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1

## Eternal Principles, Shifting Realities: An Analysis of Patrick Porter's American Grand Strategy

In his article, "Why America's Grand Strategy Has Not Changed Much," Patrick Porter looks into the principles that have shaped American foreign policy throughout the twentieth century to today, examining the continuity of American grand strategy amidst evolving international circumstances. At the start of his article, he establishes his research question, looking to determine what explains the lasting continuity and consistency of the US grand strategy despite shifts in international circumstances, leadership changes, and evolving foreign policy over time (Porter 9-10). When Porter references grand strategy, he refers to the long-term approach a nation has taken on foreign policy and international relations, including a set of core principles and goals that shape the country's interactions with the world and its pursuit of national interests on the global stage. In the case of the US, this grand strategy and core principles of primacy have remained relatively stable despite the changes in the circumstances surrounding foreign policy decision-making (Porter 9). His argument and evidence explain what the US grand strategy is and what factors influence decision-making on foreign policy matters while also explaining why it has remained unchanged for many years, but there are some limitations in his assessment, including simplifying the complexities of American foreign policy issues, selective examination of cases and ignoring instances of deviation from the strategy, a majority focus on internal factors over external, and minimal consideration of public opinion.

At the start of his article, Porter sets out that “if grand strategy is the long-term orchestration of power and commitments to secure oneself in a world where war is possible” (9) then the US’ methods of maintaining security are stable and consistent. Following World War II, amidst the Cold War, the US formed its grand strategy of “primacy,” with parameters for foreign policy set by the 1960s that have remained relatively unchanged: “to be militarily preponderant; to reassure and contain allies; integrate other states into US-designed institutions and markets; and to inhibit the spread of nuclear weapons” (Porter 10). These ideas Porter puts forward can be seen in and supported by other writings on foreign policy and international relations, such as Robert Art’s “American Foreign Policy and the Fungibility of Force” and Robert Jervis’ “Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma.” Art’s argument connects to the first part of Porter’s parameters, as he argues for the importance of military power and its role in foreign policy, supporting the idea of US military preeminence (Art 8-9). Jervis’ argument on the security dilemma aligns with Porter’s second parameter, with the idea of balancing increasing security while ensuring allies are reassured and not also escalating their own security in response (Jervis 169). Both writings help substantiate Porter’s definition of the parameters in the context of US history. Porter goes on to argue that US grand strategy is made stable by the interaction of power, “the state’s relative economic size and military capabilities,” and habit, the “collective ideas that come to seem obvious, axiomatic choices made from unexamined assumptions,” as the tangible power may have established the pursuance of primacy, but habit is what makes it difficult to change as the strategy and principles are perpetuated by the elites of the foreign policy establishment that has existed and remained relatively unchanged since post-WWII, the Blob (Porter 11). The Blob, like many other elite establishments discussed in research on foreign

policy decision-making, including Andrew Payne's "Bargaining with the Military: How Presidents Manage the Political Costs of Civilian Control", and Joshua Kertzer and Thomas Zeitzoff's "A Bottom-Up Theory of Public Opinion about Foreign Policy", has been so successful in establishing primacy as the framework for US foreign relations that it has constrained policy choices as leadership has the tendency to follow historical precedent (Porter 11-12).

To support his argument about the habit of primacy, Porter traces it back to the last years of WWII, as the US worked to increase its global position over other war-torn, exhausted major powers. Porter notes that the US's growth allowed it to "enlarge its ambitions and reorder the international system," as elite experts urged leadership to push for a "Washington-designed world order," assuming the US would take Britain's position as the global leader, an ambition that was accomplished as the US took military command over large parts of the world at the end of the war, reshaping the global economy to follow US-designed institutions (14). Porter's historical discussion is similar to Art's on the implementation of US institutions to reassure European allies in their economic rebuilding post-WWII (Art 28-29), highlighting the various reasonings and ways in which the US got involved in rebuilding global institutions post-war. Porter suggests that with the Soviet Union gone, as it was once considered the last major check on US global power, the US can achieve "its long-held goal of unrivaled dominance" and the grand strategy will persist as it stands, despite incentives and opportunities for change (19).

To support his argument, Porter examines two case studies: President Bill Clinton's preservation of primacy despite opportunity and incentives to pursue alternative strategies, and

President Donald Trump's challenging of the consensus that the US be the global leader during his first year in office. As the first fully post-Cold War president, Clinton had the opportunity and incentives, including the public support for peace-seeking, to pursue a new grand strategy, but instead he maintained the longstanding grand strategy of primacy, partly because of his lack of preparation or strategy on foreign relations matters before entering office, but also his lack of interest in focusing on diplomatic issues (Porter 22). Clinton and his administration faced decision-making over the size of the defense budget and NATO enlargement and alliances, raising the issue of whether the US should remain the major global superpower and remain a leading power in continental Europe. Despite hinting at an alternative move to limit the US's global role during his campaign and a decrease in the defense budget, which still remained ahead compared to other states, Clinton maintained traditional attitudes on military structure and preeminence because of the influence of the Blob in policy, decision-making, and security assessments (Porter 24-26, 28-29). Porter uses this example of Clinton to showcase that despite the capabilities and support for a change in grand strategy, political leaders will continue to uphold the same grand strategy of preeminence as they are influenced to uphold the framework laid out by the Blob.

To further support his argument, Porter studies the case of Donald Trump's first year as president, and the challenge he posed to the established security order. Porter notes that Trump was elected because of a public wave of dislike of the costs and burdens of primacy, and by extension the Blob, as his campaign evoked ideas of interwar isolationism and zero-sum nationalism. His election campaign strategy characterized government officials and elites as a corrupt oligarchy and threatened to scrap traditional alliances, accommodate previous major

adversaries, support nuclear proliferation, move away from frequent use of military force, and move towards protectionism. Political elites questioned Trump's morality, sanity, and legitimacy, and the 2016 presidential election was presented as a fundamental decision about the United States' global role (Porter 38-39). Porter finds that despite his threats to shake up foreign policy establishments, the first year of Trump's presidency consisted largely of continuity in grand strategy, as the Blob and tradition constrained his administration's ability to enact change, despite the encouragement from a public that was war-weary and suffering the long-term stress from the 2008 financial crisis. The Blob encouraged experts to boycott the administration and pushed Trump and his staff to follow tradition, forcing Trump's hand to fall in line, in the face of understaffing and lack of political support, on issues like the NATO Charter and 2017 National Security Strategy (Porter 41-43). Porter gives this example to highlight, that despite a president's best hopes for pursuing a new grand strategy, even given the public incentives for it, the Blob's influence is so strong that once in office, a president cannot and will not incur the political costs to enact this change, and will instead almost certainly fall in line with the Blob and their traditions.

Porter's argument, and provided evidence, are certainly compelling and convincing in explaining why America's grand strategy remains consistent. As previously discussed, Porter's argument about the influence of elites aligns with arguments in many other writings on foreign policy establishments, including Payne and Kertzer and Zeitzoff. Payne discusses the bargaining process between presidents and military elites, recognizing the role of elites in shaping foreign policy decisions and managing civil-military relations (166-167), similar to Porter's focus on the role of elites, in his case the Blob, on foreign policy. Kertzer and Zeitzoff look at how individuals

can be influenced by political elites, including policymakers and leaders, in forming their foreign policy preferences, and the role of elites in shaping foreign policy related beliefs (544), a slightly different approach from Porter's focus, but still highlighting the roles that elites play in this realm. With these similarities to other writings, Porter's argument and evidence become stronger and more compelling, knowing there are other related arguments on the influence of political elites. Furthermore, with his historical cases, and his detailed references to strategic thinkers and key policy players, foreign policy documents, and changes to the international system, Porter's argument becomes stronger and more compelling with these cited examples of history and policy as evidence to support it.

Porter's argument and evidence link directly to US national security, through its contributions to understanding the continuity of strategic principles, policy debates, domestic factors, and military interventions. Porter's writing speaks to issues that are critical when considering national security, and understanding why the framework for national security decision-making has remained relatively unchanged for so many years, despite the opportunities for it to adapt to changing global and domestic contexts. Porter's argument and evidence highlight how the fundamental principles guiding American grand strategy have remained consistent, a significant factor in national security as it provides a stable framework policymakers can draw on when addressing global issues and protecting national interests. Porter's analysis of historical cases gives some insight into policy debates within the US that highlights the importance of consensus among foreign policy elites, as it helps ensure a unified and coherent approach to addressing security threats, as seen especially with Donald Trump's presidency and the boycott of the Blob until he acquiesced. Porter's look at domestic factors, like

the influence of the elites and the military, highlights the connectedness and interdependence of national security and domestic politics, an understanding that is crucial for assessing the broader national security landscape. Following that, Porter's discussion of military intervention further demonstrates how principles of grand strategy relate to the use of military force, as aligning military actions with the overall strategic goals is central to achieving national security objectives. Overall, as he looks to define grand strategy and explain why it remains unchanged, Porter is explaining a large, influential part of the United States' national security framework and decision-making reasoning, explaining who is involved and why choices are made as they are.

Though his argument and provided evidence are overall fairly compelling, his argument does have some limitations. While it does provide a valuable perspective on the continuity of American grand strategy, his argument is reliant upon a broad overview of the US foreign policy history that simplifies complex issues and nuances, that overlook some of the depth and intricacy of certain events and policy decisions. Furthermore, his argument places a strong emphasis on the continuity of American grand strategy, with a limited exploration of alternative perspectives, or contradictory cases. The emphasis on continuity may downplay significant shifts or changes in specific policy approaches, and his limited exploration of alternative perspectives or contradictory cases ignores any instances of deviation from the norm without even a mention. It could be argued that both the Vietnam War could be seen as a departure from grand strategy (Seagren and Henderson 77), and the focus on counterterrorism following September 11, 2001 and the military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq could be seen as a turn to non-state actors and unconventional threats (Gadarian 470-471), both examples that show deviance from the grand strategy as they lack in having the defined containment of a major power, even if they

uphold some of the other parameters Porter set out that the US established for foreign policy in the 1960s. Furthermore, Porter gives limited emphasis on external factors, as he focuses mostly on internal factors, such as the influence of the elites and foreign policy establishment. Porter argues that the grand strategy is resistant to change despite shifting international circumstances but does not actually analyze if there are any impacts of these changing international circumstances, such as the global balance of power, shifts that could further explain potential deviant instances or reasons for adhering to the strategy. Additionally, Porter gives very little consideration to the influence of public opinion on foreign policy. He does briefly touch on it but does not deeply assess how changing public attitudes may impact foreign policy, despite works by Sagan and Valentino, Gadarian, Seagren and Henderson, Kertzer and Zeitzoff, Krebs et al., and Bayard de Volo all discussing how influential public opinion can be on foreign policy decision-making or the elites involved in the decision-making and warfare.

Porter's argument and evidence are effective in explaining policy decision-making for America's national security since the end of WWII, but the limitations of his argument are glaring, especially considering the global issues today. He published his article in 2018 but gave no real discussion of the War on Terror, a possible instance of deviation from his grand strategy argument, and an influence on foreign policy and war decisions since. Furthermore, not focusing on the importance of public opinion could be problematic in making use of his argument with contemporary issues, particularly with the ever-increasing polarization of the public and the influence of public opinion on policymakers. His simplification of complex issues, though understandable for the context of his writing, is also mildly problematic as issues of foreign policy and global challenges grow more complex and less clear-cut as they challenge



international order, international law, and national interests. While these limitations should be considered when applying Porter's argument to contemporary foreign policy decision-making, his argument, evidence, and findings are still useful in understanding the influence of foreign policy elites, and the framework under which many foreign policy decisions continue to be made despite the ever-changing context of the world surrounding them.

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