grand strategy” in the title ebbed and flowed through the Cold War and accelerated in the years after the fall of the Soviet Union. Since the turn of the century, however, the annual rate of increase has declined markedly, from 1.042 in 2000 to 0.102 in 2015.¹⁰ Scholarship on this topic is still increasing, but ever more slowly. More troubling still, appearance of the term in public discourse outside the academy is erratic at best and waning at worst. Appearances in the *New York Times*, as captured in the newspaper’s archival key word search, have increased slowly, from 99 in 1945 to 236 in 2016, almost identical to the change in U.S. population in that period.¹¹ The count has varied widely in the intervening years, but shown

⁷ Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (New York: Macmillan, 1973); and Geoffrey Parker, *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500-1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, [1988] 1996).

⁸ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2d ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1962] 1970), 10-34.

⁹ Ionut Popescu, *Emergent Strategy and Grand Strategy: How American Presidents Succeed in Grand Strategy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017).

¹⁰ See note 1 above.

¹¹ The *New York Times* search engine for “grand strategy.”

no dramatic increase. “Google Trends,” while covering a shorter period, presents more troubling data. From a high of 100 hits in May 2004, “grand strategy” has fallen steadily to 16 hits in October 2017. In short, scholarly interest in the topic appears to be decelerating and the existing scholarship evinces small impact outside the academy.¹²

This finding raises the possibility that scholars who follow this literature are largely talking to each other. And that in turn suggests a new set of thoughts about how and why to study the nature of our discourse. Maybe, for example, the field is burdened with careerism. Perhaps the literature on the topic is driven, at least in part, by historians doing normal science and political scientists running in the ‘Kennan sweepstakes.’ Both forms of scholarship beg the question of what the participants are trying to achieve.

Silove sheds some light on this question. She concedes, for example, that the appearance of “grand strategy” in the titles of some scholarly works may be “more for purposes of grandiosity than intellectual honesty” (30). But her own point of view might suffer that same guild perspective. Her approach is explicitly ontological, exploring the nature of “grand strategy” as the concept is deployed in the existing literature. Her study has greatly advanced my understanding of the term and I am confident that it will find its way into many syllabi and bibliographies. But it might be equally illuminating to explore the epistemology of the concept. What is it that we want to know--or believe we have found—when we study grand strategy? Is it a short-hand for national policy at a certain time and place, like “the Bush Doctrine”? Can it tell us something about national values and practices, as we once thought “the American way of war” would do? Might it illuminate the plans and principles behind national behavior in a particularly enlightening way? Must we share a common definition to achieve these ends?

Whatever the answers to these questions might be, I hasten to repeat my admiration and appreciation for this significant contribution to our understanding of “grand strategy.” Like the author, I am a member of this guild and mindful of its achievements. Even if we cannot agree on a definition of our topic, and even if the discussion has grown too discursive, it remains a rich and rewarding field to explore. Perhaps, in the end, the most useful conclusion might be, to paraphrase President Dwight Eisenhower, grand strategy is worthless, but grand strategizing is everything.

Alex Roland is Professor of History, Emeritus, at Duke University, where he taught military history and the history of technology. He assisted Peter Feaver in designing and launching Duke’s Program in American Grand Strategy and co-taught the capstone course in that program. His latest book is *War and Technology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

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¹² To its credit, the field has produced and encouraged its own critical self-examination.