

EXPLORING THE CONCEPTUAL SWAMP: THE EVOLUTION OF GRAND STRATEGY AS THEORY AND DISCIPLINE¹

EXPLORANDO O PÂNTANO CONCEITUAL: A EVOLUÇÃO DA GRANDE ESTRATÉGIA COMO TEORIA E DISCIPLINA

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Abstract: Grand strategy is a term that has come back into focus in recent years. However, the debate is still overshadowed by diverging approaches made to the concept. Some see grand strategy as the coordination of the instruments of national power for the effort of war; others see it as guidelines that guarantee the security of the State, while there are those who approach grand strategy only through the prism of foreign policy. The only common understanding in the specialised literature is that grand strategy stems from the relationship between means and ends, in which a nation uses its resources for achieving state level goals. In this way, this article analyses the evolution of grand strategy as a theory and as a discipline, in order to clarify the debate around such an important concept, though sometimes misunderstood and misused.

Key-words: Grand Strategy. State. Power.

Resumo: Grande estratégia é um termo que voltou a ficar em evidência nos últimos anos. Entretanto, o debate ainda se encontra ofuscado pela amplitude das abordagens feitas ao conceito. Uns veem a grande estratégia como a coordenação dos instrumentos do poder nacional para o esforço bélico na guerra; outros a veem como diretrizes garantidoras da segurança do Estado; enquanto há quem aborde a grande estratégia apenas pelo prisma da política externa. O único entendimento comum na literatura especializada é que grande estratégia trata da relação entre meios e fins, em que uma nação usa seus recursos para atingir objetivos de Estado. Desta forma, este artigo analisa a evolução da grande estratégia como teoria e como disciplina, com fim de clarear o debate em torno de um conceito tão importante, porém mal interpretado e mal empregado.

Palavras-chave: Grande Estratégia. Estado. Poder.

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Introduction

Grand Strategy, within the disciplines of International Relations and the Political Science, is a broad concept. It has become conventional to refer to grand strategy as something related intrinsically to the state's greatest interests, coordinating its various spheres of statecraft, such as social, economic and political variables, along with the country's military power calculus in its relationship with the foreign world.

The neophyte, when faced with said “conceptual breadth”, can easily conflate the idea of grand strategy with fundamental concepts studied in International Relations, such as foreign policy, power and, in some cases, even military strategy. This is due to an epistemological problem: there is still no consensual and established definition for the concept of grand strategy.

The theory was interpreted in different ways, both by its first proponents in the early 20th century and by academics who worked on the topic in the post-Cold War context. Thus, despite the increasing popularity of the term, this phenomenon led some of the most established scholars in the field⁴ to deal with the concept as a double-edged sword.

The focus of this paper is to assess the theoretical and conceptual development of Grand Strategy as a discipline, since its earliest formulations with the naval theorists from the early 20th century, through the main military historians of the mid-20th century, until the contemporary debates. It is important to highlight, however, that it is not intended to cover all the authors who have focused on grand strategy studies, but to make a systematic analysis of the main authors and the approaches that influenced and found durability in the discipline.

The main objective of this paper is to understand the process through which grand strategy evolved during the 20th century trying to show the nuances acquired beyond the security and military domains, incorporating economic and political meanings after the

⁴Hal Brands (2012) refers to GS as a “slippery” concept. Paul D. Miller (2016) uses the term “fuzzy”, and Lukas Milevski (2016) refers to it as a “jumbled” concept. See also Silove (2017).

end of the Cold War. The method used for the analysis was a systematic and integrative review of literature, through the examination of theoretical data of other authors regarding the specified object/research question (the conceptualisation of grand strategy in this case). The criteria for selecting and analysing the material was based on the extent to which each book and article analysed dedicated at least one section to the theoretical approaches and conceptualise grand strategy until the year of 2021.

The article is divided into three parts. In the first part, it turns quickly to the concept of strategy, without intending to exhaust it, and in the second part, it rescues the historical meaning of the concept of grand strategy, focusing on security studies on the subject. Finally, the meaning attributed to the concept after the cold war is analysed, trying to show the nuances acquired beyond the security area, which incorporate economic and political meanings.

1. The concept of *Strategy*

The strategic theory and the strategic studies are, initially, both directly related to the polemology field. Polemology is a branch of the social sciences responsible for the scientific study of war, its effects, forms, causes and functions as a social phenomenon (Bouthoul, 1991).

Etymologically speaking, the term “strategy” is a derivative from the Greek word *strategos* (στρατηγός), which was used to describe what we know nowadays as an army general, who was responsible for the art of wartime command, specifically during land campaigns (Miller, 2016). Thus, it was from its etymological origin that the Prussian General Carl von Clausewitz, the father of modern military science, gave birth to his definition of strategy as “the use of the engagement for the purpose of war” (Paret; Craig; Gilber, 2005, p. 177; Clausewitz, 1979, p. 199). However, important strategic theorists like Liddell Hart, Michael Howard, Richard Betts, Thomas Mahnken, and Lawrence Freedman, among others, furthered Clausewitz’ work and built upon his theory contributing to the advancement of strategic theory with equally relevant conceptualizations and definitions.

Basil Henry Liddell Hart was a British Army Captain, military historian and military theorist whose work proved to be influential among strategists after World War

I. In his words, strategy can be conceived as “the art of the general” and he defines the concept of strategy as “the art of distributing and applying military means to fulfil the ends of policy” (Liddell Hart, 1954, p. 335-336). Michael Howard (1979), also a British military historian, similarly claims that strategy concerns the deployment and use of the military to accomplish a certain political aim. The American approach also reflected that of the British, with Professor Richard K. Betts, an American political scientist, also arguing that strategy the use of military means to achieve/fulfil political ends. According to Professor Betts’s description, strategy can be understood as “a plan between policy and operations, and an idea for connecting the two” (Betts, 2000, p. 7).

The consideration of strategic theory was not restricted to the Anglophone world. Héctor Saint-Pierre, an Argentino-Brazilian strategic theorist, devoted a significant portion of his work to systematising the evolving thought on the strategic studies field. According to Saint-Pierre, within the theoretical exercise of strategic thought it is possible to identify three main levels of analysis with which we can properly assess the phenomenon of strategy: the political level, the strategic level and the tactical level. In his words,

[A]t the political level, fundamental decisions are made that will guide all other decisions and war actions [...]. At the strategic level is defined the general war behaviour as well as the general operations planning [...]. Finally, at the tactical level, the attitude in the battle is defined. (Saint-Pierre, 2018, p. 499-500).

Therefore, based on the previously presented theorists, as well as on the Clausewitzian maxim that war is the continuation of politics by other means, it is possible then to conclude that strategy in its strict sense, is about how to win wars and is - or at least should be - a rational process (Mahnken, 2007).

Having outlined the debate around the concept of strategy, strongly related to the phenomenon of war, it is imperative now to turn to one of its qualifiers: grand strategy. In light of this, within the narrow concept of strategy, depending on the level of decisions and operations, it is also possible to distinguish the singular concept of strategy from that of grand strategy.

2. A theoretical overview of the origins of Grand Strategy

Grand strategy (hereafter, GS) is a basic concept in the study of international politics, although it can also be ambiguous, like many other concepts in the political and social sciences. Today, GS still lacks a certain level of conceptual clarity, mostly due to the absence of a consensual definition of what the concept really is. According to Silove (2017) and, in Brazil, Alsina Júnior (2018), this epistemological problem can lead GS to acquire different meanings to different people, and for scholars like Murray, Sinnreich and Lacey (2011), it is impossible to think of it as a concept universally applicable to all the states that make up the international system.

The term here assessed derives from the aforementioned concept of strategy. In its basic conception, grand strategy was depicted – based on Liddell Hart’s observation – as being the conjunction and coordination of all national resources for the political objectives of war. According to Milevski (2016, p. 4), “the idea of integrating various forms of power in war used to be one of the dominant interpretations of GS embraced by various strategists”. One possible assessment to explain the expansion of the concept of strategy lies on the emergence of military conscription during the French Revolution, with the emergence of the phenomenon of total war (Fuller, 2002).

According to the General Ferdinand Foch, the ushering of a new era with the revolution and the Napoleonic wars meant that warfare would demand both the large-scale conscription of the male population, as well as the channelling of all the nation’s resources into the war effort, thereby changing the parameters of strategy and statecraft (Foch, 1903).

Bearing in mind that the demands on the structures of the State and society were becoming colossal in the beginning of the 20th century, the adoption of a broader concept, such as that of grand strategy, was fully applicable.

Nonetheless, even though Liddell Hart was the first to specifically offer a structured definition of grand strategy, its idea had already been discussed and theorized by Sir Julian Corbett (1911) and Major General J. F. C. Fuller (1923).

Sir Corbett was responsible for the formulation and distinction between “minor strategy” and “major strategy”. (Strachan, 2006). He argued that the planning of operations, selection of objectives and the deployment of military force ought to be called "minor strategy". The “major strategy” was then defined as follows:

In its broadest sense [major strategy] has also to deal with the whole resources of the nation for war. It is a branch of statesmanship. It regards the Army and Navy as parts of the one force, to be handled together; they are instruments of war. But it also has to keep in view constantly the politico-diplomatic position of the country, and its commercial and financial position (Corbett, 1911, p. 308).

In this regard, Sir Corbett was the first to highlight the importance of broadening the concept of national power outwards the military scope, showing how a nation can clearly benefit from the linkages made between different branches of power.

In turn, Fuller was the first to use the specific term “grand strategy” as an extension of the scope of strict strategy. In 1923, the constant attempts to link peacetime preparation with the conduct of war led Fuller to entitle one chapter of his book, “The Reformation of War”, “The Meaning of Grand Strategy”. According to Fuller (1923, p. 2018),

[t]he first duty of the grand strategist is, therefore, to appreciate the commercial and financial position of his country; to discover what its resources and liabilities are. Secondly, he must understand the moral characteristics of his countrymen, their history, peculiarities, social customs and systems of government, for all these quantities and qualities form the pillars of the military arch which it is his duty to construct.

It is important to highlight that Fuller’s concern with the financial and commercial position of the country derives from Corbett’s concern with economic resources to fund the activities of the state.

Furthermore, Fuller shed light on an argument that would be later reinforced by Liddell Hart, stating that grand strategy no longer requires exclusive planning for wartime, but also a “vision for peace and building post-war society” (Briffa, 2020, p. 5). In other words, for Fuller grand strategy was but the act of transmission of power, with the final objective of maintaining policy.

In this way, one can understand that victory in the military confrontation is not enough for the protection of peace. Moreover, the victory must also be translated into results intrinsically favourable to the interests of the victorious belligerent. This implies that in order to achieve its main objectives, the nation needs to mobilize resources of the most varied nature, including peacetime (Alsina Júnior, 2018).

Given that one of the main purposes of war is to achieve better peacetime period afterwards, it becomes fundamental to conduct warfare with constant concern for the

peace we desire thereafter, a truth that lies at the heart of Clausewitz' assertion that "war is the continuation of politics by other means". In this sense, one feasible assessment of Liddell Hart's theory of grand strategy is that maintaining the political objective of war always regarding the problems of subsequent peace, shapes the core of grand strategy.

Writing after Britain's experience in World War I, Liddell Hart offered a definition of the concept, which remains the favourite among many grand strategic theorists and scholars today. As mentioned previously, Liddell Hart first conveyed the idea that the role of GS was – or still is – "to coordinate and direct all the resources of a nation [...] towards the attainment of the political object of the war" (Liddell Hart, 1991, p. 322). In his own words "[...] while the horizon of strategy is bounded by the war, grand strategy looks beyond the war to the subsequent peace. It should not only combine the various instruments, but also regulate their use as to avoid damage to the future state of peace" (Liddell Hart, 1991, p. 322).

According to Liddell Hart, strategy and grand strategy must be analysed and studied as distinct concepts. Therefore, grand strategy must always control strict strategy, even though common principles may exist. Although Liddell Hart's theory is related to the full mobilisation of a nation's strengths to the fulfilment of the political objectives of war, it can also be conceptualised as a "policy in execution" (Liddell Hart, 1991, p. 406).

Regarding Hart's definition of GS, both Paul D. Miller and Alsina offer contributions that deserve to be highlighted. Alsina shows two important points of Liddell Hart's definition: *first*, it is explicit in the transcendence of the purely military dimension and; *second*, it identifies the permanence of the war phenomenon as the central axis of *strategy* (Alsina Júnior, 2018, p. 26-28).

Paul D. Miller (2016, p. 240-242) identifies that: Firstly, "grand strategy includes identifying and articulating the political goals at which strategy aims". Secondly, "grand strategy also expands [...] beyond its core field of military deployment [...] to include other instruments of foreign policy and even national power". Thirdly, "because grand strategy involved more than the application of military resources, Liddell Hart argued the concept was not relevant only in wartime".

Finally, "the construction of grand strategy has bred the expectation policymakers will provide a unifying theme or organizing concept around which to integrate [...] the

several instruments of national power” (Miller, 2016, p. 240-242). Through these contributions to the intellectual debate, Alsina and Miller thus highlight how grand strategy is therefore distinct from, and more comprehensive than, strategy itself.

Meanwhile, in the United States, there were already sketches of what would become the American grand strategic tradition. Most of the thought regarding grand strategy in the United States preceded the two great wars and were mainly focused on the military character (Milevski, 2016). According to Carrington (1904), during the American War for Independence, a concern with the continental army’s inability to equate to the British military in battle, called for a ‘grand strategy’ capable of conducting long decisive battles⁵, instead of a single tactical plan to give them more room for manoeuvre.

However, the first definitions started flourishing during the interwar period, and contrasted starkly with that of Britain. This was mainly because the lessons America learned from their campaigns during WWI differed from those of the British and had a rather different impact within the United States. Edward Mead Earle was the first American scholar to dedicate his work to develop a more thorough analysis to the concept (Howard, 2001; Milevski, 2016; Alsina Júnior, 2018).

In addition to the lessons learned during WWI, Mead Earle’s theory was also “shaped by the crisis in the liberal democratic model of government” (Briffa, 2020, p. 6) and the economic crash of 1929. For Meade Earle, “the highest type of strategy – sometimes called grand strategy – is that which so integrates the policies and armaments of the nation that the resort of war is either rendered unnecessary or is undertaken with the maximum chance of victory” (Earle, 1943, p. 8). Moreover, Mead Earle bolstered his own argument by stating that grand strategy was also a “combination of domestic and military policies by which the vital interests of a nation may be most effectively advanced and defended”.

Some scholars agree that Earle’s definition of GS is broader than that of Liddell Hart. The interpretation is that the conduct of GS during peacetime is so important that,

⁵ This approach derives from the concept of grand tactics, coined by French general and military writer Jacques-Antoine-Hippolyte de Guibert, and it was used to describe an army's potential of conducting major battles through the use of other means along with military power in the battlefield.

once successful, it can avoid the outbreak of another war, such as that under escalation at the time of Earle's first publication in 1943. Therefore,

[...] the definition of grand strategy proposed by Earle incorporated deterrence as an essential component of State policies management, since now it was no longer a question of conducting the war in order to obtain peace, but of managing the grand strategy during peace so that war was unnecessary (Howard, *apud* Alsina Júnior, 2018, p. 29).

Milevski (2016) shows that after WW II and during the first half of the Cold War, the rise of important concepts such as nuclear strategy and the return of limited warfare ended up overshadowing the concept of grand strategy. In addition, according to Briffa (2020), the idea that the war happened because of a failure or absence of a Western grand strategy, also contributed to the dormancy of the concept.

However, despite the lack of explicit interest and references to grand strategy, it became more common during this period "to see grand strategies being explicitly articulated and written down" (Briffa, 2020, p. 7). It should be noted that the Containment Strategy proposed by George Keenan, in his "Long Telegram," is one of the most explicit examples, when he stated that the focus of the US policy should be the containment of any Russian expansive activity.

In the United States, few employed or saw any utility in the term during the Cold War, except for the navy who perceived that the concept was a useful asset for them to mitigate some of the structural constraints of sea power. The grand strategic approach enabled them to maximise their own utility - especially because there was an increasing interest by the Army and Air Force on the above-mentioned concepts of nuclear strategy and limited warfare - following the trail opened by Sir Corbett (Milevski, 2016).

Milevski highlights that "the re-emergence of grand strategy as a major idea in strategic studies was symptomatic of larger trends and the reopening of larger questions within the discipline" (Milevski, 2016, p. 108). The term returned to fashion during the 1970s within the field of strategic studies as an important concept, responsible for influencing debates around issues of defence, strategy and the decline of the superpowers (Collins as cited by Milevski, 2016).

In light of this, during the second half of the Cold War other important definitions also gained their ground. Among them, Barry R. Posen and Edward N. Luttwak stand out. Although their contributions were not the only ones provided by the Americans,

they were the ones that proved to be the most enduring until the end of the bipolar conflict in the early 90's.

Barry Posen first defined GS in his book "The Sources of Military Doctrine" (1984). In Posen's words, "a grand strategy is a political-military, means-ends chain" capable of being conceived as "a state's theory about how it can best cause security for itself" (Posen, 1984, p. 13).

The perspective adopted by Posen states that a GS best works when a state can identify probable threats to its security, and creates a structure where political, economic, military and other "remedies" can be used to contain those threats. According to Posen, GS should have a specific subcomponent to deal exclusively with military means, and, for the component mentioned, he uses the term "military doctrine".

Edward Luttwak (2005) also posited relevant assessments on the matter. The author works specifically with strategy; however, his analysis supports the existence of five levels at which the strategy unfolds: technical, tactical, operational, theatre of operations and grand strategy. His analysis applies different labels to establish the differences between military, institutional, and normative doctrines, analysis from the observers, and the objective reality of each level. For instance, tactics recommended by military handbooks; tactics applied to a specific military class; tactics for a specific type of terrain; the tactical analysis for the assessment of a war episode, and strategy itself, as it is.

Notwithstanding, in the study of GS there are no proper terms to differentiate it as a doctrine proclaimed by a State, the doctrine imputed to it, GS as a level of analysis and the reality of grand strategy as a decisive level of strategy. In this regard, Luttwak (2005, p. 209) also combines military and non-military means when defining his idea of GS

[...] at the level of grand strategy, the interactions of the lower, military levels, their synergisms or contradictions, yield final results within the broad setting of international politics, in further interaction with the non-military transactions of states: the formal exchanges of diplomacy, the public communications of propaganda, secret operations of others formed by intelligence official and unofficial, and all economic transactions [...].

One important aspect of Luttwak's theory is how to assess the results of a grand strategy. According to Luttwak, the interpretation that defines the results of grand strategy as successful or unsuccessful is a subjective issue. This means that the way to analyse the results depends on the objectives pursued. Thus, an early assessment of grand strategy, according to Luttwak's theory, would be the net result from the technical, tactical, and operational areas on the theatre of operations, in a constant interaction with the transactions between states.

Both the British and the American schools of GS have their convergences and their divergences, especially when it comes to the importance policy achieved throughout time. Even though some differences, a forceful contestation of each other never existed, which contributed for grand strategy become more and more popular among scholars and political commentators.

3. The post-Cold War debates on Grand Strategy

After going through a period of dormancy, studies on GS re-emerged in the 1970s and gained momentum during the 1980s, with the first works of Edward N. Luttwak and Barry R. Posen. During that time, the concept started to be appropriated and re-appropriated with increasing frequency by scholars, a phenomenon that was intensified after the Cold War (Milevski, 2016).

Over the course of the three decades since the end of the Cold War, one was able to witness the flourishing of theoretical and applied forms of studying it. With great importance, universities began to dedicate full programmes and research centres exclusively to the study of Grand Strategy on both sides of the Atlantic. Two examples of it are the Yale programme, in the 1990's, and the Centre for Grand Strategy launched in 2016 at Kings College London.

To assess exhaustively every single approach to contemporary grand strategic thought is beyond the scope of this paper. What is significant, however, is the fact that such a proliferation has resulted in multiple interpretations, and the deliberate 'use and misuse' of the concept has led to the development of the discipline in conflicting ways.

According to Briffa, this revealed a “lack of clarity and consensus about the constitutive qualities of grand strategy” (Briffa, 2020, p. 8). This happened mainly because at the beginning of the 1990s, few authors dedicated themselves to theorizing about grand strategy. Instead, they sought to address the subject through case studies or, with what Milevski would call ‘prescriptions’, which were idealisations of what would characterise a good grand strategy.

During the 1980’s, when grand strategy was still gaining momentum and re-emerging within the academic and policymaking circles, scholars and practitioners would usually refer to foreign policy to inquire about a nation’s interests and how it would coordinate its strengths to promote those interests internationally (Hill, 2004).

Nonetheless, it is imperative to highlight that, despite its many similarities, grand strategy and foreign policy are not the same. Whilst foreign policy encompasses all the political actions of a nation in international politics, grand strategy is a broader conceptual framework that purveys the bases upon which foreign policy is based (Baracuhy, 2011).

Despite its latency post-World War II and subsequent re-emergence during the second half of the Cold War, scholars such as Silove and Alsina identify that the popularity of grand strategy as a discipline only reached its apogee after 1991, with the publication of Paul Kennedy’s collection “Grand Strategies in War and Peace”.

This work marks an important moment in the studies of grand strategy since it was the first to ‘lay the foundations’ of what would become one of the most prominent interpretations of the field: thinking and theorising about grand strategy as a coherent long-term policy about what a nation, in its clearest sense, wants to do in the world.

Kennedy’s theory of grand strategy stands out because it did not focus on achieving security, as Posen argued, or on thinking about the political utility to the use of force, as Liddell Hart proposed. Instead, his interpretation emphasised a long-term strategy and the importance of a relationship between a nation’s military power and its economic strength, however, the main point of distinction was the importance and focus Kennedy gave to policy more broadly defined (Milevski, 2016).

Notwithstanding, it is important to observe that, unlike the strict concept of strategy, one no longer talks exclusively about sheer military might and its engagement

in battle. In this sense, Grand Strategy would also encompass economic, diplomatic, social, cultural and geographical resources to achieve the country's national interest (Kennedy, 1991).

It is important to highlight that Kennedy also understands grand strategy as a policy in execution, but he bolsters his own argument saying that the underlying logic of grand strategy lies on the integration of policies “that should operate for decades, or even centuries” (Kennedy, as cited in Milevski, 2016, p. 118). Thus, it is feasible to say that Kennedy thought of grand strategy as being a ‘long-term perspective policy’. In his own words, Kennedy (1991, p. 5) summarises grand strategy as follows

The crux of grand strategy lies therefore in policy, that is, in the capacity of the nation's leaders to bring together all the elements, both military and non-military, for the preservation and enhancement of the nation's long-term (that is, in war time and in peacetime) best interests.

Grand strategy requires a high level of comprehension of the past and the present to achieve a nation's long-term objectives. Its formulation and execution requires constant adaptation to new realities and adjustment to objectives and expectations (Ribeiro, 2018).

Kennedy's theory shows a limitation since its concept has no universal application, both in strategic theory and in practice. According to Kennedy, grand strategy is concerned mainly with great powers rather than small or middle ones. Nevertheless, Kennedy says that it is possible to devise and implement grand strategy in the context of a country with potential to become a great power (Kennedy, as cited in Milevski, 2016, p. 120).

The fact that Kennedy paved the way for the establishment of one of the most important contemporary approaches to the study of grand strategy did not erase the attempts of other “schools” to develop their own ways of assessment and theorisation. Scholars like Peter Layton, Hal Brands and William Martel dedicated a significant portion of their work to identifying the different “trends” on the study of the discipline.

Within his analyses, Layton (2018) identifies two main groups that tend to formulate grand strategy in differing ways. First are the governmental policymakers, who usually devise grand strategies by applying historical analogies and experiences to

current problems; however, the author found a significant number of failures related with the misuse of historical experiences.

The second consists mainly of scholars and think tanks who embraced an alternative approach, which Layton calls “advocacy”. This approach is what Milevski came to call “prescriptions”, with the main intention of addressing specific contemporary challenges (Layton, 2018).

Furthermore, Hal Brands also identified the existence of groups assessing grand strategy in diverging ways. The author found that, with the term in vogue after the end of the Cold War, it became feasible to see the scholars devoted to the study of grand strategy placed into ‘loose groupings’ according to their main focus. These groups can be wide-ranging, but it is possible to separate them into three major groups.

The first group, that includes scholars such as Robert Art (2013), who defines GS in terms of military capabilities, applies the study of grand strategy mainly to wartime decision-making and strategic planning of the military, extremely close to the approaches developed during the emergence of the discipline.

Others contend with grand strategy as a “long-term policy”, a broader approach that sometimes can be confused with foreign policy itself. Scholars who contributed to this approach are Paul Kennedy, Charles Hill and John Lewis Gaddis (Kulman & Kissinger, 2016).

Finally, there are the advocates of grand strategy as a matter of national security, such as Barry Posen, who usually adopt its study to provide systematic planning, prescriptions and explicit doctrines (Brands, 2012).

The latter approach gained significant notoriety because a main concern among ‘grand strategic’ scholars during the 1990’s was the uncertainty of what should be the purpose of the United States’ foreign policy. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the world witnessed the advent of the unipolar moment (Krauthammer, 1990), which raised questions about what the ‘new’ hegemon was supposed to do (Milevski, 2016). Therefore, during the first post-Cold War decade, several academics dedicated themselves to thinking about grand strategy to ‘prescribe’ the new direction of the US international role.

Barry Posen and Andrew Ross (1996) thoroughly examined all of the most important prescriptions prevailing at that time, and divided them into four grand strategy ‘models’: neo-isolationism, selective engagement, cooperative security and primacy (Posen & Ross, 1996).

The key differences among those models revolved mainly around the use of force and the level of focus on national security. However, this approach did not change with the advent of 9/11. At the time, advocates of differing models of US grand strategy were interested in imposing these prescriptions on the war on terror, instead of transforming them.

It is important to highlight here that the “national security school” of grand strategy – an approach that became quite common and widespread before the demise of the Soviet Union – has its foundational basis in the neorealist theory of International Relations, predominantly developed by Kenneth N. Waltz 1993.

Despite its significant American characteristics, there are also important British theorists sympathetic to the national security approach. Sir Lawrence Freedman is one of the British scholars who devoted his grand strategic thinking towards the security of the state.

Freedman analyses grand strategy as the process of how, and for what purposes, nation states position themselves within the international system. Within this logic, one can infer that, if the main purpose of the state is to secure its survival, thus the state must be aware of all the potential threats to its security so that it can mobilise and employ all the means necessary to contend with such threats (Freedman, 2001). Notwithstanding, one of the most important features of Freedman’s theory is that, sometimes, the extreme focus on national security matters raises a certain kind of “analytical problem”.

Freedman’s argument (2001) is that, given that the main purpose of the state in the international arena is to guarantee its survival, the countries may start a tireless search for radical threats prior to assessing what outcomes could arise through the actions of another state.

In turn, William Martel (2015) offers a more detailed assessment of all the differing groups devoted to the study of grand strategy on the post-Cold war. Martel

focuses the core of his work on American grand strategy. Within his assessment, he found that, after the Cold War, four different disciplinary approaches to the study of American grand strategy flourished. However, a more thorough examination reveals that these approaches identified by Martel can also be useful and applicable to the study of grand strategy more broadly.

The first approach is focused on the study of grand strategy through the lens of history. This approach focuses on the unique political, cultural, social conditions and historical experiences existent in each country to develop a better plan as to how these countries should act internationally (Martel, 2015).

The second, which Martel calls the “sociological approach”, focuses on the study of grand strategy through the lens of theory and theoretical debates. Such analysis is more deductive and its proponents believe that grand strategy can be better assessed and explained based on general theories. The sociological approach is the more egalitarian since its advocates tend to treat all states as equivalents (Martel, 2015).

The practitioners develop the third approach, which is focused on the matter of implementation, since policymakers in general have a more knowledgeable sense of the role of domestic politics and the institutions shaping and constraining the development of a nation’s grand strategy (Martel, 2015).

The last approach derives from the military strategists. This is the most well-known approach, developed by scholars who see grand strategy as the primal concern of military strategy. Yet despite its greater notoriety, currently, due to the evolution of the discipline, these scholars are in minority. However, their arguments are still very strong and worth noting (Martel, 2015).

However dispersed the attempts to address the issue of grand strategy may be, several authors (Venkatshamy, 2012; Martel, 2015; Miller, 2016; Silove, 2017; Layton, 2018; Lissner, 2018, and Briffa, 2020) began started to seek for unanimity in understanding the concept.

For Brands, grand strategy is an ambiguous concept, and focuses his work on explaining why grand strategy is important and how important it is to define the concept, prior to engaging in a more serious and deep study on the matter (Brands,

2012). Therefore, over the last decade, scholars began to focus their efforts on the matter of devising, untangling, and implementing grand strategy to secure good results.

According to Brands, the existence of an enormous number of definitions for the concept can lead critics to think that, in the end, the concept is rather subjective. If a concept is not directly linked to the empirical analysis of a phenomenon, then there is no way to sustain that concept, and everything becomes a question of who is in charge of the definition (Goertz, 2006). Hence, sometimes the remaining option for the analyst is to devise a definition that is considered “right enough” (Gray as cited in Brands, 2012).

In this sense, the main contribution brought by Hal Brands is the theorisation of grand strategy as a “structured and coherent idea of what a nation sets out to accomplish in international affairs” (Brands, 2012, p. 3). In his words, grand strategy is “the intellectual architecture that gives structure to foreign policy and helps nations find their way in the world” (Brands, 2012, p. 4).

Nonetheless, Brands (2012) claims that this concept still requires further elaboration, raising six aspects for a better understanding of the whole. The first one is that grand strategy should not be confused with foreign policy in its totality. In fact, grand strategy shapes a country’s foreign policy, but they are not the same. Secondly, is that grand strategy deals with converting short/medium-term actions into long-term goals; how to make today’s policies bring tomorrow’s desired ends. Third is that grand strategy involves the combination of all aspects of national power to accomplish a country’s objectives.

Fourth sets out that grand strategy should be adaptive in a world where almost nothing sits still. Hence, even if a country’s interests remain constant, the decision process on how to allocate the resources of power should inevitably shift. The fifth aspect is that grand strategy is no less important in peacetime than in wartime. Lastly, is that grand strategy should not necessarily be formally enunciated.

According to Brands (2012) regardless of whether leaders seek to establish a formal grand strategy, they end up engaging in one. The synthesis of these arguments is that all countries have interests, and all countries must make trade-offs about which

goals are most important. Hence, it is correct to say that all states have or do grand strategy, even though many of them may not do it very well.

Layton (2018) is another scholar who seeks to provide a set of “principles” one can appreciate to devise a grand strategy. He (2018) assesses three different case studies to explain which factors leads to failure when implementing a grand strategy and how to overcome them. The case studies are: The British grand strategy of deterrence and engagement to avoid the outbreak of another war with Germany; the grand strategy adopted by the Soviet government, which sought to become an “equal partner” of the USA in managing world affairs adopt the grand strategy; and the grand strategy to bring democracy to the Middle East adopted by the USA in 2002.

His (2018) first “principle” worth noting is that grand strategy is “futuristic” in essence, which means that, while strategy focuses on immediate concerns, grand strategy looks beyond immediacy and focuses on a desired future. However, even if the author corroborates the argument previously elaborated by Fuller and Hart, Layton says that instead of just looking into the future, the main goal of grand strategy is to impose a preferred state of order on the future as well (Layton, 2012, 2018).

The underlying logic of this principle is that grand strategy attempts to bring a certain level of improvement to the established international order, even if such improvement is only considered through the implementing state’s perspective. Hence, the ends of grand strategy should be quite clear regarding who the target is, either a specific country, region, or the totality of the international system.

The second “principle” is that grand strategy is comprehensive when it comes to the means used. Hence, it applies a diverse array of instruments of national power (diplomatic, informational, military and economic). In this principle, grand strategy not only employs an integrated blend of these various instruments, but also needs to build and mobilise them (Layton, 2012, 2018). The third “principle” mainly concerns how the countries develop these means and allocate them to the specific strategies responsible for the conduct of grand strategy.

However, in a world of limited resources, grand strategy is a discipline of trade-offs, where the vital interests of the country should be clearly defined so it avoids

spending resources in non-essential matters. This is based on a basic economic presumption that while human needs are infinite, resources available are scarce.

The same notion applies to foreign policy, where there are never enough resources to promote a nation's best interests everywhere. Therefore, it is important that political leaders maintain a clearly defined interest – or set of interests – so that they can deploy their limited resources in the most appropriate way.

When assessing a feasible theorisation for grand strategy, Layton uses Arthur Lykke's threefold model of strategy, which he describes as the usage of 'means' in certain 'ways' to achieve specific 'ends' (Lykke as cited in Layton, 2018). However, in grand strategy, the ways are often overlooked, which means that scholars and policymakers give more importance to the 'means' and the 'ends' (Layton, 2018). This choice does not make the ways through which a country implements its grand strategy less important; however, the reason for this oversight may be that whilst the means and the ends can be clearly tangible, the ways cannot.

Layne (2007) described the practice of grand strategy in a very easy, simple and practical way: it was just a matter of the state matching its desired ends to its available means. Nonetheless, Layton assesses that, usually, nations with great means do not always manage to convert these into achieving desired ends successfully.

The main reason for such a problem is a failure to establish a clear political objective (end). In this sense, it is important to highlight that, this work continues to build upon the Clausewitzian rationale that war is the continuation of politics by other means. However, the main argument within this rationale is that it should not be war that drives grand strategy, but politics. In other words, if politics drives war, politics should also drive grand strategy.

Hence, establishing a coherent grand strategy could be vital, as the political leaders will have the ability to keep fundamental interests always in view. In this sense, Brands states that

[...] states with a well-crafted grand strategy may be able to overcome or correct mistakes in daily conduct of military or diplomatic policy, while those with a fundamentally deficient grand strategy will be hard pressed to preserve their core interests over the medium and long term (Brands, 2012, p. 9).

Based on the prior discussion, it is possible to draw attention to the fact that grand strategy can be fundamental to successful statecraft since the increasing complexity of international politics has made the act of thinking about grand strategy as a policy-making process/approach an imperative.

From all the literature reviewed thus far, it is possible to draw one common understanding: grand strategy is the relationship between means and ends where a state uses its resources to achieve state level goals. Notwithstanding, there is one key component missing from all the aforementioned approaches and “schools”: a clear and established definition of what grand strategy really is. Even though a significant number of are authors looking for a concrete definition of the concept, those who try to define it do so in a variety of different and contradictory manners, which further obscures the literature on the matter.

Due to the great number of possible definitions for the term, Brands characterises grand strategy as “one of the most slippery and widely abused terms of the foreign policy lexicon” (Brands, 2012, p. 1), and draws attention to what can be understood as the “epistemological crisis” of grand strategy. For the author, the main problem regarding the concept is that it is invoked with great frequency, but in return, very little attention is paid to define the concept properly.

Layton, when analysing the reasons why Britain finds it so difficult to devise a grand strategy, shows some concern regarding how authors have been focusing on different aspects and defining the term in dissimilar ways. Unfortunately, this problem is not restricted to academics. Instead, it extends to the executive sector, which plays a crucial role in determining the country’s national strategy (Layton, 2012).

In this regard, over the past decade, scholars such as Krishnappa Venkatshamy, Nina Silove and Rebecca Friedman Lissner have been trying to bring a more systematised approach to the study of grand strategy by developing methods and models on how to establish the field amongst so many differing interpretations.

4. Methods and Models

Building upon the Clausewitzian approach to the philosophy of science and the purposes of theory building, one can understand that the role of theory is mainly to clarify ideas that were previously confusing and entangled. According to Clausewitz, theories should explain, rather than prescribe, to develop a more systematized explanation about the reality of the world. In Clausewitz's words, "not until terms and concepts have been defined can one hope to make any progress in examining the question clearly and simply and expect the reader to share one's view" (Clausewitz, 1984, p. 132).

After Hal Brands, Venkatshamy Krishnappa was one of the first scholars to develop a more thorough analysis of the problem of grand strategy. His assumption is that, despite being a largely desirable concept, grand strategy lacks a high level of systematization, coherence and articulation. According to the author, devising a grand strategy is only possible through a feasible and proper understanding of what it really is. Thus, he falls into an important category of scholars who have been trying to develop a more systematised analysis of the concept (Krishnappa, 2012).

Krishnappa divides grand strategy into seven "images" representing the possible ways by which one can assess, understand or even implement the different approaches to grand strategy. The "Krishnappan" images of grand strategy are; plans, visions, politics, paradigms, strategic culture, harmonisation of ends and means, and patterns (Krishnappa, 2012).

The dominant view of the literature sees grand strategy as a plan of action clearly articulated by the nation's leadership. In the first image (plans), a group of experts usually identifies the challenges to national security, which to prioritise, and how to approach them in order to maximise opportunities and minimise risks (Krishnappa, 2012). The second image (vision) regards how a national leader's visions are the representation of the grand strategy created in his/her mind. Generally, a leader's vision functions as a guiding idea, providing clarity and inspiration for what needs to be done (Krishnappa, 2012).

In the third image (politics) "grand strategies emerge out of bargaining and compromise among various stakeholders within the state" (Krishnappa, 2012, p. 117). This means that the fourth image (paradigm) is the representation of grand strategy as a

simplified version of reality. Within this context, a paradigm is generally a perspective of the world widely shared among the elites of the country. Krishnappa (2012) explains that the examples that best encapsulate this idea are the academic theories of realism and liberalism. The fifth image (strategic culture), emphasises the role played by verbally articulated ideas because, within this context, “nations are moved by words”, meaning that nation leaders and policymakers can use discourses to create favourable situations in order to promote the nation’s core interests (Krishnappa, 2012, p. 118).

The sixth idea regards how the harmonisation of ends and means characterises a grand strategy, since its purpose is to ensure the best deployment of means to achieve a nation’s interest on the international arena. Within this context, grand strategy ensures that ends will never over-step the available means, ensuring that resources are not wasted in the process. Finally, the seventh image (patterns) is widely shared among political scientists – particularly those who come from a behaviourist background – and historians. In this view, grand strategy is identified by the pattern of behaviour of a state on its foreign affairs, and those “predictions” are made based on historical analysis to identify how the country have behaved under certain conditions in order to find consistency of behaviour (Krishnappa, 2012).

His systematisation of the phenomenon has the objective of guiding future research into surpassing the lack of conceptual clarity. Nina Silove (2017) is part of a contemporary group of scholars who have been likewise seeking to bring greater unity to the understanding of what grand strategy really is. While using Krishnappa’s work as an important source for her own, she (2017) goes a step further in assessing the state of the art of grand strategy by attempting to systematise the study of the discipline in the format of a methodology, which can better guide further studies on the matter.

Similar to Brands and Krishnappa, Silove also draws attention to the “epistemological crisis” of grand strategy, as the main problem driving her whole argument.

As has been established, this crisis is characterised by the increasing number of proposed definitions to the concept, where each one of them is starkly different from one another. Thus, instead of helping to establish the theory, a high level of dissensus arises about its meaning (Brands, 2012; Silove, 2017). To restore clarity, Silove says the

study of grand strategy can be organised into three different categories: grand plans; grand principles and, grand behaviour, which can be useful to understand the forms grand strategy will take.

The first category, “grand strategy as a plan”, refers to the scholars – mainly military historians - who usually analysed, theorised and defined grand strategy as a formal document; a clearly elucidated plan of action generally deliberated by policymakers. Silove named this category “grand plans” (Silove, 2017).

The second category is “grand strategy as an organising principle”, which Silove (2017) refers to as “grand principles”. The advocates of this category mainly reject the idea of grand strategy formalised in a plan or document. This approach usually claims that grand strategy is created and implemented through a set of core guiding ideas, something related to a nation’s values and strategic culture. Scholars within this field criticize the grand plans approach for trying to devise a grand strategy by purveying a “prefabricated recipe”, whereas the focus on principles and doctrines gives direction to foreign policy.

The last category is “grand strategy as a pattern of behaviour”, which Silove calls “grand behaviour”. According to Silove (2017), this category is the most difficult among the three to identify clearly, because it is based only on the pattern of behaviour of a given nation’s foreign policy. By pattern of behaviour, Silove means a series of repeated actions of a state over a given period. Therefore, the resulting grand strategy can be a product of a plan, of a guiding doctrine, or only the pattern itself towards a specific political objective.

Lissner (2018) uses Silove’s work as a ‘starting point’. She claims that there is a certain degree of agreement regarding the basic definition of Grand Strategy. Nonetheless, she argues that scholars have been applying the concept in largely differing ways, generally according to specific research agendas within the grand strategy literature.

According to Lissner, Silove’s method is useful only to the approach of research questions. When it comes to those seeking to understand what constitutes the basis of the grand strategy research agendas, it is of little help. The author then attempts to resolve the problem of conceptual inconsistency of grand strategy by distinguishing

three research agendas within the specialised literature: grand strategy as a variable, grand strategy as process and, grand strategy as blueprint (Lissner, 2018).

The ‘variable’ agenda is merely descriptive and takes grand strategy as a dependent variable. Usually this agenda has a predominant focus on the origins of grand strategy with the main objective of considering where grand strategy comes from and under which conditions it might change.

In the ‘process’ agenda, grand strategy is no longer an object in need of explanation. Instead, it focuses mainly on the procedural characteristics of grand strategy’s formulation and execution. The decision-making process and the influence of individual choices bear great weight within this agenda. The last category is rather prescriptive. The ‘blueprint’ agenda generally seeks to depict what a country’s grand strategy should be. In this sense, it provides a set of recommendations with the objective of guiding that country’s foreign policy (Lissner, 2018).

In short, approaches with a greater methodological character have proven to be strong candidates for solving the biggest problem of grand strategy conceptualisation and its effectiveness. The discipline has evolved over the past few decades and nowadays it is possible to highlight the existence of a growing consensus on the basic principles of grand strategy.

When it comes to establishing the parameters through which grand strategy should be measured, Silove and Lissner sought to impose more methodological rigour, however more efforts are still required. In addition, it is possible to realise that scholars still struggle to properly differentiate definitions and causality. Therefore, just as democracy and power – both disputed concepts – grand strategy has a long way to go towards a coherent, cohesive and consensual definition.

Conclusion

Although a relatively new academic concept, Grand Strategy has always been in evidence as states always had to make ‘big picture decisions’ about their international behaviour using limited resources. Despite the large number of diverging concepts, grand strategy presented itself either as an output or as a tool. The ‘output’ conceptions

being merely the results of political actions, where there is little room for strategic choice and less chance to adaptability under structural constraints. The latter conceptualisation as a ‘tool’, conversely, gave the political leaders and policy-makers greater room for manoeuvre, making it possible for the individual agencies to change and adapt their grand strategies wherever needed.

This “applicability” differentiation is due to the evolving – and changing – underlying character of grand strategy. The discipline went through an important transition from a focus purely on the military apparatus and how a nation would ensure victory in warfare, through to the use of all resources of national power to a more broad and ‘all-encompassing’ approach. In either case, the need for strategic choice was always prominent.

Whilst undertaking the literature review, it became apparent that the probability of the outbreak of conventional wars remains a concern amongst those who propose to theorize about grand strategy, particularly due to the significant influence of the Realist approach to international relations. This concern could be found even in the works of authors more focused on political approaches. Therefore, even if grand strategy is no longer restricted exclusively to the efforts of warfare, its probability and avoidance will remain a constant concern.

Nonetheless, it has become increasingly common, in the grand strategy-making process, to focus on foreign policy matters, rather than exclusively military issues, even in the approaches concerned with state security. This may be a source of the conflation of the two concepts. This may lead to an interpretation that the extreme concern with the conduct of foreign policy in periods without war is essential for the maintenance of international peace (peace here understood within the “negative peace” perspective – the absence of conflict/violence). In other words, the optimal conduct of foreign policy during peacetime is essential to maintain peace and ensure the achievement of states' political objectives, without having to raise arms.

The possibility is that the idea of grand strategy as being the mobilisation of a country’s national strengths to best promote its interests in the international arena has blurred even more what grand strategy really is. The scholars reviewed in this paper have been making important advances in the field. However, the attempts to bring a

solution to the grand strategy problem remain rather palliative. What lies ahead for researchers and practitioners on the battlefield of grand strategy is the great ‘fog of war’ - a period of incertitude until there is a largely accepted definition for the concept.

Although the objective of this paper is not to propose a new theory or definition for the concept of grand strategy, the author elaborated his understanding based on the literature review presented. Firstly, it is understood that a grand strategy depends on the existence of a national interest, and although this drawback to Cold War approaches, having a clear national interest is of great importance for any country that wants to take comprehensive decisions. Making an analogy, the grand strategy would be a compass, and the national interest would be the compass needle, since it points in the direction the country should follow.

Secondly, even though the domestic component is relevant for the devise and implementation of a grand strategy, the latter shows its effectiveness on the international stage. This means that a grand strategy suits the country’s behaviour in relation to the world and to what the country sets to accomplish in international politics.

Last, it is known that grand strategy above all comprises the mobilisation of all resources of national power of a given nation. Nonetheless, not all countries are able to establish such a comprehensive mobilisation of resources. Since grand strategy needs to be adaptive, this means also dealing with limited resources. Therefore, the mobilisation of all resources is not mandatory, but only key resources to achieve the objectives established by the State.

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