

Global Strategic Assessment 2009: America's Security Role in a Changing World

Introduction

By Patrick M. Cronin

Although the United States cannot afford to be the world's exclusive security guarantor, the world is ill prepared for U.S. retrenchment. This Global Strategic Assessment offers a conceptual pathway for U.S. policymakers to begin recalibrating America's security role to reverse what has appeared to be a widening gap between U.S. ends and means, now and in the future. International security requires U.S. active engagement, but the character of that engagement is changing along with the global environment. Worldwide trends suggest that the United States will increasingly have to approach complex challenges and surprises through wider and more effective partnerships and more integrated strategies. This volume explains the complex security environment and how in particular the United States can begin the process of strategic adaptation.

Complexity is the watchword of our century. This assessment should be a healthy reminder of just how complex—and dangerous—a world we live in. That complexity was encapsulated by the Greek poet Archilochus, who said that the fox knows many things but the hedgehog had only one big idea. During the previous administration, the United States conflated security under the umbrella of a “global war on terror” and focused on a single big idea. Thus, in this volume a central idea, if not an organizing principle, is that the United States will have to be as clever as the fox, keeping its eye on multiple challenges and taking care not to exert its finite resources on any single problem. Preparing for and dealing with such profound complexity requires particular capabilities, approaches, and proclivities: cultural, developmental, experiential, technical, organizational, political, and operational.

These attributes can be selected, cultivated, and enhanced, and it seems that they will have to be if we are to survive, let alone succeed.

This book attempts to bridge the gap between theory and praxis, but it is not a policy blueprint. As suggested above, its overriding message is to emphasize global complexity and America's vital yet limited role in coping with that complexity. Some critics of this volume will hew to a traditional view of security and the world, claiming that the threats are far more straightforward and the world quite predictable. Indeed, the world of tomorrow will carry on with a great deal of continuity. It is also fair to say that this volume tries harder to identify change than highlight that continuity. Even so, the gist of this research, undertaken by 125 scholars, suggests that policymakers and analysts are only beginning to come to terms with the uncertain, complex world in which we operate. For instance, too little systematic thought has been given to the interactions between state and nonstate actors, between economics and security, and in the “global commons.” Moreover, to the extent that officials and analysts are able to stay on top of global trends, they also realize that our prescriptions, policies, and strategies tend to lag woefully behind them.

Today's world is marked by the uneasy coexistence between traditional geopolitics and ever-widening globalization. A fundamental question undergirding this volume is how the United States can best use its essential and yet insufficient influence in a world marked by both rising state power centers and the devolution of power into the hands of more nonstate actors. Clearly, there is no simple prescription for the problem of how the United States can best exert its influence in this dynamic security landscape. Even

so, the breadth of threats, challenges, and opportunities that may surface in the coming years will require a comprehensive approach that utilizes the full continuum of power—be it hard, soft, smart, dumb, or fuzzy. Complexity should not be an excuse for ignoring clear, urgent, and obvious dangers, but responses to those threats must better assess the side effects and opportunity costs of neglecting the full array of challenges confronting the United States and the world. In short, there is no substitute for making conscious choices within a grand strategic perspective: the world cannot afford for us to be narrow, near-sighted, or parochial.

Safeguarding U.S. national interests and global security is complex and uncertain today and is only likely to become more so tomorrow. This volume provides departure points for reflecting on challenges, considering remedies, and managing complexity. It is designed to serve the broadest possible community, from officials in the Obama administration and across the U.S. national security community, to elite and public audiences around the world.

There are three sections: first, an overview of eight broad trends shaping the international security environment; second, a global analysis of the world's seven regions, to consider important developments in their distinctive neighborhoods; and, third, an examination of prospective U.S. contributions, military capabilities and force structure, national security organization, alliances and partnerships, and strategies. Every chapter contains at least five succinct essays designed to assess a particular issue and its implications. Thus, while the 20 chapters reflect more than 125 separate issues, they all contribute to a general framework from which policymakers may initiate discussions.

Section I considers eight strategic trends shaping both near- and long-term challenges and opportunities. Economic and political power is shifting; technology is altering political and social patterns of behavior; energy and the environment are looming as larger long-term drivers of security than in the past; permanent fragile states and nonstate actors are creating new dimensions to what had once been seen by many as a big-power chessboard; and the proliferation of weapons and hybrid warfare are likely to change the character of conflict in the future. The world seems stuck in a constant tussle between geopolitics and globalization, between classic state-power contests for competition and cooperation, and emerging dynamics in which

the good and ill effects of globalization take on heightened importance. Policymakers will have to seek the best balance between these traditional and emerging forces.

Section II provides seven regional surveys that highlight the rich and distinctive issues, uncertainties, competitions, and partnerships that characterize each region of the world. Trends may be global, but they affect and shape each region in different ways. Moreover, each region appears to have largely local domestic and regional concerns, even while increasingly intersecting with other regions and global security issues. As for which countries will contribute to regional and international security, there is an obvious gap between the array of challenges transcending narrow national interests and the level of contributions most countries are making. Again, policymakers will have to find a balance between local and regional priorities on the one hand and more global and transnational issues on the other.

Finally, Section III focuses more directly on the implications of global and regional trends for U.S. policy. The complex environment poses a potent set of challenges for how the administration of President Barack Obama seeks to exert America's significant yet finite power to safeguard against a diverse set of traditional and modern threats and challenges, while also seizing as many opportunities as possible to build more durable, peaceful, and collaborative solutions for the 21st century. In his first months in office, President Obama demonstrated a keen ability to change the basic narrative of the United States, placing it in a far less confrontational stance with most of the world, and showing a willingness to give greater weight to local and multilateral solutions.

Although this project was largely accomplished before the beginning of the Obama administration, we know from the first months of its tenure that in many ways the United States has turned the page on its style and narrative in many parts of the world. At the same time, it should be obvious that while diplomacy and rhetoric can provide an important new beginning, the hard work of seeking security, building support, and implementing whole-of-government solutions across a vast number of complex challenges is a never-ending business. The administration has not only embraced the "3 Ds" of diplomacy, development, and defense, but has also recognized that many broad security issues are interwoven with the "3 Es" of economics, energy, and

the environment. Other issues, such as democracy and human rights, cannot be divorced from security, whether concerning the future course of Iran or the difficulties democracies have in waging protracted counterinsurgencies without losing popular support or straying from democratic values.

Albert Einstein once said that given an hour to save the world, he would devote 59 minutes to thinking about the problem and 1 minute to resolving it. This volume hews to that advice by allowing some 125 expert authors to contribute to a portrait of the world that pays homage to the breadth and diversity of issues driving tomorrow's security environment in an accessible and constructive way. It presents a coherent whole, but it does not attempt to speak with one voice. The breadth of this approach is meant to provide decisionmakers with a full palette of the circumstances that they face and the options to consider.

This Global Strategic Assessment provides a purposefully broad point of departure for many national security functions: subsequent analysis, interagency coordination, policy derivation, coalition-building, reorganization, long-range planning, and operations. The need for broader U.S. strategic thinking is obvious to me and to my colleagues at the Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS) at the National Defense University. But equally important is the need to mobilize partners, conduct serious planning, integrate a rich variety of disciplines and actors, follow through on implementation, and then assess actions with an appreciation of history. And all of these steps must then, in turn, inform our education and training. No single essay in the full collection ever provides the depth that some experts require. Instead, the attempt is to cover enough issues and areas of the world to review the intricacies of global security. In so doing, it makes an obvious case for all-of-government and coalition-based solutions. Again, this assessment is not a policy treatise, but it does set out the terms of the debate as a first step to confronting challenges, exploiting opportunities, and keeping the United States secure.

This should be a familiar process: on the modern battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan, a deep and sober understanding of what U.S. and coalition forces faced had to emerge before any hope of a comprehensive and successful strategy was possible. The Global Strategic Assessment aspires to get this strategic learning process off the battlefield to the maximum extent possible and appropriate.

The challenges are great, but so are the opportunities. The world is changing, but the United States still has the greatest capacity to cope with these vicissitudes, to lead global responses, and to make the world a safer place. Many of the trends are positive, and the contributions of issues as diverse as the information revolution and advances in the life sciences are bringing greater overall good than ill to humankind. Even so, in a volume focused on security risks, it would be a dereliction of duty to avoid difficult questions about better ways to manage the challenges emerging even from positive trends.

In addition to the elaborate interrelatedness of international security, this Global Strategic Assessment should remind the reader of the enduring realities of American power. There is nothing permanent about the U.S. global security role, and there are no guarantees in international security, but no other nation has America's unique attributes: a global zeal to make the world a better place; potent expeditionary forces to project power on all continents and oceans; a large and open economy; and a diverse and ever-changing society built on freedom and the rule of law. As the Nation is refocusing its foreign policy on diplomatic rather than military capabilities, the fact remains that formidable military power has supercharged our diplomacy and remains key to providing the Obama administration with far more purchase than other countries. Whether through settled or ad hoc collective security arrangements, no other country appears ready to mobilize its instruments of power to address threats posed by state and nonstate actors. Even as American power measured as a percentage of the global economy has declined, its comparative advantage in terms of hard military power has expanded.

Although the weight of these diverse essays may leave some wondering about America's future, there is inherent in this document a good deal of optimism: that problems can be resolved or at least better managed; that a more humble America that is more sensitive to diverse views from around the world is ready to work together with others; and that for America's relative decline in perceived and actual influence, perhaps, there is every reason to believe that the United States will remain a powerful and unique contributor—only one, to be sure—to global security.

The effort embodied in this Global Strategic Assessment harkens back to the origins of INSS, which was established 25 years ago by then-Chairman

of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Jack Vessey, who understood long before whole-of-government approaches became fashionable that planning and assessment needed to take full advantage of diverse expertise, cutting-edge research, and a blend of civil-military teamwork. As General Vessey mentioned in early 2009: “the [geographic and functional commanders in chief] were constructing our war plans in basement rooms around the world with, except for Stratcom [U.S. Strategic Command], staffs equipped with #2 pencils and yellow foolscap.” Responding to the inherent challenge presented by General Vessey, INSS published a series of annual assessments over the last decade. In 2008, the Office of the Secretary of Defense asked the Institute to prepare another assessment that would provide a broad and diverse understanding of the international security environment in the decade ahead, specifically designed for use early in the term of the new President. It is a great privilege to be able to share this volume with the widest possible audience. [gsa](#)