

# Is Strategic Studies Relevant to Contemporary Policymakers?

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## *Abstract*

This article addresses the question of the relevance of the academic study of strategy to those who carry out strategy in the domain of policy. Since its inception, the field of strategic studies has long been critiqued as either irrelevant or overly focused on violence. The question of its value to policymakers is rarely explored. This article argues that policymakers' actions are the clearest evidence that the field is still relevant to contemporary policymakers. Primarily, I refer to multiple strategy documents from the last three American presidential administrations to highlight how the principles of strategic studies are central to policymakers' responses to the global strategic environment.

**Keywords:** Strategic studies, strategy, policy, grand strategy, US policy

## *Introduction*

The question of strategic studies' relevance to both the modern intellectual canon as well as contemporary policymakers is a perennial one. Since the birth of its modern form in the interwar period, the field has been subject to scorn from critics who deride it as 'meagre, immoral or even promoting bellicosity among states'.<sup>1</sup> The termination of the Cold War provided more fodder for those who felt that an academic discipline whose central focus is the use of military action to achieve political goals was irrelevant for an era, bereft of great power competition. Throughout the debate, there exists a tension between the need for academic independence and integrity, and the goals and motivations of policymakers. Because of the close relationship between strategic studies in academia and policy actions, the spectre of 'prostitution of strategic scholarship' is at the heart of criticisms of the field.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout this article I argue that strategic studies remain as relevant to contemporary policymakers as ever. Owing to its central focus on the ends-ways-means construct, strategic studies provide an essential framework with which decision-makers can develop strategies that are tailored to suit an ever-changing and complex geopolitical environment. Scholars too benefit from this framework when it comes to understanding interactions between nation-states.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, while international relations and the subfield of security studies predominantly concern themselves with 'the study of the conditions of the international security system and theories on the nature of that system,' strategic studies has a clear

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<sup>1</sup> Ahmed Hashim, 'Is Strategic Studies at Risk?', *Australian Journal of Defence and Strategic Studies*, Vol. 1 No. 1 (2019): 84.

<sup>2</sup> Colin Gray, *Strategic Studies and Public Policy: The American Experience* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1982), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Meiser, "Ends + Ways + Means = (Bad) Strategy," *The US Army War College Parameters Quarterly*, Vol 6(4) (Winter 2016-2017): 82.

relationship to action.<sup>4</sup> The field's close relationship to policy action provides lasting impact and relevance. While the need for academic independence and integrity is of the utmost importance to the field, that does not change the fact that there is a clear link between theory and practice in strategic studies.

While the changing geopolitical landscape – ranging from the growth of non-state actors to the rise of China – might invite speculation that strategic studies is a vestige of the Cold War and ought to be done away with and replaced with a field more responsive to modern geopolitics, this does a disservice to the richness of strategic studies as an academic discipline. As geopolitics has become more complicated, so too have the choices facing the nations of the world. Strategic studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – with its study of sharp, soft, and hard powers – is certainly more varied than the field was in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, with its predominant concern being 'the bomb'. While the toolkit of means becomes bigger, the reality is that the use of force and the need for strategy will be a near-constant. In other words, 'as long as mankind insists on the use of force in inter-state relations, there will always be a need and a place for those who study war and violence in the international system'.<sup>5</sup>

A persistent theme when discussing strategic studies is a certain degree of ambiguity in its definition. I will first introduce the field of strategic studies and identify its place within political science, and especially within the field of international relations. I will also identify a key – albeit controversial – model for strategic studies. Finally, by identifying this model within the multitude of strategy documents, specifically the National Security and National Defense Strategies, published by the previous three presidential administrations, I will argue that the field of strategic studies remains critical to modern policymakers.

### ***Strategic Studies***

In order to understand the relevance of strategic studies to modern policymakers, we must first define strategic studies and identify the discipline's position within the broader field of political science. Given the field's relative youth as compared to the more established subfields of political science such as international relations and political theory, this is not a straightforward proposition. Nevertheless, the basis for my overall thesis is rooted in an understanding of *what* strategic studies is, which provides an understanding of *why* it is relevant to contemporary decision-makers.

The definition of strategic studies fits neatly within the definition of political science. The latter is predominantly focused on the 'systematic study of governance by the application of empirical and generally scientific methods of analysis' with a further emphasis on political institutions and 'power – defined as the ability of one political actor to get another actor to do what it wants – at the international, national, and local levels'.<sup>6</sup> Turning to a definition of strategic studies, the emphasis is on the ability of actors to achieve political ends. Strategy, in turn, is defined as 'the science or art of employing all the military, economic, and political resources of a country to achieve the objects of war'.<sup>7</sup> Thus strategic studies is the study of that science or art as it relates to the goals of political actors.

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Ayson, "Strategic Studies," in *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations*, ed. Reus-Smith C. and Snidal D. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009): 14. DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199219322.003.0032

<sup>5</sup> Hashim, "Is Strategic Studies at Risk?", 84

<sup>6</sup> Michael Roskin, "Political Science," *Britannica*, 2016, accessed July 26, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/political-science>.

<sup>7</sup> Cohen, "Strategy."

If the relationship between political science and strategic studies is self-evident, strategic studies' relationship with international relations – especially within the subfield of security studies – is less clear. A casual interpretation of the two fields might see significant overlap between them, if for no other reason than the fact that military actions play an outsized role in our conceptualization of security; and that strategic studies is often considered as the study of why military actions occur. This perceived overlap has led scholars to 'suggest that strategic studies is a specialized portion of security studies, which is itself a subfield of international relations'.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, as Robert Ayson argues, that taxonomy may not be the best understanding of the relationship between strategic studies and the international relations subfield of political science. The first reason is that strategic studies is not purely the study of military actions, but rather it is the study of 'how political ends *and* military means interact under social, economic, and other constraints'.<sup>9</sup> To further illustrate the point, Richard Betts describes a concentric circle whereby military science (with its focus on tactics and technology) constitutes the core, while security is the outermost ring; between the two is strategic studies.<sup>10</sup> Thus strategic studies as a discipline does not exist under the shadow of security but is rather an 'interactive partner'; 'if security is the condition, strategy is the reaction'.<sup>11</sup> While security studies and international relations are concerned with the theoretical foundation for why conflict may occur and what lays in its aftermath, strategic studies 'is concerned with all three phases of war, including the actual conduct and mechanisms of it'.<sup>12</sup>

Strategic studies is also able to stand alone as an interdisciplinary field. Not only is its purview broad, but it also threads the needle between theory and application. In fact, it is not improbable to argue that – much like the political theory subfield – strategic studies has strong political philosophic roots; in one sense, when Clausewitz theorized the direct relationship between politics and war, he became the 'Thomas Hobbes of Strategic Studies'.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, strategic studies is a useful tool by which scholars can understand the actions of political actors through the ends-ways-means construct, while those same political actors can utilize the same construct to achieve their goals. In this regard, the practical relevance of strategic studies is clearer than many other academic disciplines.

There are also a number of critiques regarding the field of strategic studies and its practitioners that must be accounted for: that 'strategists leave morality out of account,' strategists exclude 'a whole range of policies such as disarmament or non-violent resistance that are intended to abolish military force or to provide substitutes for it', and that the field is engaged in 'pseudo-scientific' methods such as game theory.<sup>14</sup> Many of these critiques arise from an academic concern with a field that is intrinsically linked to military action, while other critiques have not withstood the test of time as the field of strategic studies has matured in response to an increasingly complex geopolitical landscape. The second critique seems at odds with, for example, the United States' well documented use of economic sanctions and financial ways and means to achieve its strategic ends.

The relationship between practice and theory represents the greatest venue for criticism of the field, including concerns about what Colin Gray described as 'prostitution of strategic

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<sup>8</sup> Ayson, "Strategic Studies," 13.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Betts, "Should Strategic Studies Survive?," *World Politics*, Vol. 50 No. 1 (October 1997): 9.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Ayson, "Strategic Studies," 1.

<sup>12</sup> Betts, "Should", 10.

<sup>13</sup> Ayson, "Strategic Studies," 14.

<sup>14</sup> Hedley Bull, "Strategic Studies and Its Critics," *World Politics*, Vol. 20 No. 4 (July 1968): 601.

scholarship,<sup>15</sup> in addition to myriad other critiques of the field. Not only is there a moralistic argument that strategic studies is somehow aiding ‘the work of the devil,’ but a field so closely associated with policy suffers from a lack of ‘paradigm shifting...theoretical innovation’.<sup>16</sup> The fallacy of this argument is rooted in a failure to recognize that both theory and policy serve valuable purposes. The United States’ current policy toward China, for example, is clearly rooted in the theory of Realism which thus informs something as operational as destroyer deployments in the South China Sea.

The intercourse between practice and theory – represented by policymakers and scholars respectively – is an asset to the field of strategic studies. First and foremost it ensures a continued relevance for the field. In the American context, the often-pejorative reference to the revolving door in government in fact allows for experience across a broad number of institutions, including government, academia, think-tanks, and private industry.<sup>17</sup> While presenting a broadside for critiques of muddled priorities and allegiances, the reality is that such a system yields a ‘richness of community embracing a diverse set of complementary institutions’.<sup>18</sup> This in turn has aided in the continued relevance and richness of the field of strategic studies and has manifested itself throughout the past two decades in a series of National Security Strategies and National Defense Strategies from three separate presidential administrations.

### ***A Strategic Studies Framework***

One of the prominent frameworks that is used in strategic studies and its policy applications, particularly in the American context, is the ‘ends-way-means’ framework. This model was first developed in the 1980s by Arthur F. Lykke Jr. while he served as an instructor at the US Army War College.<sup>19</sup> The framework was originally conceived as a stool, with the three components supporting strategy. Eventually, this framework developed into an equation presented as ‘strategy = ends + ways + means’.<sup>20</sup> As a result of increased emphasis on teaching strategy at the senior war colleges, as well as visibility through journal publications and congressional testimony, Lykke’s model became the main strategy heuristic in both the Army and the US military in general.<sup>21</sup> This model is still used to this day and is the key construct the DOD uses when it discusses strategy: ‘all strategies include a fundamental logic of ends, ways, means, and risk’.<sup>22</sup>

This framework is not without controversy. As one critique points out: the emergence of the framework as doctrine has little to do with the ‘soundness of the model,’ but rather a coincidence of time and place for the author.<sup>23</sup> The main thrust of the critiques of the model rest on its oversimplification. A formula which ‘fits cleanly onto a PowerPoint slide’ is clearly

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<sup>15</sup> Gray, “Strategic,” 2

<sup>16</sup> Betts, “Should”, 29.

<sup>17</sup> Gray, “Strategic”, 2.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Webb, “*Rethinking Strategy: Art Lykke and the Development of the Ends, Ways, Means Model of Strategy*” (MA diss., US Army Command and General Staff College, 2019), 1.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid 37.

<sup>22</sup> Daniel O’Donohue, *Joint Doctrine Note 2-19: Strategy*, (Washington DC, 2019), II-1.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid iv.

inadequate when addressing complex strategic questions.<sup>24</sup> Or put another way, ‘most strategic problems in the world are not equation-able’.<sup>25</sup>

These critiques are valid, particularly insofar as the claims of oversimplification are concerned. The equation further opens strategy to claims of pseudo-science. Nevertheless, I reference the ends-ways-means construct throughout this essay precisely because of its wide adoption. Use of this construct by authors and strategists who are positionally removed from senior war colleges is evidence of the application of strategic studies and its influence on contemporary policymakers, regardless of whether or not the model being invoked is inherently flawed. Furthermore, if we acknowledge that the framework is unsound, then the importance of strategic studies for modern policymakers is even more paramount. The field of strategic studies is not static nor is it reliant upon a singular model. Rather, it allows policymakers to critically assess strategic decisions and policies through a deep understanding of all of the tools of statecraft, as well as the historical, economic, and political reasons for their use. The persistence of what many contend is a flawed model may illustrate a lack of rigorous application of strategic studies, but it is not an indictment of the field itself. This is why I reference the ends-ways-means framework throughout the essay as a signpost for identifying how policymakers use and need strategic studies.

### ***Assumptions***

There are a number of assumptions that I rely upon in my analysis of the relevance of strategic studies. The first is that my analysis is written from the American perspective. As a field which grew into prominence on that side of the Atlantic, this is only natural, but it means that there remains work to be done, particularly with regards to the application of strategic studies in the Asian context.

The second assumption I make concerns terminology. My use of the term ‘strategy’ is firmly rooted in Carl von Clausewitz’s maxim that ‘war is continuation of politics by other means’ and that this ‘seeming cliché is in fact a radical statement’.<sup>26</sup> What I mean by this is that while strategy is often related to war, in fact its use as a tool of politics means that it is an inherently broad field that covers a range of tools of statecraft. As such, strategic studies is not simply the study of how war is carried out, but rather the study of the various levers of statecraft that governments use toward political ends.

### ***Post-9/11 Strategy***

The field of strategic studies matured during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and its importance was further reinforced by the complex issues associated with the development and deployment of nuclear weapons. The nuclear age introduced the concept of mutually assured destruction and deterrence theory which – for the rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – represented one of the central theoretical underpinnings of strategic studies.<sup>27</sup> The end of the Cold War necessarily forced a reassessment of the role of strategic studies and its relevance. As a field that had gained

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<sup>24</sup> ML Cavanaugh, “It’s Time to End the Tyranny of Ends, Ways, and Means,” *Modern War Institute*, accessed on July 24, 2020, <https://mwi.usma.edu/time-end-tyranny-ends-ways-means/>.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Eliot Cohen, “Strategy,” *Britannica*, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/strategy-military>, (Accessed on: 26 July 2020).

<sup>27</sup> Betts, “Should”, 14.

prominence in its study of Cold War concerns, strategic studies could easily be maligned as anachronistic or at the very least ill-suited to contemporary issues. Just as vigorously as scholars argued for the primacy of a new liberal international order, and a supposed ‘end of history’,<sup>28</sup> critics of strategic studies surmised that the field was ‘an obsolete vestige of a dark past’.<sup>29</sup> For those challenges that the new international order faced, the tenets of strategic studies were supposedly wholly unsuited. The transition from a superpower duopoly to a single ‘hyperpower’ also saw a concomitant and increasingly potent role of non-state actors (both violent and peaceful, economically and militarily focused). Yet while scholars were debating the relevance of strategic studies, strategists in the 1990s were already developing new approaches for achieving political objectives.

Furthermore, the events of 9/11 and the growth of non-state violence in the Middle East disabused scholars of the irrelevance of strategic studies. Stephen Biddle highlights an important point regarding the supposed death of strategic studies i.e., the continuity in strategic thought between the mid-90s and in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. As an example, there are explicit references to rogue states and terrorism in both the 1996 and 2002 National Security Strategies.<sup>30</sup> National Security Strategies (NSS) play an instrumental role in helping understand how strategy, and thus strategic studies, is viewed in the context of policymaking. The ends-ways-means construct is clearly on display both in these documents and in public pronouncements regarding strategy in the post-9/11 era. The Cold War was replaced by a War on Terror, which itself encompasses a number of political objectives: the disruption of networks and foreign havens which in turn pose a threat to the homeland. The Bush administration and its post-9/11 strategy have been the target of a great deal of criticism, specifically regarding declaration of pre-emptive force, as embodied by the statement that ‘America will act against such emerging threats’ before they are fully formed.<sup>31</sup> My intent is not to engage with the administration’s critics, but rather to focus on whether or not strategy – and thus strategic studies – played a role in the national security strategies and actions of the administration. I will do this by drawing a direct connection between these public strategy documents and the central concepts of strategic studies.

As I have stated, the ends-ways-means construct is a useful framework for analysing strategy, and that is no different for the 2002 National Security Strategy. The political ends as stated in the 2002 NSS are decidedly principle-based: freedom, defence of peace, democracy, and free enterprise.<sup>32</sup> In addition, defence of the nation is identified as the ‘first and fundamental commitment of the federal government’.<sup>33</sup> In what would be a surprise to critics who accused the Bush administration of unilateralism, the document then clearly identifies the ways of the strategy: a unique American internationalism. The means for this pillar of the national security strategy is clearly engagement with international partners. While a commitment to ‘human dignity,’ the next component of the national security strategy, might be considered too nebulous a ways for strategy, it is still supported by concrete actions including targeted foreign aid, identifying the shape of bilateral relations, and public diplomacy. The other ways including free trade, disruption of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) proliferation, and regional intervention are equally supported by targeted means. This

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<sup>28</sup> Francis Fukuyama, ‘The End of History’, *The National Interest*, No. 16 (Summer 1989): 3.

<sup>29</sup> Kersti Larsdotter ‘Military strategy in the 21st century’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 42:2 (2019): 157, DOI: 10.1080/01402390.2018.1559151.

<sup>30</sup> Biddle, ‘American’.

<sup>31</sup> ‘The National Security Strategy 2002,’ The White House, <https://georgewbush.whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2002/>, (Accessed on: 2 January 2021).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

national security strategy works as an example of strategic studies in action as it finds itself on Betts' second concentric circle. Yet this document also clearly resides on the outer orbit of that concentric circle, as the document does not engage directly with the military science, or even technological means that will be used to achieve the ways and ends. As such, while this document may not clearly illustrate strategic studies as it applies to the conduct of war, it does highlight the development of the administration's grand strategy.

The 2006 National Security Strategy posits itself as a wartime document: 'America is at war'.<sup>34</sup> Yet beyond the introduction, the remaining document reiterates the earlier one. The lack of meaningful change between two documents which span four years of war across two different countries reveals an important point regarding these documents as tools of strategy. They are necessarily broad in scope and limited in detail, especially when it comes to the specifics of the execution of the strategy, i.e. means. The Bush administration's actions in the Middle East have been widely derided as 'strategic failure'<sup>35</sup> and represented a set of self-injurious policies which mired the United States especially, as well as its allies, in so-called 'forever wars'.<sup>36</sup> What led to these strategic failures and what are the implications for thesis of this paper? The Global War on Terrorism itself lays the groundwork for strategic shortcomings. The reference to terrorism, itself as 'a tactic, not an enemy,' is troublingly imprecise.<sup>37</sup> Even if an explicit noun "terrorist" were used, it would still be too imprecise for strategic application. There is no way to determine when the political ends have been achieved. Another critique of the Bush administration's strategy is too much of a focus on Betts' innermost circle, to the extent that 'politicians have become all the more involved in tactical solutions to strategic problems'.<sup>38</sup> While there is nothing in either national security strategy that would lay the groundwork for this over-focus on tactics, the lack of specificity is problematic. By not clearly identifying the enemy or the political ends, the model thus leaves no room to identify concrete means for action.

The national security strategies are not our only means to assess the application of strategic studies principles to the administration's policies. The 2005 and 2008 National Defense Strategies (NDS), as well as the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review Report (QDR) are all explicitly built around the ends-ways-means framework. Importantly, the 2005 NDS heads off the administration's critics by acknowledging that the nation is engaged in a 'long war'.<sup>39</sup> The document then identifies strategic objectives (summarized as defence of the homeland, global freedom of manoeuvre, strengthening alliances, establishing favourable security conditions); these are followed by 'how we accomplish our objectives'.<sup>40</sup> Finally, the NDS touches upon implementation guidelines. While the latter could be construed as overly vague – thus falling victim to the same shortcoming as the NSS – the 2006 QDR presents itself as the implementation guide for 'operationalizing strategy'.<sup>41</sup> These two documents, then, work in

<sup>34</sup> "The National Security Strategy 2006," The White House, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2006/>.

<sup>35</sup> Todd Greentree, "Strategic Failure in Afghanistan," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 2019, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01402390.2019.1684232?journalCode=fjss2>.

<sup>36</sup> Center for Strategic and International Studies, "Current military operations and the concept of forever wars," accessed on January 2, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/current-military-operations-and-concept-forever-wars>.

<sup>37</sup> Stephen Biddle, "American Grand Strategy After 9/11: An Assessment," *Strategic Studies Institute*, 2005, accessed on January 2, 2021 <https://publications.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/1708.pdf>.

<sup>38</sup> Larsdotter, "Military", 158.

<sup>39</sup> Donald Rumsfeld, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, (Washington DC, 2006), 9.

<sup>40</sup> George W. Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of American*, (Washington DC, 2005), iv.

<sup>41</sup> Rumsfeld, "Quadrennial", 19.

concert to firmly place the administration's strategic goals on the strategic studies continuum between the security environment and military science. The 2008 NDS continues the trend, even going further and identifying 'DOD Capabilities and Means'.<sup>42</sup> As such, criticisms of the administration as overly focused on tactics, or execution without strategy, are without merit when viewed through the prism of their strategic messaging. While the nebulous nature of the Global War on Terror and its promise to be a war without a clear end can certainly be critiqued, the administration did work within the ends-ways-means framework.

### ***Strategic Studies in the Age of Great Power Competition***

The transition to the Obama administration presented an opportunity to assess the continuing application of strategic studies. With the administration's stated aim to drawdown forces in Iraq, in line with 2008 campaign promises, we can also identify changes to the administration's grand strategy entering the second decade following the 9/11 attacks.<sup>43</sup> Again, we turn to the administration's NDS and NSS.

The first indication of the continuity in the use of strategic studies are the multiple references in the 2010 QDR to the 2008 National Defense Strategy.<sup>44</sup> This document continues to highlight general lasting principles with regards to American grand strategy, namely support for liberal democracies and open societies as well as commitment to partner nations.<sup>45</sup> The 2010 QDR also introduces an additional component of the security environment not seen in the previous administration's documents: climate change.<sup>46</sup> Beyond laying out the security environment, the 2010 QDR also explicitly delineates the unit-level components needed to carry out the military's role in the nation's strategy going forward. The Department of the Army, for example requires 15 PATRIOT battalions, while the Department of the Navy requires 51 roll-on/roll-off strategic sealift vessels.<sup>47</sup>

The specificity of means illustrates a maturity of strategic implementation that was not as clearly laid out in the previously discussed documents. It also highlights the beginning of a shift in strategy and identifies multiple, competing ends. In the case of the 2010 QDR, these ends include not only the current wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but also 'future threats,' including China.<sup>48</sup> This shift in strategic mindset will ultimately lay the groundwork for the so-called Rebalance to Asia, which represented a 'more comprehensive approach to strategy and engagement in the region'.<sup>49</sup> The Obama Administration's first National Security Strategy, released after the QDR in 2010, also highlights a novel approach to the strategic ways, including the role of not only the military, but also diplomacy, economics, development, homeland security, intelligence, strategic communications, and American innovation and the private sector.<sup>50</sup> While the NSS does not communicate the same level of granularity when it comes to the means of strategy, there is certainly a clearer understanding of how strategy will be implemented; there is also, notably, an extensive discussion on how military force will be

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<sup>42</sup> Robert Gates, *National Defense Strategy*, (Washington DC, 2008), 18

<sup>43</sup> "Obama's Remarks on Iraq and Afghanistan," *New York Times*, July 15, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/15/us/politics/15text-obama.html>.

<sup>44</sup> Robert Gates, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, (Washington DC, 2010), 1.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 57.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 84.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, xvi.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, iii.

<sup>49</sup> Hilary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>.

<sup>50</sup> Barack Obama, "National Security Strategy," (Washington DC, 2010), 9.

used. These documents more clearly display a thorough understanding of the role of strategy in responding to a truly complex security environment.

The Trump Administration's 2017 National Security Strategy introduces a new strategic end: putting America first.<sup>51</sup> While the previous administrations identified defence of the homeland as the *sine qua non* of national security strategy, the 2017 NSS takes it one step further by focusing on the need to be 'safe, prosperous, and free at home'.<sup>52</sup> With this understanding, one sees that this national security strategy goes beyond simply stating an administration's position on a wide range of issues, but is meant to communicate how campaign promises – famously, the goal to 'make America great again,' which constitutes the first line of the 2017 NSS – will be turned into policy.<sup>53</sup> Does this further politicization of the national security strategy have an adverse effect on the relevance of strategic studies to those who authored the document? In fact, this NSS more clearly than the previous administrations' lays out an ends-ways-means approach to strategy: the pillars represent strategic ends, which are in turn supported by more specific ways, while priority actions represent the means.<sup>54</sup> Admittedly this document does not have the granular details that were seen in the 2010 QDR. Nevertheless, we see a clear application of strategic studies and its influence on the policymakers who developed the 2017 NSS.

The second key takeaway from the 2017 NSS is the introduction of strategic competition with 'the revisionist powers of China and Russia'.<sup>55</sup> Identifying China and Russia as revisionist powers not only sheds notions of geopolitical convergence, which the Bush administration's NSS hoped for when it proclaimed that 'in time, China will find that social and political freedom is the only source of greatness,'<sup>56</sup> but it also represents the culmination of a change in strategic ends that first began in the latter half of the Obama administration. This change further reinforces the importance of strategic studies as it exemplifies the application of theory in policy. The belief that China and the United States would geopolitically converge, namely by China adopting western liberal political norms, was rooted in the belief of the primacy of the post-Cold War liberal international order. By arguing that the rise of China and its prominence on the world stage represents a threat to the United States, the neorealist theory of international relations takes centre stage. In an anarchic world system, 'each state is uncertain about the intentions of others and is afraid that the possible gains resulting from cooperation may favour other states more than itself'.<sup>57</sup> As I stated earlier, one of the key pillars which enables strategic studies to stand alone as an interdisciplinary field is the importance of theory. While neorealism is a broader international relations theory, as strategic studies interacts with the security environment, so too does it rely upon many of the theoretical underpinnings of international relations and security studies.

## Conclusion

The reports of the death of strategic studies are exaggerated. While the conclusion of the Cold War may have introduced the notion of peace overriding any need for the academic field, the reality since the early 1990s has been quite different. As the geopolitical landscape

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<sup>51</sup> Donald Trump, "National Security Strategy of the United States of America," (Washington DC: 2017), i.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, i.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>56</sup> George Bush, "National Security Strategy of the United States of America," ii.

<sup>57</sup> "Political Realism in International Relations," *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, 2017, accessed on January 2, 2021, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/realism-intl-relations/>.

became increasingly complex, this only further reiterated the need for strategy and its academic study. Academics engaged in the study of strategy only serve to further ensure that sound strategies are developed and executed. Moreover, any perceived strategic failures of the three administrations that I have discussed are not clearly rooted in the application of strategic studies toward their national strategy documents.

The interdisciplinary nature of a field which touches upon geopolitics, history, and economics highlights the need to reassess where strategic studies lies within the political science taxonomy. As my analysis of the National Security Strategies of the past three administrations in the US has shown, there is a clear and direct link between the academic study of strategy and the application of strategic principles as manifested in policy. Stating that strategic studies is a subfield of security studies further disavows what Ayson described as the interactive nature of the two fields.<sup>58</sup> Not only does strategic studies respond to the security environment, as was illustrated by the shifting priorities over time in the analysed documents, but strategic studies can also influence the security environment, as evidenced by the development of the so-called Bush doctrine. As such, I consider strategic studies to be a political science subfield in itself.

With the continued geopolitical rise of China and the ascendancy of middle powers such as Australia the world has entered a period of distinct multipolarity. This multipolarity coupled with the recurrent disruptive threats posed by non-state actors and the popular assault on globalization ensure that the political actors of the world are confronted by a complicated geopolitical landscape that demands multi-pronged strategies that cover a wide variety of domains – namely diplomacy, intelligence, military, and economics. These strategies will be well served by rigorous academic study and insight supported by the field of strategic studies. Thus strategic studies is not only relevant to contemporary policy makers, but absolutely critical.

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<sup>58</sup> Ayson, “Strategic,” 1.