More than a quarter century after the end of the Cold War, the debate continues on the appropriate American grand strategy to succeed containment. Despite widespread consensus on American core interests, there is little progress on what specific policy objectives and tools will maximize those interests. We argue that the lack of progress to date stems from a more basic disagreement about how the world works. Specifically, different groups within the debate rely on differing international relations theories: liberalism and realism. Those theories inform beliefs regarding how far away the United States is from an “optimal strategy,” or, alternatively, how best to reach the Pareto frontier, given American interests. We demonstrate that this framework can best identify competing schools of grand strategy, where and why they disagree, and the degree to which those disagreements can be resolved through empirical tests. In this way, our paper both maps and presents ways to advance the current debate regarding U.S. grand strategy.
What is America’s role in the world? This question is at the heart of scholarly debates on American grand strategy. Moreover, many argue that President Donald Trump’s election signals a radical policy reorientation (e.g., Drezner 2017, Saunders 2016). Yet there is little consensus on the basic contours of the scholarly grand strategy debate or what will best serve American interests. This obscurity exists because it is often unclear whether policy prescriptions follow from different conceptions of what the national interest should be or disagreements about evidence supporting competing claims. At this critical juncture, it is vital for scholars to evaluate the competing grand-strategic positions that seek to enhance America’s national interest.

We argue that a more fruitful academic debate focuses on falsifiable claims about how grand strategies would realize a set of outcomes related to U.S. interests, independent of claims of what the national interests should be. Such a debate would in principle have to meet four conditions. First, there must be an agreement on the interests that American grand strategy seeks to further. Second, the theories that undergird these positions must be clearly identified. Third, scholars must evaluate the internal logic of each side’s theories and derive testable theoretical predictions. Fourth, these theoretical predictions must be subjected to rigorous empirical tests. Only after these conditions have been met can policy makers evaluate each side’s arguments and evidence and update policy. Currently, the debate satisfies none of these conditions.

Satisfying these four conditions represents a major undertaking that cannot be addressed in a single article. We aim to develop a framework that satisfies the first two conditions. This is a significant contribution because it provides the necessary foundation for future research satisfying the final two conditions. Through this approach, we seek to clearly articulate the competing positions so that future studies can better evaluate tradeoffs across grand strategies and rigorously test competing claims.
The development of such a framework requires setting aside the normative components of the debate and focusing on how different grand-strategic positions advance a common set of interests. We do so by holding national interests constant to establish a baseline from which to build discrete grand strategy positions.¹ We show that it is possible to identify four major ideal-type grand strategy positions in the academic debate today deductively according to underlying theoretical principles. First, we argue that differences in conceptions of power divide the different grand-strategic positions into two overarching camps: those that adopt some variant of balance-of-power realism and those built on hegemonic stability theory (Table 1). This dichotomy obscures important elements of the debate, though. While there is some variation among those that build upon balance-of-power realism, the larger issue is the conflation of different grand strategies that append additional theories to hegemonic stability theory. Thus, the second part of our argument incorporates the role of international and domestic institutions (Table 2). We label these four schools Restraint, Deep Engagement, Liberal Internationalism, and Conservative Internationalism.² Others have highlighted how theory shapes thinking on foreign policy and grand strategy (Posen and Ross, 1996/97; Milevski, 2016; Silove, 2018; Snyder, 2004; Walt, 1998). We extend past scholarship to offer a novel categorization of the contemporary debate that clarifies the sources of disagreement among interests, objectives, and tools in order to improve prospects for moving the debate forward.

¹ We acknowledge that there are normative differences over national interests. This analytical move allows us to establish a baseline to assess the degree to which grand strategy prescriptions differ according to theoretical disagreements rather than different conceptions of the national interest.

² Representative examples of each are Posen (2014); Brooks and Wohlforth (2016); Ikenberry (2011a); Nau (2013).
Parsing the contemporary grand-strategy debate this way is useful for several reasons. First, its provides a general and clear understanding of the grand-strategic landscape at a critical juncture in American history. Second, our deductive approach allows the clear identification of four positions in the debate which inductive approaches can obscure. For example, scholars that agree on one prescription, such as a robust U.S. military presence abroad, may disagree on others, such as the 2003 Iraq invasion. Third, our framework clarifies the links between the oft-conflated concepts of theory, interests, objectives, and policy tools. Separating the debate along these conceptual levels adds the precision needed to transform broad visions into falsifiable propositions. Fourth, this framing will allow future research to focus on identifying the propositions and evidence that can inform which grand strategic objectives or policy levers can maximize U.S. interests. This clarifies when scholars’ policy prescriptions hinge on normative preferences as opposed to theory and evidence. An improved understanding will, at a minimum, help scholars determine where to focus their efforts to avoid unresolvable issues.

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In mapping how diverse worldviews inform grand strategy objectives and tools, we cannot address every aspect of the debate. We do not seek to demonstrate the superiority of one position and necessarily gloss over minor disagreements in the interest of outlining ideal-types (Posen and Ross, 1996/97). We are also unable to engage critical treatments of grand strategy (for discussions, see Payne, 2012; van Rythoven, 2016; and Vennesson, 2017) or debates on whether state grand strategies influence policy (e.g., Mitzen, 2015; Brands, 2014). Finally, we do not attempt an account of grand strategy in the Trump administration. A lively debate on this subject has already begun with widely divergent conclusions (for example, Brands 2017; Schweller 2017; Kroenig 2017). We nevertheless provide a baseline with which to judge when the Trump administration is proposing novel grand strategic positions, borrowing from discrete (and perhaps contradictory) approaches, and when policy is actually very much in line with existing formulations.

The rest of this article proceeds in three parts. First, we develop our argument by unpacking the terms we use to characterize the dimensions of the debate. Next, we use this framework to briefly outline four grand strategy positions. We conclude by summarizing major areas of disagreement and ways to advance the debate.

The Framework

In this section, we separate and define the concepts of interests, objectives, and policy tools. Interests are the highest purposes of the state that grand strategy seeks to attain. To achieve their interests, states set objectives, such as preventing a Eurasian hegemon, and utilize specific policy tools, such as alliance commitments, to attain their objectives.
There is considerable disagreement over how to define grand strategy (Silove, 2018; Milevski, 2016). Brands (2014:4) reviews multiple definitions, concluding that grand strategy is “the conceptual logic that ensures that [foreign policy] instruments are employed in ways that maximize the benefits for a nation’s core interests.” We adapt Brands’ definition to the United States, defining grand strategy as the U.S. theory of how it can maximize security, domestic prosperity, and domestic liberty.

The decision to assume U.S. interests to be constant is controversial, so we unpack the logic. First, this assumption establishes a baseline for competing grand strategy prescriptions. Without this assumption, it is impossible to isolate the impact of each side’s theoretical assumptions on their prescribed policy prescriptions (Glaser, 2010). For instance, one might consider U.S. alliance commitments as a tool that may help obtain objectives. By contrast, labeling a U.S. alliance commitment as an interest (Slaughter, 2016:79) indicates that whether the alliance helps or harms U.S. objectives does not matter; the alliance commitment is an intrinsic interest to pursue (Lind, 2016). Social science tools are ill-suited to assess whether a national interest is normatively appropriate or not. We therefore focus on the theoretical links between specific tools and objectives that advance a specified policy interest. In other words, we examine how variation in worldviews inform disagreements over what objectives and policy levers will best maximize U.S. interests, rather than what those interests should be.

The second virtue in limiting U.S. core interests to security, domestic prosperity, and domestic liberty is that most participants in the debate explicitly or implicitly adopt these interests. Generally, advocates for expansive grand strategies argue these have been and should be U.S. national interests (for example, Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth, 2012/3:11; Brooks and Wohlforth, 2016:1; Slaughter, 2012:47-8; Beckley, 2015:24-5). Even those favoring a
reduced U.S. role frequently assert interests beyond security. For example, Walt (2015) writes that the “central purpose of U.S. foreign policy is to make Americans safer and richer, and to preserve our political values here at home.” Similarly, Preble (2009) argues that a less activist grand strategy would enhance American security, prosperity, and liberty. Posen (2014:3) defines security to include a state’s power position, which is in turn the “sum total of a state’s capabilities … [including] population size, health, and skill [and] economic capacity of all kinds.” Domestic prosperity thus finds its way into security. To be sure, there is disagreement on the content of these concepts. For instance, domestic liberty has various meanings and the number of Americans that could claim ‘liberty’ has expanded over time. Yet, as Nau (2013:13-4) notes, “the core classical liberal belief in individual liberty and equality … binds all Americans, conservatives and liberals alike."

We assume that the core U.S. interests are the security, prosperity, and liberty of the American people, not the globe. As Posen (2014:2) notes, advancing “the economic welfare or liberty of people abroad” may enhance U.S. interests, but that need not be the case. Much of the grand strategy debate centers on the presence or absence of links between advancing stability, welfare, and freedom abroad with the wellbeing of the United States at home.

We define grand-strategy objectives as the real-world outcomes a state seeks to achieve in order to advance its interests. Objectives are instrumental to interests: officials’ choice of objectives depends on their theory of what objectives will best maximize U.S. interests given internal and external constraints. For example, some argue that maintaining stability in Eurasia is both affordable and necessary for attaining U.S. interests, while others argue that it is too costly or unnecessary. Finally, policy levers or tools are the instruments states employ to realize objectives. A state’s choice to invest in its diplomatic corps or military forces are levers that can
influence the probability of realizing some objective which furthers an interest. Moreover, just as objectives are instrumental to interests, the specific policy levers a state adopts are means to realizing objectives.

We restrict our analysis to four specific policy levers: military force structure, security commitments, military deployments, and the use of force. We recognize that states can rely upon additional grand strategy tools, but focus on military tools for several reasons. Much of the grand strategy debate centers on the role of military power; there is often less disagreement about other policy tools. Numerous scholars across different grand strategy positions support foreign aid, open trade, and diplomatic engagement. The most intense schisms involve the deployment of military forces and extension of alliance commitments. This is not surprising; extending alliance commitments, deploying troops, fighting, and acquiring the requisite military capabilities involves significant political, economic, moral, and human costs. There is also a practical concern: no article can focus on every U.S. policy tool. Limiting the focus allows us to more specifically describe and define the difference between grand strategies.

**Four Grand Strategies**

We outline each grand strategy ideal-type in this section. We focus on the underlying theory and its relation to objectives and policy levers. Table 3 summarizes the arguments along each dimension.
THEORETICAL ANCHOR. Balance-of-power realism provides the intellectual foundation for the Restraint, or what some label “offshore balancing,” grand strategy. It makes several core assumptions: the international system is anarchic, states cannot fully know the intentions of others, and states want to survive. “Because there is no government to protect them and they cannot know the intentions of others,” write Rosato and Schuessler (2011:805), “great powers must ultimately provide for their security.” The efforts of one state to make itself more secure can create insecurity for others, which is the basis of the security dilemma that plays an important role for Restraint (Gholz, Press, and Sapolsky, 1997). Systemic constraints and the distribution of power are thus the key causal factors, while international and domestic institutions play a marginal role in shaping international outcomes. Alongside, but distinct from, the focus on
the international system, Restraint argues that nationalism remains a powerful motivating force (Posen 2014).

The desire to survive imbues societies with a strong incentive to resist outside influence. Hence, states will tend to balance rather than bandwagon. States with sufficient means will work to block or undermine the opponent by building up their own military capabilities, allying with states to oppose rivals, or militarily challenging the opponents’ interests. Efforts to project power and counterbalancing will occasionally lead to spirals of hostility resulting in arms races and conflict. There is disagreement about which behaviors provoke balancing, but there is consensus that the more geographically proximate and active a state is, the more likely its actions will provoke reactions by capable states (Walt 2006; Mearsheimer 2001; Posen 2014; Mearsheimer and Walt, 2016). The emphasis on ability to balance is critical. Weak states not directly targeted by a great power may be able to do little and simply bandwagon until they find themselves directly in a great power’s crosshairs (Mearsheimer, 2001:162-5). The basic balancing logic can extend to non-state actors as well, which will use asymmetric strategies (e.g., terrorism) to challenge the great power policies they oppose (Pape, 2006).

Many (e.g., Brooks, Ikenberry, Wohlforth, 2012/3) link Restraint to defensive realism. Yet the U.S. position allows offensive realists, most notably Mearsheimer, to advocate a policy of restraint. Offensive realism predicts that states will seek to expand when the benefits outweigh the costs. The United States’ position as the only major power in the Western Hemisphere provides a high level of security and prosperity. The costs associated with U.S. activism therefore outweigh the minimal benefits in the absence of a potential hegemon abroad.

OBJECTIVES. The focus on balancing and nationalism directly informs Restraint’s contention that a short list of objectives best advances American interests. First, Restraint focuses on preventing
any major threats to the American homeland. Second, the United States must prevent the emergence of a hegemon in Europe, Northeast Asia, or the Persian Gulf. A rival could utilize the region’s power potential to endanger U.S. territory or block U.S. commerce. A hegemon in the Persian Gulf could endanger energy flows, harming the U.S. economy by raising the global price of key commodities (Rosato and Schuessler, 2011:805-7, Posen, 2014; Mearsheimer and Walt, 2016). Finally, the United States must deny another state from commanding the global commons of the “sea, space, and air” (Posen, 2003:7-8). If others command the commons, then the United States might find its homeland vulnerable to attack. In the long run, this could also undermine the U.S. economy.

Restraint looks at the world today and sees few states capable of threatening these objectives. Distance and the American nuclear arsenal deter major assaults. There is no state that can unite European or Asian power-potential in the near-term, though China may be able to do so in the medium- to long-term (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2016). Preventing the emergence of a hegemon in the Middle East requires minimal U.S. investment because very weak powers populate the region. Global markets are robust and not easily disrupted (Gholz and Press 2001, 2010).

Restraint does not identify regional stability as a grand strategy objective (Walt 2006:222; Mearsheimer and Walt 2016:73; Posen, 2014; Rosato and Schuessler, 2011; Betts 2012). To begin with, instability abroad does not directly affect American security. Moreover, the tendency to balance causes others to contest U.S. efforts to impose stability, generating security dilemmas that can actually generate instability. Restraint prefers letting regional actors balance other regional actors. This may lead to conventional arming, the formation of new alliances, and possibly even nuclear proliferation as others supply their own security. As more
states provide for their own security the United States can reduce its defense burden, enhancing U.S. prosperity and liberty without sacrificing security (Parent and MacDonald, 2011). The reason U.S. allies do not behave this way today is because they are “cheap-riding” (Posen 2014:35-50) while the US foots the bill for providing security. Worse, the United States may be creating a moral hazard, emboldening allies to act recklessly which can entrap the United States.

Restraint considers terrorism an enduring challenge but not one that rises to the level of a grand strategy objective (Desch 2007/8:40; Mearsheimer and Walt 2016:77). Expansive counterterror policies can actually provoke backlash. As Pape (2010) argues, “U.S. ground forces often inadvertently produce more anti-American terrorists than they kill.” Terrorist acquisition of a nuclear weapon would be “a game changer” (Mearsheimer 2015:12), but the probability is remote. States are unlikely to allow nuclear weapons or fissile material to fall into the hands of a terrorist organization and risk losing control or retaliation (Walt, 2006:224-40). The United States can help secure stockpiles and prevent accidents by sharing safeguard technology and best practices, rather than relying on military tools.

Although few Restraint proponents advocate for nuclear proliferation, most do not consider nonproliferation a grand strategy objective. Aggressive nonproliferation efforts are likely to encourage proliferation among hostile states as they seek to balance the United States (Sapolsky et al., 2009:91; Posen, 2014:31, 61; Walt, 2006:239-40; Mearsheimer and Walt, 2016:79). Additionally, Restraint adopts the nuclear optimist position that nuclear weapons reduce conflict (Sagan and Waltz, 2013). As long as the United States maintains its nuclear arsenal, deterrence will prevent nuclear attacks. Regional nuclear armed states can deter regional aggression. Thus, Posen (2014:167) accepts that with Restraint “some nuclear proliferation
would be tolerated.” This may cause the U.S. to lose some power projection ability, but Restraint prefers that the United States do less in the current international environment.

Restraint does not count democracy promotion or humanitarian intervention among its objectives. Democracy promotion is difficult and unnecessary for U.S. interests. Restraint does not oppose democracy or foreign aid, but proponents believe that it is inappropriate for grand strategy. Humanitarian interventions can create failed states, generate havens for terrorists, and invite diplomatic backlash. The United States can utilize a number of alternative diplomatic and foreign aid initiatives that may save more lives.

POLICY LEVERS. Restraint seeks to reduce existing U.S. defense commitments, forward-deployed troops, the frequency of using force, and the U.S. military. Despite a common theoretical base and set of objectives, individual scholars differ on the scope of the reduction. The broadest divide is between those advocating modest versus major reductions. This reflects diversity in assessing the balance of power, technology, preferences for hedging against geopolitical uncertainties, and estimates of domestic political feasibility. While these differences are important, they are outside the shared theoretical framework. We do not, therefore, treat these differences as discrete grand strategies.

Restraint proponents argue in favor of reducing U.S. security commitments and forward-deployed troops. At the extreme, scholars in this group advocate ending nearly all commitments and bringing the troops home (Gholz et al., 1997:17-29; Layne, 2006). More moderate positions (Posen, 2014:90-1, 100-13, 159; Mearsheimer and Walt, 2016; Parent and MacDonald 2011; Betts, 2012:37-9) agree on reducing the U.S. role in NATO and Europe where Russian weakness and West European wealth negate the need for U.S. involvement. Air and naval power may remain in the Middle East but the United States would remove ground forces and no longer
support regimes against domestic opposition. Only in Asia would sizeable U.S. forces, primarily air and sea, and defense commitments potentially remain in order to hedge against the rise of China.

Restraint’s objectives suggest the United States will rarely use force. It will do so only if a state stands poised to attain hegemony in Europe, Asia, or the Middle East or a state makes a bid to command the commons. Additionally, the United States will use minimal force to degrade and contain terrorist organizations with the desire and ability to strike the United States (Posen, 2014:86). The limited U.S. global role allows significant reductions in the current force structure. In particular, force structure would shift to one that privileges the navy and air forces with light, highly mobile ground forces which Restraint contends will result in large savings.

Deep Engagement

THEORETICAL ANCHOR. Hegemonic stability theory provides the underlying principles for Deep Engagement (Gilpin, 1981; Wohlforth, 1999). This position shares much with what others have labeled “selective engagement” (Art, 2003). Deep Engagement draws on a separate branch of realism than Restraint and argues that balancing is not feasible when one state’s material capabilities far exceed those of all others. States are more likely to bandwagon with, rather than balance against, the hegemon. Not only is balancing unlikely, but the world is more peaceful and prosperous when there is a preponderance of power (Wohlforth, 1999). The hegemon can utilize its superior military and economic tools to provide global public goods, such as regional security, that underwrite a stable international order. The provision of security alleviates regional security dilemmas and deters aspiring powers from challenging the hegemon’s authority (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2016, 89-102). Absent the hegemon, regional balances of power will not form, costly arms races will occur, and the hegemon will be dragged into the conflict thereby harming its
interests. The clear preponderance of power makes conflicts over prestige unlikely, removing another source of war. Thus, spirals of hostility are unlikely at both the global and regional levels.

The benefits of maintaining the hegemonic order outweigh the costs. The costs are low because other states are unlikely to balance and military spending is not a major drain on resources (Norrlof and Wohlforth, 2017). Peripheral wars are choices rather than necessities (Brook and Wohlforth, 2016:122-33). The hegemon also benefits from increased security, extracts enormous privileges from the system, and enriches itself through the rise in global prosperity (Norrlof, 2010; Mastanduno, 1997). The hegemon’s ability to shape international institutions facilitates order and lowers transaction costs for managing the international system. For instance, the hegemon can use economic institutions to mold the global economic system to its comparative advantage (Mastanduno, 2009). International security institutions allow the hegemon to coordinate with allies to maintain regional stability (Art, 2003:163-5, 247).

However, in contrast to Liberal Internationalism, Deep Engagement argues institutions are unlikely to be effective in the absence of a hegemonic state powerful enough to enforce those institutions.

OBJECTIVES. Deep Engagement aims to deter threats to the homeland and global commons. It also focuses on maintaining stability in the world’s three key regions – Asia, Europe, and the Middle East – rather than just preventing a hegemon. Thus, Brooks and Wohlforth (2016:1-2) advocate economic globalization, promoting institutions, and defending allies and preventing conflict that would threaten the U.S.-led international order.

Deep Engagement argues that the United States can, and should, continue to lead the international order. The United States can because it remains the only superpower and its
position is durable (Wohlforth, 1999:23-5; Brooks and Wohlforth, 2016; Brooks and Wohlforth, 2008; Beckley, 2015). The United States should because its presence stabilizes economic and security relations between states. Without a hegemon, regional actors will fail to balance potential peer competitors, harming U.S. security and prosperity. Finally, changes to the status quo adversely affect the United States because the system reflects American interests.

Maintaining a stable, open, and U.S.-led order in the core regions requires that the United States pursue several objectives. First, the United States must oppose the emergence of a regional hegemon as well as work to dampen strictly regional security competition in key regions. Without U.S. leadership, local balancing will be inefficient. Moreover, security competition generates negative externalities—such as conventional arms racing, nuclear proliferation, and trade disruption—that increase the risk of regional and global instability. In contrast to Restraint, Deep Engagement adopts nuclear pessimism, which highlights the dangers of nuclear accidents, inadvertent escalation, and loose nuclear weapons. These outweigh any potential stabilizing effects from nuclear weapons (Sagan and Waltz, 2013). Thus, Deep Engagement argues that paying the costs associated with protecting American allies helps deter and contain potential peer competitors and regional instability. This also gives the U.S. leverage over its allies, minimizing the risk of entrapment (Beckley, 2015).

Second, Deep Engagement aims to protect the United States and its allies from terrorism and violent domestic instability. However, Deep Engagement does not view these threats outside of the core regions to be a major danger. For example, the risk of a terrorist attack or civil conflict in sub-Saharan Africa is a smaller concern than in Saudi Arabia. Deep Engagement might support efforts to prevent failed states, civil war, ethnic conflict, and humanitarian
disasters, but only if such outcomes have the potential to threaten the stability of the international order.

Deep Engagement supports the spread of democracy but does not view this as a grand strategy objective. Overt democracy promotion can undermine support for other U.S. objectives (Art, 2003:46, 69-73, 145; Brooks and Wohlforth, 2016:74). Efforts to protect human rights through humanitarian intervention or democracy promotion distract leaders from core objectives and may lead policymakers to pursue unnecessary or impossible objectives, squander resources, and produce negative externalities.

POLICY LEVERS. Deep Engagement seeks to construct a military capable of maintaining existing alliance commitments and foreign troop deployments. These tools serve as the backbone of U.S. influence by deterring adversaries and reassuring allies. Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth (2012/3:34) make the point clearly: “The United States’ overseas presence gives it the leverage to restrain partners from taking provocative action. Perhaps more importantly, its core alliance commitments also deter states with aspirations to regional hegemony from contemplating expansion and makes its partners more secure, reducing their incentive to adopt solutions to their security problems that threaten others and thus stoke security dilemmas.” (See also Wohlforth, 1999; Art, 2003:8-9, 138-45, 231-2; Art, 2012:15-28; Beckley, 2015). To this end, the United States has constructed a set of commitments that include formal defense pacts with sixty-eight countries that, with the United States, represent 75% of world economic output (Beckley, 2015:7). Alliances such as NATO and security structures in the Middle East and Asia should continue. Moreover, contrary to Restraint, forward deployed forces are necessary to maintain command of the commons and surge U.S. presence in an emergency. Commitments and presence
also encourages intelligence sharing, cooperation in counterterrorism, and reduces domestic instability.

Deep Engagement argues critics overstate its costs. Offsetting arrangements with allies defrays the costs of deploying troops abroad. In terms of terrorism, U.S. troops may contribute to anti-Americanism but it is hardly the decisive factor (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2016). Were U.S. troops to come home tomorrow, the terrorist threat would not disappear nor much money be saved. Regarding entrapment, U.S. alliances allow the United States significant freedom to maneuver and tend to give the U.S. more influence over its weaker partners (Beckley, 2015).

Deep Engagement views military force as a tool to maintain, not alter, the status quo. Hence, it supports the use of force to protect existing commitments but does not support using military force to spread democracy or, except in extreme cases, remove human-rights violators from power. As Brooks and Wohlforth (2016:74) write: “those who advocate ambitious projects to assertively spread democratic liberal principles and foster dramatic improvement in human rights, by the sword if necessary, make the same mistakes as proponents of pulling back; they fail to appreciate the major benefit America derives by sustaining its long-standing grand strategy.”

Deep Engagement seeks to maintain U.S. force structure projections made during the end of the Obama administration but is not opposed to modest increases. This level of military power is necessary to maintain existing commitments and deployments. This force requires an amount of military spending that is affordable and will likely decrease over time (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2016; Norrlof and Wohlforth, 2017). A larger military is unnecessary because Deep Engagement does not seek to undertake new military missions or commitments outside core regions.
Liberal Internationalism

THEORETICAL ANCHOR. Liberal Internationalism rests on hegemonic stability theory and neoliberal institutionalism. It depends on the “decentralized model” (Snidal 1985:588-9) of hegemonic stability, in which it is the hegemon’s “benevolent leadership” more than its coercion of states that ultimately maintains the international order. Liberal Internationalism’s central characteristic is the hegemon’s creation and maintenance of an order built on “rules and institutions that advance collective security and cooperation among democracies,” (Ikenberry, 2009:2). It holds that a stable international order can arise when a hegemon is able and willing to use its power to overcome collective action problems and provide international stability as a public good. Liberal Internationalism does not accept that the hegemon's power is sufficient, instead arguing that hegemonic leadership must command legitimacy. That legitimacy depends on upholding the interests of the other states in the system, rather than coercing states to adhere to the hegemon’s rules. To accomplish this, the hegemon must tie its own hands by adhering to the same rules as other states and allowing a role for non-state actors (Ikenberry, 2000, 2011b; Slaughter, 2016:84-6). By constructing effective, relatively flat (as opposed to hierarchical), international institutions, the hegemon restrains its ability to act coercively and enhances the legitimacy and stability of the order. Institutions also facilitate cooperation by reducing transaction costs, monitoring and enforcing agreements, and overcoming collective action problems. Ultimately, a thick web of institutions can “lock-in” the order and allow it to outlive the hegemon’s inevitable decline. Rising great powers can be successfully co-opted into supporting and perpetuating the order (Keohane, 1984; Ikenberry, 2000, 2011b). This helps overcome the nefarious consequences of anarchy touted by realists (Jackson and Nexon 2009:923-4).
Liberal IR theories of the economic and domestic-political underpinnings of international cooperation strongly inform Liberal Internationalism (Moravcsik, 1997). In particular, Liberal Internationalism argues that the promotion of open and free trade (economic liberalism) and the global spread of democracy (republican liberalism) are critical pillars of a stable and peaceful international order. Thus, as Slaughter (2009:105) argues, the “origins of international conflict and cooperation lie in the political and economic micro-foundations of individual societies.” Democratic states are unlikely to go to war with one another and can cooperate to form security communities (Lipson, 2003). Market democracies will pursue globalization with the free flow of goods, services, and ideas across borders. This type of economic interdependence not only promotes peace by raising the costs of conflict, it also enhances prosperity.

OBJECTIVES. The core objective of Liberal Internationalism is the maintenance and expansion of a U.S.-led liberal international order embedded within a dense network of international institutions (Ikenberry and Slaughter, 2005:14-6; Slaughter, 2012:46-7). As Slaughter (2016:77) argues, the “next U.S. president should adopt a grand strategy of building and maintaining an open international order based on three pillars: open societies, open governments, and an open international system.” Thus Liberal Internationalism parts company with Deep Engagement by considering the incorporation of liberal elements into the international order the very bedrock of U.S. grand strategy.

Liberal Internationalism considers the end of unipolarity and the rise of one or more rival great powers as inevitable. It differs from the other grand strategies in that it opposes efforts to contain a rising peer (Ikenberry, 2008, 2011b). Instead, it argues that by building a thick web of international institutions, the United States can co-opt potential rivals into the existing order and provide them a stake in maintaining it. The end of the Cold War created a unique historical
moment and an unparalleled opportunity for the United States to “lock-in” an international order amenable to its interests (Ikenberry, 2001:55-6). During this window of opportunity, the United States should use its power for institution-building, advancing democratic institutions and norms, promoting free markets, and pulling down barriers to international trade—albeit while acting within the rules of the order it constructs. Institutions, they argue, are “sticky.” Once states become enmeshed within a sufficiently thick rule-based, liberal international order, the benefits this order provides and the costs of dismantling it create powerful incentives for future great powers to support that order (Ikenberry 2001:65). Other states gain from the hegemon’s provision of global public goods like security and stability. Institutions also reassure them that U.S. leadership is benign by constraining U.S. behavior. Although the United States may possess the military and economic power to violate the institutional rules, doing so carries the cost of undermining its international legitimacy (Ikenberry, 2011).

Liberal Internationalism considers the global spread of democracy and globalization a keystone to global stability and central grand strategy objective. Liberal Internationalism therefore advocates protecting established and nascent democracies, even to the point of providing military support to domestic democratic opponents of existing autocratic regimes. This democratizing impulse was the basic rationale behind the Clinton Administration’s “democratic enlargement” policy which expanded NATO eastward in the 1990s (Brinkley, 1997; Ikenberry, 2009:20-2). As Slaughter (2009:97, 109) argues, the United States must continue its policy of “supporting liberal democratic parties and institutions in countries determining their own political future. …The twenty-first century, like the twentieth century, must be made safe for democracy.” Promoting globalization can foster the development of a middle class, a core constituency for democratization in developing countries.
Liberal Internationalism highlights the importance of maintaining regional stability. Regional arms races and conventional conflict undermine the rule-based international order and inevitably end up sucking the United States into conflict. The experiences of the past have shown that “aggressors in faraway lands, if left unchecked, would someday threaten the United States (Ikenberry and Slaughter, 2006:16). For Liberal Internationalism, the September 11 attacks demonstrated how internal and external stability can create conditions that can lead to direct harm to the United States.

Liberal Internationalism considers international terrorism, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and gross human rights violations to be significant threats to the global order. These concerns are compounded by general suspicions of authoritarian and illiberal groups and a skepticism they can be reliably deterred. Nuclear proliferation and terrorism can combine in particularly pernicious ways. Ikenberry and Slaughter (2006:14) assert that the “threat of nuclear terrorism looms greater than any other nuclear threat because of the limits of traditional concepts of deterrence against adversaries who would willingly martyr themselves.” Nuclear proliferation to states generates instability and imposes limits on America’s ability to act against challengers to the liberal international order. Human rights violations undermine nascent liberal movements and breed regional instability. As Slaughter (2016:89) notes, “R2P [Responsibility to Protect] has gone deeply out of fashion, but that is surely temporary.”

POLICY LEVERS. Liberal Internationalism holds that U.S. military dominance currently underwrites the liberal international order. The United States must therefore maintain the military capabilities and alliances necessary to deter and defend against revisionist, anti-liberal challengers (Ikenberry, 2011a:301-6; Ikenberry, 2000:ch.3). As Ikenberry and Slaughter (2006:29-30) write, Liberal Internationalism’s objectives “require a continued high level of U.S.
defense spending.” The United States should maintain and expand its commitments and, where necessary, its troop presence as well. This is particularly true for nascent democracies outside Western Europe. “The United States,” argues Ikenberry (2011a:354-5) “should recommit to and rebuild its security alliances. …The updating of these alliance bargains would involve widening the regional or global missions in which the alliance operates and making new compromises over the distribution of formal rights and responsibilities.” Though the regional emphasis may differ by scholar, Liberal Internationalism supports an expansion of troops in specific cases as a hedge against potential illiberal challenges. For instance, former U.S. Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Michele Flournoy and former U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Plans Janine Davidson (2012:56) note, “The cornerstone of forward engagement [is] positioning U.S. troops in vital regions to help deter major conflicts and promote stability, particularly in Asia and the Middle East.”

There will be times when it is necessary to use force to attain American objectives. This can include the defense of emerging democracies, but Liberal Internationalism does not advocate the constant use of force to spread democracy. It emphasizes multilateralism, though not necessarily universal support, as a way to build legitimacy for any use of force. Thus Slaughter (2009:114) writes “if the need for international action is great, the international community must turn to broadly representative regional institutions to authorize and implement intervention.” Democratic communities can legitimize U.S. action when broader forums were not supportive (Slaughter, 2009:98-100; Ikenberry and Slaughter, 2006:7). Concerns over human rights violations led many to support the Iraq War in 2003 and the intervention in Libya in 2011 (Slaughter, 2009:109). The initial stages of humanitarian intervention may require the kind of forces that only the United States is in a position to supply.
Conservative Internationalism

THEORETICAL ANCHOR. Conservative Internationalism is a broad family that includes, but is not limited to, neoconservatives and shares much with what Dueck (2015) labels “conservative nationalism.” It combines classical liberal assumptions and hegemonic stability theory to arrive at more assertive grand-strategic prescriptions. It rests on a variant of hegemonic stability theory that combines “benevolent” and “coercive” elements (Snidal, 1985). The hegemon’s rule must be benevolent in that the international order it establishes must command legitimacy among other states. This legitimacy arises when core liberal values are shared. Because liberal, democratic states have a shared set of interests, a liberal democratic hegemon’s efforts to establish an international order will command legitimacy even when this requires the unilateral exercise of military force. Indeed, the hegemon’s legitimacy rises among its fellow liberal democracies whenever it exercises power to defend the international order against nondemocratic challengers. Absent this leadership dangerous threats will multiply. As Cohen, Edelman, and Hook (2015:6) state, a “strong United States is essential to the maintenance of the open global order under which this country and the rest of the world have prospered since 1945 …[t]he alternative is not a self-regulating machine of balancing states, but a landscape marked by eruptions of chaos and destruction.” (See also Cohen 2016; Brands and Feaver, 2016:168; Dueck, 2015:207-8).

Conservative Internationalism shares with Liberal Internationalism a focus on domestic institutions but parts company on international institutions. For Conservative Internationalism, state behavior is largely driven by regime type rather than the distribution of power. “Democracies,” writes Charles Krauthammer (quoted in Vaisse, 2011:244-5, see also 233), “are

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3 We borrow the term “Conservative Internationalism” from Henry Nau (2013), but do not as strictly define the term. See also Dueck, 2015:168-76.
inherently more friendly to the United States, less belligerent to their neighbors, and generally more inclined to peace [than illiberal regimes].” International institutions are suspect, though—particularly those that grant equal status to both democracies and autocracies that are fundamentally illiberal in character as they empower and legitimate tyrannical regimes. Because democratic regimes are more likely than autocratic ones to be bound by international rules, international institutions restrain the states that require a free hand to uphold the international order while permitting the challenges of the liberal order greater freedom of action. Thus, international institutions can have an important effect on state preferences (contra Restraint), but only among democratic states (contra Liberal Internationalism).  

Many distinguish conservative nationalism from internationalism. Despite a number of real distinctions, on key points the divide is narrow. In one of the most important recent treatments, Colin Dueck’s (2015:ch.5) discussion makes clear that conservative nationalism sees regime type as critical; liberal states share interests with, and powerful autocracies are a key challenge for, a liberal hegemon. There is similarly a pronounced skepticism of multilateral institutions and attention to muscular U.S. hegemony. Finally, after the U.S. experience in Iraq, there is a widespread counsel for prudence in regime-change operations.

OBJECTIVES. Conservative Internationalism, like its liberal counterpart, favors the promotion of an international order based on liberal characteristics, in particular the spread of democracy, capitalism, and free trade. As Condoleeza Rice (2008:26) put it, “An international order that reflects our values is the best guarantee of our enduring national interest.” Conservative

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4 Nau (2013:52) argues that “legitimacy in foreign affairs derives from the free countries making decisions independently or working together through decentralized institutions,” whereas Liberal Internationalism sees legitimacy as stemming from “participating and voting in universal organizations” that include authoritarian regimes on an equal footing.
Internationalism does not consider such an “international order” to be a rule-based one built on international institutions; in fact, it warns that faith in institutions could lead the United States to abrogate its leadership role while failing to constrain illiberal regimes. The United States remains the sole superpower, albeit sharing the stage with several great powers. Even with a variety of challenges that hegemonic status is durable (Dueck, 2015:203-12; Cohen, 2016:63).

Conservative Internationalism prioritizes the spread of democracy and opposition to authoritarian regimes. Unlike Liberal Internationalism, which argues that democracies can resolve conflicts of interest through peaceful negotiation, Conservative Internationalism holds that maintaining a U.S.-led international order is a globally-shared interest and that democratic governments best channel popular international support for U.S. hegemony. Authoritarian and “rogue” regimes, on the other hand, are unrepresentative of the populations they govern and therefore do not share the citizenship’s interest in maintaining the international politico-economic order established by the United States. Proponents of Conservative International do not rule out spreading democracy by the sword, many supported the 2003 Iraq invasion, but they caution against ill-conceived or constant efforts to do so. Because non-democratic regimes are both illegitimate and naturally inimical to the established and popularly supported international order, their very existence is by definition a security threat to the United States and its democratic allies.

Conservative Internationalism posits that the stability of the international order rests on U.S. power. U.S. primacy and preventing the rise of a great power rival, particularly an illiberal great power, are core objectives. The focus on regime type and the importance placed on U.S. preeminence in the international system suggests a strategy toward China combining elements of engagement and regime transformation (similar to Liberal Internationalism) and a balancing
approach (similar to Deep Engagement and, increasingly, Restraint). The result is a strategy similar to Aaron Friedberg’s (2015:107) “better balancing” approach, which “combines continued attempts at engagement with expanded and intensified balancing.” It differs from other grand-strategic positions by assuming engagement can best move China toward democracy when coupled with assertive balancing, and that U.S. balancing efforts do not risk escalation or require reassurance.

Aggressive counterterrorism is a necessary objective. “Jihadist terrorists” must be preempted, argues Dueck (2015:236-7). “The nature of this particular enemy leaves no superior alternative other than an assertive and determined strategy of rollback.” Conservative Internationalism sees an essential link between terrorism and “rogue” states that sponsor terrorist organizations, and therefore favors strategies that focus on that link. For example, the Bush administration rapidly shifted focus to Iraq after the 9/11 attacks despite Iraq’s lack of connection to the terrorist attacks. As Mann (2004:302) describes Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz’s thinking, the “forces behind terrorism in the Middle East were all interconnected…If the United States could defeat [Hussein], it would weaken terrorist groups throughout the Middle East. The issue was broader than Al Qaeda.”

Nonproliferation is a critical objective because Conservative Internationalism doubts the efficacy of deterrence with authoritarian and rogue states. Proponents are supportive of preventive military action as well as ballistic missile defenses and nuclear counterforce capabilities. Concerns about nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons proliferation were at the center of the Bush administration’s case to invade Iraq. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, advocates of the neoconservative strain of Conservative Internationalism within the administration expressed particular concern about “rogue” states like Iran, Iraq, and North Korea.
acquiring nuclear weapons. This interacted with the terrorist threat to raise additional worry, and played a central role in the development of the Bush Doctrine and informs critiques of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action involving Iran’s nuclear program more than a decade later (Gause, 2010:186-238; Jervis, 2003; Cohen, Edelman, Takeyh, 2015:64-75).

POLICY LEVERS. Conservative Internationalism highlights the value of U.S. military power for achieving American objectives. The tendency to bandwagon will dominate incentives to balance, and so there are increasing returns to U.S. global activism with little risk of blowback. A robust troop presence will reassure skittish allies, deter and compel potential adversaries, and establish the means to defeat them should coercion fail (Dueck, 2015:chap. 5). As Robert Kagan (2014) notes, the “American presence enforced a general peace and stability in two regions [Europe and Northeast Asia] that for at least a century had known almost constant great-power conflict. …When the United States appears to retrench, allies necessarily become anxious, while others look for opportunities.” In the Middle East, Feaver (2016) argues that Obama’s troop drawdown “proved disastrous for American interests and paved the way for the rise of the Islamic State, forcing Obama to shift back once again to an onshore balancing in the region.”

Conservative Internationalism emphasizes alliances with democracies rather than autocracies, but makes room for compromise on this issue. Mann (2004:352) explains how conservatives shifted during the Cold War from a position largely consistent with the one set forth in Jeane Kirkpatrick’s (1979) landmark Commentary article, to more assertively supporting democracy even when it meant challenging the domestic security of anti-communist regimes supportive of the United States. Similarly, Nau (2013:55) argues that although “critics often attack such cooperation [with authoritarian regimes] as hypocrisy” it is necessary to set priorities and be sensitive to “the limitations of both resources and public will to support the end of
tyranny everywhere at once.” Thus, support for U.S. commitments to non-democratic allies in the Middle East and elsewhere is not inconsistent with the overall tenets of Conservative Internationalism.

Conservative Internationalism’s emphasis on military power leads to a large force structure and willingness to use military force to advance U.S. objectives. Conservative Internationalism thus emphasizes what Nau (2013:6) terms “armed diplomacy.” The ability and resolve to use force “during negotiations and before an attack when it is a choice, not just after negotiations and in retaliation to an attack when it is a necessity” is essential to “succeed in negotiations that move freedom forward.” This does not mean Conservative Internationalism favors greater use of force overall. Rather, as Nau (2013:7, emphasis in original) argues, “the earlier and perhaps more frequent use of smaller force to deter, preempt, and prevent [will] prevent the later use of much greater force.” Put differently, Conservative Internationalism focuses on the risk of acting too late; other grand strategies put greater weight on the risk of acting too soon. A large military is essential, allowing the United States to act and bargain from a position of strength (Vaisse 2011:235; Cohen, 2016; Nau, 2013:179-181). Current spending on defense is low by historical standards and can be increased without undermining the domestic economy.

Discussion

We argue that grand-strategy disagreements hinge on theoretical disagreements about the role power and institutions play in international politics. Regarding power, the core disagreement is between Restraint, which relies on balance-of-power realism, and the other three grand strategy positions, which adopt variations of hegemonic stability theory. A focus on power alone, however, would lead to an inaccurate portrayal of the debate. Equally important is the role that
international and domestic institutions play in international politics. These differences have enormous implications for the specific objectives the United States should pursue to maximize its interests. Liberal Internationalism focuses on spreading liberal economic, domestic, and international institutions, relying on all three pillars of the Kantian tripod (Oneal and Russett, 1999). Conservative Internationalism draws on classical liberalism and agrees on the importance of spreading liberal economic and domestic institutions. In contrast to Liberal Internationalism, though, proponents argue that international institutions dangerously constrain U.S. action while allowing illiberal states to pursue dangerous agendas inimical to U.S. interests. Deep Engagement is the mirror position of Conservative Internationalism. For its proponents, spreading liberal domestic institutions is often a costly distraction from core objectives. At the same time, Deep Engagement borrows some insights from institutionalism. Restraint argues that it is unnecessary and perhaps even counterproductive to use military tools to spread liberal international or domestic institutions to secure U.S. interests.

Our framework makes several important contributions. First, by holding interests constant, we identify four grand strategies that lead to a number of different policy prescriptions that claim to maximize a given set of U.S. interests. Having done so, future work will be able assess which side offers the best mix of policies to maximize these interests. One could identify a different set of interests, but whatever interests one identifies must be consistent, held constant, and carefully separated from objectives. Two important recent works help illustrate how failing to adopt this framework can lead to conceptual confusion.

In his important book on Restraint, Posen (2014:2-3) argues that foreign policy “may have many goals beyond security, including the prosperity of Americans at home,” but grand strategy seeks to maximize security alone. Yet his definition of security then includes “economic
capacity.” This is problematic because it is unclear if prosperity is a means (objective) for security or an ends (interest). If it is an ends, then Posen would need to demonstrate that Restraint’s objectives lead it to better advance U.S. economic capacity compared to alternative grand strategies. If prosperity is a means, then it is necessary to make clear that there may be a tradeoff between security and prosperity in favor of the former. For instance, if an action increases prosperity but harms security, then one should not pursue it. It would also be necessary to specify the severity of this tradeoff to assess whether it is sharp enough to undermine security in the long run. In short, on his own terms, Posen’s treatment of Restraint is incomplete. By clearly identifying and examining these issues which our framework highlights, scholars and policymakers will be better able to directly compare the costs and benefits of each grand strategy to maximize a given set of interests.

Others conflate grand strategic objectives and interests. In their careful treatment of Deep Engagement, Brooks and Wohlforth (2016:1) have done this, writing that “managing the external environment to reduce near- and long-term threats to U.S. national security” is one of three core U.S. grand strategy interests that are essential for furthering U.S. security. This statement risks tautology: the best way to preserve U.S. security is to reduce the near-and long-term threat to U.S. security. More importantly, it conflates means and ends; managing the external security environment is a means for maximizing the U.S. interest of security, it is not an end in of itself. As our framework makes clear, interests or ends must be treated as constant, whereas means should vary depending on evidence regarding their effectiveness in realizing a given interest. It critical for future grand strategy research to carefully separate means from ends so that officials can clearly understand whether scholars are making claims about what interests the U.S should adopt as opposed to what means will maximize a given end.
Next, our framework reveals why analysts across grand strategy positions may agree on some policy prescriptions but not others. For example, the debate over American decline overlaps with debates on grand strategy (e.g., Layne 2012; Beckley 2015). Yet retrenchment due to weakness is discrete from exercising restraint. In the latter, enduring strength provides a choice of whether to do more or less. Thus, Gholz, Press, and Sapolsky (1997) argued that an expansive American role was necessary when there was a Soviet peer competitor but no longer necessary as U.S. relative power surged. Today, this explains why policy prescriptions of some Restraint proponents (e.g., Mearsheimer and Walt 2016) overlap with proponents of more robust grand strategies in East Asia but not in other regions. Research showing that the United States remains dramatically more powerful than China has different implications for different grand strategy positions. For arguments following from variations on hegemonic stability theory, it suggests the United States should maintain its position in East Asia. For balance of power-based grand strategies, though, the same finding points to a reduced U.S. role in East Asia. Our framework makes clear that to the extent analysts within traditions disagree on these issues it necessarily follows from additional factors – such as disagreements over relative power, changing technology, or normative preferences – that go beyond the underlying theories.

Finally, this article provides a framework for how to best apply existing research to the grand strategy debate and what additional research should be undertaken. We illustrate this with two examples drawn from each axis of the debate. First, if a U.S. presence abroad provoked rival nuclear proliferation more than it limited allied proliferation this would support Restraint while undermining alternative positions. The converse is not necessarily the case. If reduced U.S. involvement caused more proliferation among allies, the Restraint position may find that acceptable, arguing that it increases regional stability through mutual deterrence. It would then
be necessary to bring research from the enduring debate on the consequences of nuclear proliferation for regional (in)stability (Sagan and Waltz, 2013) as well as whether nuclear-driven (in)stability positively or negatively affected American interests. That is, it would be necessary to show how these changes affected American ability to achieve other objectives and interests. There are a number of studies examining U.S. nonproliferation tools (for a discussion see Gavin, 2015), but more fine-grained analyses addressing the effectiveness of individual and combined policy levers is needed. For instance, research that disentangles whether the U.S. commitment is sufficient to provide leverage (closest to Deep Engagement), or must be coupled with a global/regional institutional order (Liberal Internationalism), and/or a strong commitment to use force against potential proliferators (Conservative Internationalism) would be informative.

A second example draws from the legitimacy axis of the debate. The different grand-strategic positions disagree whether international legitimacy matters in determining whether U.S. strategies such as troop deployments and the use of military force are likely to be stabilizing or destabilizing (or has no effect on stability either way). Liberal Internationalism holds that the use of American military force abroad promotes stability when the United States exercises self-restraint and adheres to international norms and the rules and processes of inclusive international institutions such as the UN Security Council. Conservative Internationalism, on the other hand, argues that U.S. military force can be carried out unilaterally, and will command legitimacy among democracies so long as its exercise is consistent with liberal ends (human liberty and free-market commerce). For example, Conservative Internationalism would predict that the U.S. failure to intervene in Syria after Assad’s use of chemical weapons in 2013 should undermine U.S. legitimacy and generate greater instability by inviting challenges to U.S. leadership. Alternatively, Liberal Internationalism would predict U.S. unilateral efforts to roll back North
Korean nuclear and missile achievements should promote instability by undermining alliances and provoking adversaries. Conservative Internationalists would expect the opposite result: allies should be heartened by these measures and adversaries cowed. In each example, researchers can test the competing claims against international outcomes in terms of stability and public and/or elite opinion abroad as a measure of international legitimacy.

In sum, this article’s focus on why each side adopts a preferred set of grand strategic objectives and corresponding levers will allow future research to better assess the relative effectiveness of these objectives and levers for attaining U.S. interests. It is necessary to not just test individual relationships but to assess how those relationships interact with one another to highlight the various tradeoffs inherent in any grand strategy that attempts to prioritize, balance competing demands, and bring together a diverse set of policies into an overarching agenda. This is more demanding than narrow hypothesis-testing, but has the potential to fill a critical gap between scholarship and policy and move us closer to the ideal of evidence-based policy.


