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History and the Perils of Grand Strategy

*Grand strategy is of increasing interest to policy makers and scholars today. Considerable attention has been devoted to attempting to define what grand strategy is, and what it ought to entail. This article argues that these attempts risk imposing a modern Anglophone conception of 'grand' strategy upon cultures and periods which conceptualised strategy in alternative ways. Illustrating these points through a study of Great Britain between c. 1870-1928 – where the origins of the term 'grand strategy' are often located – it argues for a new approach to the study of grand strategy. Employing concepts from Intellectual History, it suggests that a *longue durée* study of grand strategy which does not sacrifice contextual factors is attainable if historians play a more active role in the study of strategy.*

The past two decades have witnessed the emergence of a conviction on both sides of the Atlantic that Western democratic governments have forgotten the art of strategy. In 2011 the United Kingdom Parliament's Public Administration Select Committee castigated Prime Minister David Cameron's administration as having 'lost the capacity to think strategically' and demanded that politicians 'reclaim the art of creating 'national strategy''.¹ In the United States, attacks on official policy are often framed in similar terms. 'America needs a grand strategy', critics claim, decrying the 'strategic incoherence' which has prevailed since the end of the Cold War in 1991.² These commentators have ambitious hopes for what such a strategy might achieve. 'Grand strategy', they believe, can 'help the American people and their policy makers answer some of the fundamental questions about what choices to make in foreign policy.'³ Calls for restraint in the use of the term 'grand strategy', appear to have gone largely unheeded. Yet its too-frequent and indiscriminate employment reduce the clarity which its advocates hope it will provide.⁴ Exaggerated hopes for what 'grand strategy' can achieve thus endure, offering the tantalising prospect that if only our leaders could articulate a more coherent vision for how to achieve a nation's goals, Western world might prove better able to meet the security challenges of both today and tomorrow.

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¹ House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee, 'Who does UK National Strategy, Further Report', 25 Jan 2011, p. 3: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmselect/cmpubadm/713/713.pdf>, accessed 26.3.2018.

² R. Brooks, 'Obama Needs a Grand Strategy', *Foreign Policy*, 23 Jan 2012: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/01/23/obama-needs-a-grand-strategy/>, accessed 26.3.2018; W.C. Martel, *Grand Strategy in Theory and Practice: The Needs for an Effective American Foreign Policy*, Cambridge: CUP, 2015, p. 1.

³ Martel, *Grand Strategy*, p. 1.

⁴ R. Betts, 'Is Strategy an Illusion?', *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 2, 2000, pp. 5-50, H. Strachan, 'The Lost Meaning of Strategy', *Survival*, Vol. 47, No. 3, 2006, pp. 33-54, P. Miller, 'On Strategy, Grand and Mundane', *Orbis*, Vol. 60, No. 2, Feb 2016, pp. 238-47; S. Reich and P. Dombrowski, *The End of Grand Strategy: US Maritime Operations in the Twenty-First Century*, Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2017, *passim*.

The importance of grand strategy has come to rest upon secure scholarly foundations, particularly in the United States. As one writer argued in 2014, ‘good grand strategy may be essential to effective statecraft’.⁵ This conviction is apparently based upon the experience of history. How states and their leaders have practiced strategy has varied over time and space yet, so this argument runs, these efforts are sufficiently alike in their essence to make them a discrete topic of study: ‘all states have a grand strategy, whether they know it or not’.⁶ Writing a history of ‘grand strategy’ is thus both possible and necessary, in order to provide foundations for thinking about the subject today.⁷ Yet there are good reasons to suppose that how this history has been approached, and the conclusions about strategy making it has supported, are both open to serious question. As Hew Strachan has argued, viewing strategy as ubiquitous in the annals of statecraft conflates strategic *theory* with strategy in *practice*. Doing so confuses our understanding of strategy in the modern world by depicting the inherently responsive, changing nature of strategic action with the long-term continuities of strategic theory.⁸ States’ behaviour may not change dramatically over time, but this does not imply stasis or stagnation. Choices are continually made, risks weighed, outcomes assessed, and actions taken. This process may be guided by enduring ‘unspoken assumptions’, yet such interpretative frameworks are significant precisely because they dictate responses to new and emerging problems, and not because they are evidence of continuity in history itself.⁹

This article argues for a new approach to the study of grand strategy, predicated upon the reintegration of history into the discussion. It is divided into two primary sections. In the first, I critique several of the assumptions which underpin much recent thinking about grand strategy, and present an alternative, historically based approach to studying it. Precisely because ‘grand strategy’ is contingent upon a host of factors unique to particular states, I argue that it cannot

⁵ H. Brands, *What is Good Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush*, Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2014, pp. 1. See also A. Wess Mitchell, *The Grand Strategy of the Habsburg Empire*, Princeton, NJ: PUP, 2018, esp. pp. 304-16.

⁶ P. Kennedy, *Grand Strategies in War and Peace*, New Haven: Yale, 1991, pp. 5-6. See also E. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, Harvard, MA: HUP, 2011, p. 409; W. Murray, ‘Thoughts on grand strategy’ in W. Murray, R. Hart Sinnreich, and J. Lacey eds., *The Shaping of Grand Strategy: Policy, Diplomacy, and War*, Cambridge: CUP, 2011, 1-33; J.A. Olsen and C.S Gray eds., *The Practice of Strategy: From Alexander the Great to the Present*, Oxford: OUP, 2011; C. Hill, *Grand Strategies: Literature, Statecraft, and World Order*, New Haven: Yale UP, 2011; H. Brands, *The Promise and Pitfalls of Grand Strategy*, SSII, August, 2012, p. 6; *What is Good Grand Strategy?*, pp. 1-16; J.L. Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy*, London: Allen Lane, 2018.

⁷ Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy*, p. 21.

⁸ H. Strachan, ‘Strategy in theory; strategy in practice’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 2019, DOI: 10.1080/01402390.2018.1559153 & ‘Strategy: Change and Continuity’ in H. Strachan ed., *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective*, Cambridge: CUP, 2013, pp. 259-61.

⁹ P. Schroeder, ‘Historical Reality vs. Neo-Realist Theory’, *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 1, Summer, 1994, pp. 108-48; P. Porter, ‘Why America’s Grand Strategy Has Not Changed: Power, Habit, and the US Foreign Policy Establishment’, *International Security*, Vol. 42, No. 4, Spring 2018, pp. 9-46.

meaningfully be considered as a branch of strategic theory, or as an historically homogenous activity with clear enduring principles.¹⁰ Rather, it must be understood as a particular – primarily Anglo-American – epoch in the much longer and broader history of strategic action by states and their leaders.¹¹ Viewing ‘grand strategy’ as but one iteration in a much longer chain of behaviour enables us to adopt an historical approach to strategy, and thereby to account for difference and change over time without sacrificing the effort to detect whether there has been a central essence to how states have practiced strategy. Similar approaches are increasingly being used by intellectual historians to understand core issues and concepts, and the growing body of work in this area offers new opportunities for us to think about ‘grand strategy’.¹²

The second section of the article expands upon these arguments by presenting a new interpretation of the origins of the term ‘grand strategy’ itself. These beginnings are often associated with a succession of writers in early twentieth century Britain: particularly Julian Corbett, JFC Fuller, and Basil Liddell Hart. These figures supposedly expanded earlier definitions of strategy to encompass all instruments of state power, making it ‘grand’ in its scope to meet the challenges of modern war. Yet, as we shall see, ‘grand strategy’ was not conceived in response to changes in the character of warfare. Rather, it emerged from peacetime debates amongst policymakers about how to defend Britain and her Empire. The British believed that grand strategy was something only they needed to do, owing to their unique position of global maritime and financial power. The concept was thus rooted in a specific context, and a particular set of assumptions about the world and Britain’s place within it. Only by re-creating a broader picture of other such contexts can we move to a fuller understanding of the practice of strategy at the national level throughout history, and therefore of the place and nature of grand strategy today. Historians will be central to this process, and their greater involvement in theoretical discussions of strategy is thus a pressing requirement.

I

Grand strategy emerged as an important concept within the discipline of strategic studies during the 1970s. Early interventions on the topic tended to accept that the term was rooted in a specifically modern context, or that it was sufficiently pliable to be used in an historical sense

¹⁰ For this argument see L. Milevski, *The Evolution of Modern Grand Strategic Thought*, Oxford: OUP, pp. 143-53.

¹¹ For a similar approach see B. Heuser, *The Evolution of Strategy: Thinking About War from Antiquity to the Present*, Cambridge: CUP, 2010, esp. pp. 3-9.

¹² D. Armitage, ‘What’s the Big Idea? Intellectual History and the Longue Durée’, *History of European Ideas*, Vol. 38, No. 4, 2012, pp. 493-507. See also D.M. McMahon, ‘The Return of the History of Ideas?’ in D.M. McMahon and Sm. Moyn eds., *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History*, Oxford: OUP, 2014, pp. 13-31; J. Isaac, ‘Strategy as Intellectual History’, *Modern Intellectual History*, 2018, doi: 0.1017/S1479244318000094.

without tight definition.¹³ Recalling his experience working on the ‘Grand Strategy’ series of the British official history of the Second War, Sir Michael Howard remarked that ‘the editor never told me what Grand Strategy was, and none of my colleagues seem to have asked. I could find no definition...so I made up my own.’¹⁴ This terminological ambiguity was not without its tensions, however. As Liddell Hart had identified in the 1930s, ‘while grand strategy should control strategy, its principles often run counter to those which prevail in the field of strategy.’¹⁵ Quite where one ended and the other began, and how the relationship between the two functioned, remained unclear. These difficulties became increasingly apparent as academic and policy making interest in ‘grand strategy’ exploded in the early 1990s. Inspired by the need to define American foreign policy in a post-Cold War world, a plethora of works on the subject quickly emerged, led by Paul Kennedy’s influential *Grand Strategies in Peace and War*. The subsequent deluge of scholarship was heavy and varied enough for one authority to conclude that grand strategy had become little more than a ‘buzzword’.¹⁶ Yet the confusion which now surrounds the term has done little to diminish its resonance, or its usage in either academic or policy making circles. Indeed, interest in the concept appears to be growing, perhaps driven by renewed great power competition or the relative decline of Western influence. As one recent summary concluded, ‘the time is ripe for serious study of grand strategy.’¹⁷

Based upon recent trends, any such study seems unlikely to place much significance upon history. Indeed, it is ironic that, despite the important role historians such as Kennedy and John Lewis Gaddis have played in popularizing ‘grand strategy’ as a concept, the discipline of history has made only the most peripheral contribution to its subsequent evolution.¹⁸ In certain respects this is extremely surprising, particularly as a number of prominent theorists have argued that grand strategy itself is an historically ubiquitous phenomenon. For Kennedy, the core features of grand strategy ‘exist at all times, and in all countries.’¹⁹ In a similar vein, Colin Gray has asserted that ‘polities differing greatly over millennia have needed to attempt to practice grand and military

¹³ A key milestone being E.N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire: From the First Century AD to the Third*, Baltimore, MA: John Hopkins UP, 1976. For more detail see Milevski, *Evolution*, Ch. 7.

¹⁴ M. Howard, ‘Grand Strategy in the Twentieth Century’, *Defence Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2001, p. 1.

¹⁵ B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy: The Indirect Approach*, London: Faber & Faber, 1967 edn., p. 366.

¹⁶ R.K. Betts, ‘The Trouble with Strategy: Bridging Policy and Operations’, *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Autumn/Winter 2001, p. 23. For an extensive review of this literature see I. Popescu, *Emergent Grand Strategy and Grand Strategy: How American Presidents Succeed in Foreign Policy*, John Hopkins UP, 2017, Ch. 1; N. Silove, ‘Beyond the Buzzword: The Three Meanings of “Grand Strategy”’, *Security Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 1, 2018, pp. 27-57; T. Balzacq, P. Dombrowski & S. Reich, ‘Is Grand Strategy a Research Program? A Review Essay’, *Security Studies*, Oct., 2018, DOI: 10.1080/09636412.2018.1508631.

¹⁷ R. Friedman Lissner, ‘What Is Grand Strategy? Sweeping a Conceptual Minefield’, *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Nov, 2018.

¹⁸ Milevski, *Evolution*, p. 133.

¹⁹ Kennedy, ‘Toward a Broader Definition’, p. 7. See also J.L. Gaddis, ‘History, Theory, and Common Ground’, *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 1, Summer, 1997, pp. 75-85.

strategy purposefully.²⁰ At one level, this appears to offer historians a tantalizing opportunity to contribute to the study of grand strategy. By the logic employed by Kennedy and Gray, history – regardless of the period or region – is of direct relevance to current affairs and to debates about strategy today. This might appear as welcome news to historians. However, as Hew Strachan has argued, this approach to strategy is based upon a series of assumptions about both history and strategy which are open to serious question.²¹

Since its entry into the English language in the early nineteenth century, the word strategy has enjoyed a varied career. Its definitions and employment are so extensive as to defy examination, however an important distinction can be made between two forms: strategy in practice and strategy in theory. These two areas have different origins, and contrasting natures. Humans have acted strategically – linking actions to outcomes - for time immemorial. This form of strategy is defined by flux and responsiveness, and is best conceived of as a process. Strategy in theory is more recent in origin, dating back to the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. The ‘classical’ strategic theory written at this time was based upon practical experience, and sought to embody continuities about the nature of war. What has happened since 1945 is that the boundaries between these two areas have become increasingly blurred, with the result that the continuity of theory has been used to understand the much more dynamic and changeable nature of strategic action.²² Thus, scholars like Gray can insist on ‘the historical unity of strategic experience’, prioritising continuity over the distinctive and shifting ways in which strategy has been understood across space and time.²³

This strive for the continuity of strategic theory is clearly apparent in recent approaches to grand strategy, which have striven to map the field and to delineate its various elements into clearly defined groups.²⁴ As part of this process, histories of ‘grand strategy’ have been written in order to inform modern debates and to support particular interpretations of the terms meaning. Such accounts tend to locate the origins of ‘grand strategy’ in the writings of either the British journalist and commentator Basil Liddell Hart in the 1930s, or the American scholar Edward Mead Earle during the Second World War.²⁵ These scholars, it is claimed, reflected the manner in which the experience of the two world wars caused a change in the way the word ‘strategy’ was used. Modern warfare required the involvement of all of a nation’s industrial, economic, and social resources,

²⁰ Gray, ‘Conclusion’ in Olsen and Gray eds., *The Practice of Strategy*, p. 291.

²¹ Strachan, ‘Strategy: Change and Continuity’, pp. 236-40.

²² See Strachan ‘Strategy in theory; strategy in practice’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 2019, DOI: 10.1080/01402390.2018.1559153.

²³ Gray, ‘Conclusion’, p. 289.

²⁴ Silove, ‘Beyond the Buzzword’; Balzacq, Dombrowski & Reich, ‘Is Grand Strategy a Research Program?; Lissner, ‘What Is Grand Strategy?’.

²⁵ Kennedy, ‘Towards a Broader Definition’, pp. 1-4; Brands, *What is Good Grand Strategy*, pp. 1-16.

and definitions of strategy therefore had to change to incorporate this shift in practice, becoming ‘grand’ in their scope. Thus, as the British army officer and theorist JFC Fuller set out in 1923: ‘the transmission of power in all its forms, in order to maintain policy, is the aim of grand strategy.’²⁶

Earle described this shift to a broader definition in evolutionary terms in 1943:

...as war and society have become more complicated - and war, it must be remembered is an inherent part of society - strategy has of necessity required increasing consideration of nonmilitary factors, economic, psychological, moral, political, and technological. Strategy, therefore, is not merely a concept of wartime, but is an inherent element of statecraft at all times. Only the most restricted terminology would now define strategy as the art of military command.²⁷

More fulsome treatments of the topic acknowledge that ‘grand strategy’ can trace its origins back before 1914, to the work of maritime thinkers in the late-nineteenth century.²⁸ However, despite claims to the contrary, they still understand the history of grand strategy in terms of ‘the history of war and other defence concerns to which *theorists* hoped to apply their grand strategic ideas.’²⁹ In other words, the history of grand strategy is understood in terms of a series of books, articles, and policy documents which have dealt with the topic. This approach is most clearly evident in the only comprehensive attempt to write the history of the concept, Lukas Milevski’s *The Evolution of Modern Grand Strategic Thought*. Despite stressing the significance of historical context and acknowledging that ‘in some ways grand strategy had no...coherence over the course of its existence’, Milevski concludes by arguing that such uniformity is precisely what is required if the concept is ‘to attain the necessary minimum standards for useful theory.’³⁰ The implicit assumption is that to have value, ‘grand strategy’ must be capable of stable definition, and of widespread applicability. In other words, it must be continuous and enduring, in much the same way that the ‘classical’ thinkers who wrote before 1945 considered the concept of ‘strategy’.

Despite the conclusions Milevski reaches, his argument are in fact a perfect illustration of why we must reintegrate history into debates about grand strategy today. If, as Milevski identifies, ‘definitions of grand strategy are transient because they reflect only their own particular geopolitical conditions’, then it follows that we cannot appreciate those definitions without an intimate appreciation of the historical conditions in which they were produced.³¹ Furthermore, it also poses fundamental questions about the value of applying particular definitions of grand strategy to examples outside of the geographic, cultural, or historic contexts in which those definitions were

²⁶ J.F.C. Fuller, *Reformation of War*, London: Hutchinson, 1913, pp. 218-19.

²⁷ E.M. Earle, ‘Introduction’, in E.M. Earle ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler*, Princeton, NJ: PUP, 1943, viii.

²⁸ Milevski, *Evolution*, Ch. 1-4. For an additional corrective see J.T. Sumida, *Inventing Grand Strategy and Teaching Command: The Classical Works of Alfred Thayer Mahan Reconsidered*, Baltimore, MA: John Hopkins UP, 1997.

²⁹ Milevski, *Evolution*, p. 8. My italics.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 152.

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 146.

formed. Writing about grand strategy has overwhelmingly been a conversation between the author and policy making elites within their own countries or regions, rather than an international or trans temporal debate about the nature of the concept itself. ‘Grand strategy’ is thus a concept rooted in the demands of making strategy in the real world, not a universal contribution to strategic theory. This distinction is no mere point of academic pedantry, as it has significant implications for how we understand both history, and strategy itself.

Writing about ‘grand strategy’ has occurred primarily in Britain and the United States since the turn of the twentieth century. Inevitably, this has influenced the ways in which the term has been used and understood. Definitions of ‘grand strategy’ born in these circumstances are very often bound in the anxieties of hegemonic powers facing the prospect of relative decline.³² They are state-centric, embody ambitions to exercise global influence, and a preference for limiting and controlling war – often reflected in a reliance upon maritime and air power as a means of circumventing large-scale land warfare.³³ In other words, Anglo-American ideas of grand strategy are not a neutral category of analysis. Assuming that definitions drawn from Fuller or Liddell Hart can be universalized achieves little more than reinforcing the dangerous delusion that the US and UK have been uniquely proficient at strategy making and statecraft. This much can be seen clearly in an historical perspective, where the actions of powers outside of the Anglophone, North-Atlantic tradition have often been criticised by virtue of being different. In a European context, this can be seen in Anglophone attitudes towards French and German grand strategy. Dennis Showalter has summarised the essence of this critique: ‘it is generally conceded that the German military could motivate soldiers, win battles, and orchestrate campaigns...But at the plane of grand strategy...the Germans appear as children’. Yet, as he rightly points out, ‘German military policies were not a denial of the concept of grand strategy, but rather its fulfilment – on German terms, to meet German needs.’³⁴

Even greater difficulties apply to the practice of imposing modern definitions of ‘grand strategy’ on the ancient or early modern world, or upon extra-European Great Powers. Ming dynasty China formed strategy based upon ‘Chinese cultural and strategic traditions’, which were distinct from those of the West.³⁵ Owing to fundamental differences in how Chinese and Western societies construct knowledge, ‘Chinese military strategy is not affected by the theory-practice

³² Strachan, ‘Strategy and Contingency’ in his *The Direction of War*, p. 237.

³³ Milevski, *Evolution*, pp. 150-51; Strachan, ‘The meaning of strategy’ in his *The Direction of War*, p. 32.

³⁴ D.E. Showalter, ‘German Grand Strategy: A Contradiction in Terms?’, *Militaergeschichtliche Mitteilungen*, Vol. 48, 1990, p. 65, 93.

³⁵ K.M. Swope, ‘Manifesting Awe: Grand Strategy and Imperial Leadership in the Ming Dynasty’, *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 79, July, 2015, p. 633.

relationship'.³⁶ Given China's fundamentally different geography, demography, and history, it is misleading to understand how her rulers have exercised power in terms of an Anglophone construct of 'grand strategy'. Similar problems exist when applying a unity definition of 'grand strategy' to describe the experience of the global south, or of minor or middle powers – all of which remain under-represented in the existing literature.³⁷ As Tarak Barkawi and Shane Brighton have suggested, 'grand strategy' can certainly be a relevant and helpful term outside of the modern Euro-Atlantic. Owing to its emphasis on the *production* of power, and of societal transformation intended to facilitate this end, 'grand strategy' may indeed have a life beyond debates about US and UK foreign policy.³⁸ Yet to do so it must be interpreted creatively, and not be confined to a single prescriptive definition.

Attempts to square this circle through the concept of 'strategic culture' – the idea that aspects of strategic behaviour are inescapably linked to cultural assumptions and practices which differ across space and time³⁹ – obscure as much as they illuminate.⁴⁰ By conflating all of the contextual factors which may influence strategy as 'culture', and arguing that such cultures are slow to exhibit change over time, the concept underplays the vital role of contingency and change in the practice of strategy. By doing so strategic culture emphasizes continuity in the same misleading fashion as universal definitions of grand strategy, and rides roughshod over complexity and change in the process.⁴¹

Does all of this mean that grand strategy ought to be declared dead? I would argue not. Rather, it is to suggest the need for a different approach to understanding what we are talking about when we refer to grand strategy, both today and in the past. First and foremost, we must accept that attempting to define what grand strategy *is*, is an inherently misleading endeavour. As David Armitage has argued in his study of civil wars, terms 'may look descriptive, but [are] firmly normative, expressing values and interpretations more than any stable identity.'⁴² The same is true of grand strategy: there is no single or correct meaning of the term, merely different ones shaped by the contexts in which it is used and the intentions of those who employ it. Viewing grand

³⁶ F. Jullien, *A Treatise on Efficacy: Between Western and Chinese Thinking*, trans. Janet Lloyd, University of Hawaii Press, 2004 edn., p. 23.

³⁷ K. Booth, *Strategy and Ethnocentrism*, London: Croon Helm, 1979; T. Barkawi, 'Decolonising war', *European Journal of International Security*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2016, pp. 199-214.

³⁸ T. Barkawi and S. Brighton, 'Brown Britain: post-colonial politics and grand strategy', *International Affairs*, Vol. 89, No. 5, 2013, p. 1116.

³⁹ C. Gray, 'Strategic culture as context: the first generation of theory strikes back', *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 25, 1999, pp. 49-69.

⁴⁰ A.I. Johnson, 'Thinking about Strategic Culture', *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 4, 1995, pp. 32-64.

⁴¹ J. Black, *War and the Cultural Turn*, Cambridge: Polity, 2012, *passim*; H. Strachan, 'The limitations of strategic culture: the case of the British way in warfare' in Strachan, *Direction of War*, pp. 136-50.

⁴² D. Armitage, *Civil Wars: A History in Ideas*, New York: A Knopf, 2017, p. 18. See also J. Bew, *Realpolitik: A History*, Oxford: OUP, 2016.

strategy in this manner - as normative, rather than descriptive – enables us to take the further step of seeing that, from the outset, the term has referred to the *practice* of strategy. ‘Grand strategy’ is, in fact, a relatively recent Anglophone attempt to describe and explain changes in a much longer running process: the actions which statesmen and leaders take to ensure the security of their respective polities. Seen in this way, the history of grand strategy assumes a wealth of new possibilities. Rather than beginning from the assumption that a central unity has defined all polities attempts to provide for their security throughout time, history can enable us to test that assumption. By developing detailed appreciations of how particular nations and states have practiced strategy at the political (rather than the solely military) level, it becomes possible to construct a *longue durée* view of grand strategy which accounts for the differences between how actors across time and space have enacted strategy without imposing a unitary definition on what they were aiming to do.⁴³ Such ‘serial contextualisation’ offers the prospect of enabling us to detect changes and differences across time and space, and therefore of developing a much more comprehensive picture of how polities with varied intellectual traditions and circumstances have exercised power.

Such a picture offers the powerful benefit of challenging the binary and overstated notions of grand strategy which encumber policy making processes today, and of allowing us to better appreciate the use of the term ‘grand strategy’ in the twenty-first century. As has recently been argued by a variety of scholars, grandiose notions of grand strategy which presume that Western leaders – and particularly US Presidents – enjoy untrammelled agency have a misleading and distorting effect upon public expectations and political debate.⁴⁴ As the US’s ‘unipolar moment’ comes to an end, the notion that grand strategy somehow offers the answer to all of the challenges facing Washington is ahistorical and unrealistic. Is it appropriate or helpful to apply the language of grand strategy – born of competition and conflict – to discussions of Sino-US relations? Would it not be beneficial for Western politicians to engage in an open dialogue with their voters about the changing nature of the international system and their own place within it? The growing divide between official pronouncements on these issues and economic and political reality undermines legitimacy and erodes popular confidence in the democratic process. Emphasizing how and why the term grand strategy is *used* would be a helpful step in redressing the misleading ways in which the term is employed in modern political debate. Viewed from this perspective, debates about ‘grand strategy’ in America today appear inexorably intertwined with fears of relative decline and

⁴³ Noteworthy examples of this approach include G. Parker, *The Grand Strategy of Philip II*, New Haven: Yale UP, 1998; K. Kagan, ‘Redefining Roman Grand Strategy’, *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 70, Apr., 2006, pp. 333-62; Mitchell, *Grand Strategy of the Habsburg Empire*.

⁴⁴ Miller, ‘On Strategy, Grand and Mundane’; S. Reich and P. Dombrowski, ‘Does Donald Trump have a grand strategy?’, *International Affairs*, Vol. 95, No. 5, 2017, pp. 1013-37.

pessimism about the reach and extent of Washington's power. These discussions are related at least as much to domestic-political narratives and institutional presumptions of America's role in the world as they are to genuine appreciations of her international standing and power.⁴⁵ Yet as grand strategy has become an increasingly sensitive political issue, important questions about the nature and formation of US grand strategy have been obscured. Not least amongst these is, as Patrick Porter has recently argued, why the US remains wedded to a strategy of primacy despite major shifts in the international system which may militate against her capacity to enact such a design.⁴⁶ This question, and others like it, are far more weighty in their import than efforts to refine a single definition of 'grand strategy', and history has a role to play in answering them.

II

To suggest all of the potential findings or benefits of a more historically based approach to the study of grand strategy here would be speculative. Rather, the remainder of this article aims to offer an example of what a fully contextualised history of strategic practice can offer us. It will do so by presenting a new account of how 'grand strategy' entered the English lexicon during debates about strategy-making in late-nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain. This instance is of particular significance to our understanding of grand strategy due to the prominence it enjoys in most narratives of the evolution of our modern understanding of the term. Whether through the works of Julian Corbett, JFC Fuller, Basil Liddell Hart, or Michael Howard, scholars consistently stress the role Britain played in the development of the concept between the 1880s and 1945.⁴⁷ Yet, as we shall see, it is far from clear why the origins of modern grand strategy ought to be attached to this time or place at all. A proportion of contemporary writers did use phrases like 'grand strategy' or 'major strategy'. However the viewpoints they espoused do not accord with modern understandings of these terms any more than the strategic concepts prevalent in Britain's Great Power rivals at the time. Whether the *Jenne École*, or doctrine of the military offensive in France, or ideas of *Volkskrieg* in Germany, other powers conceptualised strategy in terms no less 'grand' than the British.⁴⁸ On what grounds the British example is superior to these traditions, and therefore ought to be privileged in our understanding of what constitutes effective strategy making at the national level, is unclear.

Furthermore, contemporaries who wrote about strategy in Britain would have been very surprised for their work to be viewed as the foundations for a universal theory of grand strategy.

⁴⁵ For some insightful reflections on this issue see A.L. Freidberg, afterword to the 2010 edn. of *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895-1905*, Princeton, NJ: PUP, pp. 305-318.

⁴⁶ Porter, 'Why America's Grand Strategy Has Not Changed', pp. 45-6.

⁴⁷ Kennedy, 'Towards a Broader Definition'; Milveski, *Evolution*, Ch. 2-3.

⁴⁸ R.T. Foley, *German Strategy and the Path to Verdun: Erich von Falkenbayan and the Development of Attrition, 1870-1916*, Cambridge: CUP, 2005, pp. 2-8.; A. Roksund, *The Jeune École: The Strategy of the Weak*, Brill: Leiden, 2007.

In fact, this was something the majority of them were explicitly arguing against. Writers such as Julian Corbett sought not to propound a universally applicable theory of war, but rather to offer a practical interpretation of the subject geared towards the formation of strategy in Britain. Many such writers enjoyed intimate ties with the politicians and military leaders involved in the making of strategy in Britain. Both Corbett and his contemporary Halford Mackinder, the Oxford geographer and founder of the discipline of geopolitics, were regular attendees at the pro-imperial ‘coefficients’ club, a group intended to foster the free exchange of ideas for the security and prosperity of the Empire.⁴⁹ There they shared ideas with leading Liberal and Unionist politicians, and an impressive array of other notable and influential individuals. Corbett also played an influential role in the education of the Royal Navy, and in the strategy making processes within the Admiralty itself.⁵⁰ These motivations and the particular context in which these figures wrote had important implications for how they approached the issue of strategy.⁵¹ Many of them were quite explicit in distancing themselves from other traditions of strategic thought, viewing them as inapplicable to the British case. As Rear-Admiral Herbert Richmond informed students at the Royal Navy’s War College in 1920: ‘Clausewitz...must be read with caution by a maritime people...His experience was of continental war, not of sea war: and therefore, although his book is a monument of philosophico-military reasoning, it is by no means an infallible sea-military bible.’⁵² This belief that Britain’s unique circumstances had direct implications for her approach to war was best articulated by Corbett in 1911:

...if we take a take a wider view that was available to Clausewitz and submit his latest ideas to the test of present imperial conditions, so far from failing to cover the ground they gain a fuller meaning and a firmer basis. Apply them to maritime warfare and it becomes clear that his distinction between limited and unlimited war does not rest alone on the moral factor. A war may be limited not only because the importance of the object is too limited to call forth the whole national force, but because the sea may be made to present an insuperable physical obstacle to the whole national force being brought to bear. That is to say, a war may be limited physically by the strategical isolation of the object, as well as morally by its comparative unimportance.⁵³

British concepts of grand strategy were concerned primarily to limit war, and to make it a useful tool of her imperial power. ‘The policy is always the object’, Corbett argued, ‘war is only the means

⁴⁹ R.J. Scally, *The Origins of the Lloyd George Coalition: The Politics of Social-Imperialism, 1900-1918*, Princeton, NJ: PUP, 1975, pp. 73-95.

⁵⁰ A. Lambert ed., *21st Century Corbett: Maritime Strategy and Naval Policy for the Modern Era*, Annapolis, MA: USNI, 2017.

⁵¹ For other recent work in this area see A. Searle, ‘Inter-service Debate and the Origins of Strategic Culture: The ‘Principles of War’ in the British Armed Forces, 1919-1939’, *War in History*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2013, pp. 4-32; A. Dighton, ‘Jomini versus Clausewitz: Hamley’s *Operations of War* and Military Thought in the British Army’, *War in History*, 2018, DOI: 10.1177/0968344518784775.

⁵² [N]ational [M]aritime [M]useum: RIC/10/1: H. Richmond, Lecture to the Royal Naval War College, ‘Strategy II’, 1920.

⁵³ J.S. Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, London, 1911, p. 59.

by which we obtain the object'.⁵⁴ He, Mackinder, Fuller, and others all recognised that, for the British Empire to remain a military force in the twentieth century, it would need to be better prepared and organised in peacetime than had hitherto been the case. This is why they pushed their discussions of 'strategy' into the peacetime realm: the requirement to consolidate the British imperial system in order to meet growing competition from the burgeoning land based Empires of Russia, Germany, and the United States.⁵⁵

The figures often identified as the founders of grand strategic thought were thus not attempting to produce a general theory to govern the higher direction of war. They were forwarding their own views on how the British Empire ought to confront the geopolitical challenges of a new century. Their ideas therefore represented a dialogue between strategy in *theory* and strategy in *practice*, the former being used to develop context specific arguments about contemporary British defence and security. It is for this crucial reason that their ideas can only be understood in this broader political, cultural, international, and imperial context. It is no coincidence that as Britain surrendered her Empire after 1945, and declined in relative influence thereafter, ambitious concepts of grand strategy lost their salience and their discussion increasingly passed into abeyance.⁵⁶ Accepting this perspective allows us to begin appreciate what the 'origins' of grand strategy really were: a particular phase of strategy making in Britain during which she was in a unique position of global, maritime, and financial power, and which required new ways of thinking about the making of strategy to suit these circumstances. The following sections will illustrate the manner in which this specific context exerted a crucial influence the context of the British Empire had over the evolution of the term 'grand strategy'.

III

Ideas are seldom conceived in a vacuum. This much was certainly true of the concepts of grand strategy that emerged in Britain after 1870, which owed much to the steady evolution of British strategic thought since well into the eighteenth century. Divining a precise point at which a concept of 'grand strategy' emerged within the British state would be an arbitrary endeavour. Britain had a long history of co-ordinating naval, military, economic, and diplomatic activity across the globe, with the example of Pitt the Elder during the Seven Years War often being cited by writers such as Corbett as an exemplar of political direction in War.⁵⁷ Nevertheless it is clear that some significant shifts in how Britain conducted strategic planning and decision making occurred during

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 27.

⁵⁵ G. Parker, *Western Geopolitical Thought in the Twentieth Century*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2015 edn., p. 19.

⁵⁶ Milveski, *Evolution*, pp. 97-107; P. Porter, 'Why Britain Doesn't Do Grand Strategy', *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 155, No. 4, 2010, pp. 6-12.

⁵⁷ J. Corbett, *England in the Seven Years War: A Study in Combined Strategy*, Cambridge: CUP, 1907; J. Hattendorf, 'Alliance, Encirclements, and Attrition: British Grand Strategy in the War of the Spanish Succession, 1702-1713' in Kennedy ed., *Grand Strategies*, pp. 11-30.

the nineteenth century. The formation of strategy in eighteenth century Britain had been 'limited and ad hoc, lacking both structure and doctrine', a situation which had led to 'serious deficiencies in the administration of the war effort' during her conflicts with France.⁵⁸ Throughout the Napoleonic Wars strategy had been improvised at Cabinet level with relatively modest and inconsistent input from professional advisors, and this situation was little changed by the time of the Crimean War of 1853-56.⁵⁹ This resulted in 'a total division of strategic objectives' between the two services during the conflict against Russia, with the Navy focusing primarily upon security of maritime communications in the Near East, and the Army limiting itself to the defeat of the Tsar's forces in the Crimean Peninsula.⁶⁰

The difficulties experienced in the Crimea resulted in a series of reforms to the structure of the War Office, aimed primarily at resolving issues of logistics and supply. These measures of rationalisation were followed by the military authorities in London assuming responsibility for the East India Company's forces in 1861. However little progress was made towards the co-ordination of action between the Army and Navy, as politicians grappled with the more intransigent problem of how to share the burden of defence spending with the colonies and increasingly autonomous Dominions.⁶¹ The absence of an obvious concept of grand strategy in this period, or of any formal structures to co-ordinate the defence of the Empire as a whole, has led several generations of scholars to present the second half of the nineteenth century as one of stagnation in official thought about strategy in Britain. It has variously been argued that 'there was nothing in this period that could be dignified with the label defence planning', and that the report of the Hartington Commission in 1890, which recommended, amongst other things, the formation of a general staff, represented 'a new departure from familiar practice.'⁶² This perspective is not without legitimacy: it is certainly true that no meaningful structures for the higher direction of defence existed before the inauguration of the Colonial Defence Committee in 1878, and that even the remit of this body and its immediate successors remained limited. However, the lack of such formalised structures belies some significant and under-appreciated developments in the manner in which contemporary British officialdom conceived of how strategy should be discussed and formed, and the role of

⁵⁸ J. Black, 'Strategy and the Struggle with France 1793-1815', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 4, 2008, p. 533. For an addition critique see J.B. Hattendorf, *England in the War of the Spanish Succession: A Study of the English View and Conduct of Grand Strategy, 1701-1712*, New York: Garland, 1987.

⁵⁹ A. Lambert, 'Preparing for the Russian War: British Strategic Planning, March 1853-March 1854', *War & Society*, No. 7, No. 2, 1989, pp. 15-39; C. Hall, *British Strategy in the Napoleonic Wars, 1803-1815*, Manchester: MUP, 1992.

⁶⁰ H. Strachan, 'Soldiers, Strategy and Sebastopol', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 21, No. 2, Jun., 1978, pp. 303-25.

⁶¹ J. Sweetman, 'Towards a Ministry of Defence: First Faltering Steps, 1890-1923' in D. French and B. Holden Reid eds., *The British General Staff: Innovation and Reform, 1890-1939*, London: Frank Cass, 2002, pp. 27-28.

⁶² See E. Feuchtwarmer and W.J. Philpott, 'Civil Military Relations in a Period without Major Wars, 1855-1885' in P. Smith ed., *Government and the Armed Forces in Britain, 1856-1990*, London: Hambledon, 1996, p. 19; J. Ehrman, *Cabinet Government and War, 1890-1940*, Cambridge: CUP, 1958, p. 6.

government in that process. These changes gave birth to a concept which was in key respects the intellectual ancestor of grand strategy: ‘imperial defence’.

The standard interpretation of the origins of ‘imperial defence’ is that, between the late-1860s and mid-1880s, the Army, Navy, and Colonial Office began to co-operate and to co-ordinate their activities to a greater extent than had hitherto been the case due to the growth of global trade and Britain’s dependence upon seaborne commerce.⁶³ Maritime commerce blossomed in the late-nineteenth century, doubling in volume between 1850 and 1900, and moving goods far more cheaply than ever before. As a result, the value of global trade increased tenfold between 1850 and 1913.⁶⁴ Britain was at the heart of this process due to her dominance of global shipping, telegraphic communications, and finance. One recent estimate has suggested that, by 1914, Britain controlled up to 55% of global trans-oceanic shipping tonnage.⁶⁵ The maintenance of this trade would be crucial to the ability of the British economy to endure a conflict of any duration. Its interruption would also have immediate consequences due to Britain’s growing reliance upon imported food which, since the abolition of the Corn Laws in 1846, had become vital to feeding her people: some 60% of the calories consumed in Britain arrived by sea in 1914.⁶⁶

These points were crucial to the changing ways in which strategy was understood in Britain, but they were far from the only factors which encouraged new ways of thinking. Changes in the practice of statecraft were arguably of equal importance. The mid-nineteenth century witnessed an extension of government responsibility and action into a wide variety of new areas into which official intrusion would previously have been unthinkable. This ‘revolution in government’ necessitated, and was in turn catalysed by, the growth of a professional class of ‘experts’ who provided the detailed knowledge necessary to enable the state to act in highly technical and complex questions.⁶⁷ In the realm of defence, the balance between politicians and their professional naval and military advisors thus began to shift in favour of the latter, due in part to conventions of governance, but perhaps more so owing to the increasing complexity of military organisations and technology, and the steady professionalisation of the armed forces. These factors combined to make it increasingly difficult for civilian politicians to make independent judgements on military questions, and thereby empowered professional soldiers and sailors to provide advice

⁶³ B. Ranft, ‘The protection of British seaborne trade and the development of systematic planning for war, 1860-1906’ in B. Ranft ed., *Technical Change and British Naval Policy*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1977, pp. 1-22.

⁶⁴ R. Findlay and K.H. O’Rourke, *Power and Plenty: Trade, War, and the World Economy in the Second Millennium*, Princeton: PUP, 2007, pp. 378-425; J. Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World System, 1830-1970*, Cambridge: CUP, 2009, pp. 115-16.

⁶⁵ N.A. Lambert, *Planning Armageddon: British Economic Warfare and the First World War*, Cambridge, MA: HUP, 2012, p. 238.

⁶⁶ A. Offer, *The First World War: An Agrarian Interpretation*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1989, pp. 218-19.

⁶⁷ R. Macleod ed., *Government and Expertise: Specialists, administrators and professionals, 1860-1919*, Cambridge: CUP, 1988.

and guidance. They also fostered a process of thinking ‘systematically’ or ‘scientifically’ about the problems of imperial defence, highlighting areas in which political intervention and decisions were necessary in order to achieve efficiency or to resolve obstacles and disagreements. A small but proficient coterie of politicians and naval and military officers, dedicated to the work of creating a truly unified cross-government and ‘imperial’ system of defence thus grew up. These figures often served in the intelligence departments of the Admiralty or War Office, in positions within the colonial administration, or relied upon private means to support their work on Royal Commissions and other bodies.

Of equal importance was the manner in which technological developments re-shaped conceptions of time and space, and created the possibility of new systems of governance and politics. In the realm of political thought, these shifts facilitated a flowering of ideas around a union of British speaking states into a ‘Greater Britain’ ruled from London. Improvements in communication were crucial to this process, as they offered the possibility of overcoming the tyranny of distance, and making a federalised imperial structure a realistic possibility.⁶⁸ An analogue change occurred in the contemporary strategic thought, as improvements in telegraphic communication, steam powered shipping, and the opening of the Suez Canal made truly co-ordinated approaches to defending the Empire ‘thinkable’ to contemporary military planners.⁶⁹ The result was a gradual yet discernible rationalisation of earlier concepts of how Britain might employ her naval and military resources in wartime into a unified system of ‘imperial defence’, and an extension of their ambition into a network of connected bases which would allow a rapid response to any emergent threat.⁷⁰

Constructing a system of imperial defence was a slow process. It occurred largely through the uncoordinated activities of various officials and politicians, and was focused primarily upon securing Britain’s coal supplies and ensuring military defence of the overseas colonies.⁷¹ Prompted by the spectre of war with Russia over the status of the Afghan border, it eventually found institutional form in the creation of the Colonial Defence Committee in 1878. This body, and a series of Royal Commissions which followed it during the 1880s, demonstrated a growing awareness of the need to co-ordinate the efforts of the two services more effectively in order to

⁶⁸ D. Bell, ‘Dissolving Distance: Technology, Space, and Empire in British Political Thought, 1770-1900’, *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 77, Sept. 2005, pp. 523-62.

⁶⁹ D.M. Schurman, *Imperial Defence, 1868-1887* ed., J. Beeler, London: Frank Cass, 2000; P.M. Kennedy, ‘Imperial Cable Communications and Strategy, 1870-1914’, *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 86, No. 341, Oct., 1971, pp. 728-52.

⁷⁰ J. Beeler, *British Naval Policy in the Gladstone-Disraeli Era, 1866-1880*, Stanford, CA: SUP, 1997. Especially pp. 6-37, 211-12; N.A.M. Rodger, ‘The idea of naval strategy in Britain in the eighteen and nineteenth centuries’ in G. Till ed., *The Development of British Naval Thinking: Essays in memory of Bryan McLaren Ranft*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2006, p. 19; J. Mitcham, *Race and Imperial Defence in the British World, 1870-1914*, Cambridge: CUP, 2016.

⁷¹ Schurman, *Imperial Defence*, Ch. 2-3.

safeguard the key overseas bases and fortresses that would enable Britain to adopt a coherent, global approach to defending her trade. It would be wrong to argue that the British had developed a system of organisation capable of co-ordinating a coherent imperial strategy in the 1880s or 1890s. However it would be similarly inaccurate to suggest that thought in official circles had not taken clear steps towards developing a shared idea about how the Empire should prosecute a war against France and Russia. Historians have tended to overlook this fact owing to the emphasis they have placed upon the disagreements and conflicts which grew up between the Admiralty and the War Office in the 1880s and 1890s. Yet whilst significant differences of opinion on various issues undoubtedly existed, in important respects Britain's naval, military, and political elites shared a common strategic outlook. They agreed that British strategy was above-all-things maritime in nature, and predicated upon securing command of the sea.⁷² If an official 'mind' grew up in the Colonial and Foreign Offices of this period, embodying the key principles along which business was conducted in those departments, it would not be too much to say that an inchoate form of strategic 'mind' was evolving in parallel to them.⁷³ As Col. John Ardagh, the Director of Military Intelligence at the War Office, set out in 1897: 'we find that when the responsible advisers of Her Majesty's Government are brought together, as they not unfrequently are, to discuss questions of Imperial defence, there is practical unanimity in their recommendations'.⁷⁴ These were the roots of a shared idea of 'grand strategy' which grew upon within the British defence establishment in the late-nineteenth century. This concept was inexorably intertwined with the practice of strategy in Britain, and deeply rooted in the geospatial reality of the contemporary British Empire.

If the parameters of a nascent concept of grand strategy had been set out in discussions of imperial defence between the 1860s and 1880s, the subsequent decade witnessed an acceleration of attempts to translate them into action, and an increase in the ambition which contemporaries had for the idea.

IV

The need for greater practical action in the realm of strategy was the subject of widespread comment in the 1880s and 1890s.⁷⁵ In a letter to *The Times* in 1888, the secretary to the Colonial Defence Committee, Lieutenant Colonel George Clarke, stressed the body's accomplishments, but condemned the government for failing to address its work with sufficient seriousness and urgency.

⁷² D.G. Morgan-Owen, *The Fear of Invasion: Strategy, Politics, and British War Planning, 1880-1914*, Oxford: OUP, 2017, Ch 1-2.

⁷³ R. Hyam, 'The Colonial Office Mind, 1900-1914', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1979, pp. 30-55; T.G. Otte, *The Foreign Office Mind: The Making of British Foreign Policy, 1865-1914*, Cambridge: CUP, 2013, pp. 2-3.

⁷⁴ [T]he [N]ational [A]rchives: WO 32/6256, Ardagh, 'The (So-Called) 'Authorized Scheme of Defence', 19 Jan 1897, p. 7.

⁷⁵ See, for instance, C.W. Dilke and S. Wilkinson, *Imperial Defence*, London: Macmillan, 1892.

‘It is desirable’, he wrote, ‘to place the demands put forward in relation to the defences of the Empire on a fair and intelligible basis. No amount of ingenuity in matters of detail can ever atone for the defects of a scheme of which the fundamental conception is wrong.’ In his view, ‘we have on many occasions shown a tendency to approach questions, both large and small, from the wrong end, and it is not difficult to ascertain the cause.’⁷⁶ In Clarke’s view, the solution to this problem was simple: the institution of a more effective system for co-ordinating the resources of the Empire, establishing principles upon which its defence could be organised, and obliging politicians to adopt a more active role in overseeing questions of defence.

Clarke was not alone in identifying the need for greater political involvement and co-ordination in the practical management of the Empire’s defence. Despite their willingness to reach agreement on points of principle in Whitehall, the services still found translating consensus into action to be a problematic affair. As the Admiralty bemoaned in 1891:

It is more and more evident to my Lords that the present position, viz, that the War Office is making plans...the details of which the Admiralty are, to a large extent, ignorant, and of which they do not even know the general plan, carries with it the seeds of confusion and possible disaster...⁷⁷

What was required in order to translate general agreements into practical action was a higher degree of formal co-ordination. The work done during the 1870s and 1880s had provided a foundation for such discussions, but was primarily focused on reactive, local measures of defence. It stopped far short of articulating anything so ambitious as an overall vision for how the British Empire might prosecute a future war. It is significant to appreciate, however, that a growing number of officials were thinking in such terms, even if the bureaucratic structures necessary to enact their ideas had yet to be established.

Beginning in the 1870s planners began to envision the activities of Britain’s armed services across the Empire as being linked together by a reliable and rapid system of communication, such as would enable a degree of co-ordination which had hitherto been impossible.⁷⁸ ‘Submarine telegraph cables’, it was recognised, ‘have an important bearing on the question of imperial defence.’ Achieving communications dominance by severing enemy cables during wartime became an important consideration: ‘it is obvious that our enemies will be at a great disadvantage both in planning offensive action and in defending their Colonies. The time gained for us by earlier receipt of orders and information will be of enormous advantage in attack’.⁷⁹ By developing an advantage

⁷⁶ G.S. Clarke, ‘The Higher Policy of Defence’ in G.S. Clarke ed., *Studies of an Imperialist*, London, 1927, pp. 120-21.

⁷⁷ TNA: CAB 18/22A, Admiralty to War Office, 15 Jan 1891.

⁷⁸ D.R. Headrick, *The Invisible Weapon: Telecommunications and International Politics, 1851-1945*, Oxford: OUP, 1991, esp. 66-68, 73-98.

⁷⁹ [B]ritish [L]ibrary: DMO/14/25, E.F. Chapman, ‘Notes on the defence of colonial ports’, 20 Nov, 1984, p. 15.

in terms of world-wide communications, the British could thus hope to out-think and out-manoeuvre their enemies, isolating colonies and capturing them individually by concentrating their forces at the crucial point. In terms of strategy, the emphasis placed upon communication revealed an important conceptual development rendered possible by the telegraph: the ability to direct naval and military forces across the globe from London. The practicality of such an approach grew rapidly after the turn of the century and the introduction of more effective wireless telegraphy, a technology which the Admiralty in particular was eager to exploit.⁸⁰

These technological advances enabled British military planners to think in more ambitious terms about strategy. A particular emphasis was placed upon exploiting the mobility of sea power to strike with rapidity at the outbreak of war, a requirement rendered pressing by the growth of sizeable European conscript armies which would massively outnumber Britain's own military forces.⁸¹ From a regular force of 544,000 men in 1880, by 1900 France could field over 715,000 men at the outbreak of war.⁸² As the Director of Military Intelligence, Lieutenant General Edward Chapman, noted in 1896, this had important implications for how Britain thought about strategy:

During the last generation, the balance of Continental States has been altered, with regard to their Military and Naval strength. Owing to the adoption of conscription, they have rapidly increased the numbers of their men, and have added to the efficiency of their Armies...

During the same period, we have made but small progress...we cannot therefore obtain a recognition from other countries of our right to make demands, when we have not the power to enforce them.

It is the 'contemplation of the Offensive' that renders an Army formidable, and the introduction of the principle of the Offensive in its organisation makes it an easy matter to undertake what, without it, is impossible.

The remedy, in Chapman's view, was that 'the Army and the Navy ought to be actuated by one motive, viz: the adoption of the Offensive, and true economy points to our having this principle accepted.'⁸³ A consensus therefore developed that striking at the very outbreak of war, before an enemy had the chance to deliver a pre-emptive blow, or to gather their full strength, ought to be the highest priority for British military and naval planning.

In order to achieve the 'true economy' Chapman sought, a greater alignment between the activities of the two services and the policy pursued by the government appeared an urgent necessity. Arguments began to emerge, both from within the services and interested political circles, that a higher degree of political oversight and involvement were required in order to forge

⁸⁰ N.A Lambert, 'Strategic Command and Control for Maneuver Warfare: Creation of the Royal Navy's 'War Room' System, 1905-1915', *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 69, No. 2, Apr., 2005, pp. 361-410.

⁸¹ BL: DMO/14/46, J. F. Maurice, 'Hostilities without Declaration of War From 1700 to 1870', HMSO, 1883; Morgan-Owen, *Fear of Invasion*, pp. 43-70.

⁸² See figures in P.M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, London: Unwin Hyman, 1988, p. 197 and 261.

⁸³ BL: DMO/14/58, Chapman to Sanderson, 27 Feb 1896, pp. 1-2.

a coherent system of imperial defence. Thus far, the workings of the CDC and the various Royal Commissions that had examined the defence of colonial ports and infrastructure during the 1880s had lacked cabinet involvement or executive authority. Their conclusions had thus not always been fully implemented due to strains on Departmental budgets, or a lack of oversight. There were also some issues which remained unresolved, despite years of inter-Departmental communication and wrangling. As the Hartington Commission identified in 1889, ‘no combined plans of operations for the defence of the Empire in any given contingency has ever been worked out or decided upon’ and that the lack of co-operation between the services created an ‘unsatisfactory and dangerous condition of affairs.’⁸⁴ Precedents were set by the CDC and between the services, but they were not discussed by the government or with other departments on a formal basis.⁸⁵ The inefficiencies and problems this caused were remarked upon freely by the two services. At a conference at the Foreign Office in April 1894, for instance, the respective Directors of Naval and Military Intelligence, each of whom had a key role in overseeing the strategic planning of their services, discussed British action in the event of war with France with the Permanent Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Sir Thomas Sanderson. At the meeting:

It was thought...that a definition of the national policy to be adopted in war would be a very great gain in economy of expenditure in peace and of effort in war as our naval and military services would be kept up to the standard required to carry it out, and combined action with definitive objects would be in undertaken in war, confusion being avoided.⁸⁶

Sanderson took the recommendation to the Foreign Secretary, and encouraged him to discuss the issue with his cabinet colleague at the Admiralty, Lord Spencer.

This call for ‘a definition of the national policy’ was the clearest indication yet that, in the view of the services, the requirements of imperial defence could only be satisfactorily resolved if a higher degree of effective co-ordination by a centralised decision-making body could be achieved. The prospect of intervening to a greater extent than had hitherto been the case in naval and military affairs was not as unappealing to politicians as the indolent response to the Hartington’s Commissions report might suggest. For a combination of financial, ideational, and diplomatic reasons, improving the defences of the Empire and potentially saving money in the process became an increasingly attractive prospect.

V

⁸⁴ C. 5979, Report of the Harrington Commission, 10 July 1889, vi.

⁸⁵ G.S. Clarke, *Imperial Defence*, London: Imperial Press, 1897, p. 195.

⁸⁶ BL: DMO/14/27, ‘Notes of a Meeting Held at the Foreign Office on April 27 1894’, pp. 4-5. Kimberley was the Foreign Secretary,

The 1890s were a disquieting decade for many in Britain. The conclusion of the Franco-Russian alliance in 1894 threatened to unite Britain's two greatest imperial rivals against her. As the decade grew on she became increasingly isolated in diplomatic terms, a situation that was revealed by the international condemnation of her aggressive policy in South Africa in 1899. Her financial position also seemed increasingly problematic, as the cost of imperial defence rose precipitously owing to the escalating cost of modern warships and increased international competition.⁸⁷ This context gave rise to a number of responses intended to remedy Britain's apparent and impending decline. The 'national efficiency' movement sought to diagnose and remedy what had 'gone wrong' in Britain with calls for a more intelligent organisation of her resources and government, and the campaigns for tariff reform and imperial federation sought to exploit the Empire's latent strength through new means of political and economic organisation.⁸⁸

These ideas found their echo in the realm of defence by the middle of the decade. In October 1895 Arthur Balfour, First Lord of the Treasury and nephew of the Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, circulated a minute to the cabinet proposing to institute a higher degree of political involvement in the formation of strategy. He envisaged a committee intended to 'decide all questions of importance connected with Imperial Defence, which involve the co-operation of Army and Navy.' His ambition did not stop there, however:

Speaking for myself, I should like to see a very wide interpretation given to this definition. There must be very few strategical plans of any significant magnitude in which the interests of both Services are not to some extent – though it may be only to a small extent – involved; and all such plans I should like to see passed through the Committee of Defence, and kept duplicate by both departments.⁸⁹

Salisbury, who presented a laconic attitude to issues of defence at the best of times, endorsed the idea on the grounds that 'it has always seemed to me that the distribution of our strength has been rather a matter of hazard than of design, and often rather represents the relative force of importunity from the Colonial Office, the India Office, and the Foreign Office, than any large scheme of Imperial defence.'⁹⁰ Revealingly, this prompted a severe rebuke from both the First Lord of the Admiralty, George Goschen, and the Secretary of State for War, Lord Lansdowne. As Goschen explained, 'it is precisely a large scheme of Imperial defence which is guiding the Admiralty in its administration, and which is sometimes made a reproach to it.'⁹¹ 'All this has been

⁸⁷ A situation well summarised in A.L. Friedberg, *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1885-1904*, Princeton: PUP, 1988.

⁸⁸ G.R. Seattle, *The Quest for National Efficiency: A Study in British Politics and Political Thought, 1899-1914*, Berkeley: Univ of California Press, 1971.

⁸⁹ TNA: CAB 1/2/15, Balfour Minute, October 1895.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 3 Nov 1895.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 2 Dec 1895.

carefully thought out', he continued, 'and the Admiralty are working up to it. They need no 'compulsion' to face what is required of the Navy. In old times no doubt there was a happy-go-lucky system, but in late years the mode of approaching these questions has entirely changed.'⁹² Goschen's defence of his Department revealed the political difficulties involved in imposing any form of central control over the armed services, mixed with a sense of pride in the amount of work already done to bring the work of the Army and Navy into greater sympathy with one another. Faced with the prospect of such a battle, Salisbury balked and allowed the Defence Committee to glide along, meeting infrequently for much of the subsequent three years before reviving it during the Boer War.⁹³

This allowed a series of fundamental questions about Britain's system of 'imperial defence' – such as the details of inter-service co-operation and the appropriate size and purpose of the Army – to remain unanswered for much of the 1890s, and it took the shock of the Boer War to produce a meaningful change in behaviour on the part of the government.⁹⁴ The conflict in South Africa precipitated a political crisis on multiple fronts. Balfour, who had replaced the ageing Salisbury as Prime Minister in 1901, faced a deteriorating financial position owing both to expenditure on the War and the growing demands of peacetime military and naval spending. Britain also endured severe international and domestic criticism over the conduct of the War in South Africa, and managing a Unionist Party which had been in power since 1895 was becoming an increasing challenge. The political heads of the Army and Navy were vociferous in insisting that some means of improving the challenges of co-ordination naval and military effort was urgently required. Hugh Oakley Arnold Forster, the Secretary to the Admiralty produced a lengthy memorandum on the need for change in October 1902.⁹⁵ This was quickly followed by a paper, co-signed by the First Lord of the Admiralty and Secretary of State for War, which pressed Balfour to find a means of addressing 'larger questions' which were 'naval, military, and political.' They elaborated:

Such questions are the action, if any to be taken by this country if Russia seized Constantinople; the policy and strategy to be pursued in case of war with France and Russia, if either Spain or Germany joined those belligerents; or in case of a war with Russia, either singly or combined with France, how far land operations in India should wait on naval operations in European waters, or how far naval operations in European waters should be influenced by the necessity of land operations on the Indian frontier.⁹⁶

⁹² *Ibid*, 2 Dec 1895.

⁹³ N.H. Gibbs, 'The Origins of Imperial Defence' in J.B. Hattendorf and R.S. Jordan eds., *Maritime Strategy and the Balance of Power: Britain and America in the Twentieth Century*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989, pp. 31-32.

⁹⁴ Morgan-Owen, *Fear of Invasion*, Ch. 1-4.

⁹⁵ TNA: CAB 37/63/145, H.O. Arnold-Forster, 'Memorandum on the Need for Organisation for War', 20 October, 1902.

⁹⁶ TNA: CAB 37/63/152, Selborne and Brodrick, 'Memorandum on the Improvement of the Intellectual Equipment of the Services', 10 November, 1902, p. 2.

These arguments were encapsulated in a short pamphlet on ‘National Strategy’ produced by Viscount Esher, an Edwardian courtier and confidant of Balfour’s, some eighteen months later. This document, which outlined the official recommendations of the so-called Esher Committee which had recently concluded its reports on Army reform, echoed the peculiarities of the position Britain faced, and the need for a unique solution to them. ‘How many Englishmen alive are there who have thought consecutively and scientifically upon National Strategy?’ Esher questioned, ‘and of these, how many are in the direct employ of the State for this purpose?’ The problems involved are numerous and ever changing, both as new responsibilities are incurred and the conditions of warfare are modified by scientific invention.’ He continued:

The questions confronting the Great General Staff of the German Army are constantly undergoing revision, but they are simple and stable compared with those affecting our world-wide Empire, and they are purely military. There is, on the other hand, hardly any point on the earth’s surface which can change ownership, and certainly not a modification in the relative power of two foreign states, can take place without affecting the National Strategy of Great Britain...In short, National Strategy, though it must be considered by the General Staff of the Army, must be decided by the Defence Committee, whereas purely Military Strategy is in all its bearings solely a matter for the General Staff, just as Naval Strategy is solely a matter for the Intelligence Branch of the Admiralty.⁹⁷

Esher’s views were clear: what he understood by grand strategy was unique to Britain, for the specific reason that the security challenges she faced were global and maritime in nature. What might work for Germany would emphatically not be suitable for Britain.

By the time Esher’s pamphlet had been published, Balfour had resolved to translate these concepts into practical action at the highest levels of British government. In December 1902 he formed a new body, the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID), with the intention of using it as the forum through which to adopt a new approach to British security. Between its inception and the fall of Balfour’s Unionist administration in late-1905, the CID made some extremely significant strides in improving the degree of co-operation between the two services, and establishing a series of principles around which British ‘grand strategy’ could operate. It began by addressing the two most protracted disagreements between the two services: the defence of India and the British Isles themselves. In both of these cases, agreement between the various parties involved had proven elusive for a number of years. Balfour’s contribution was to exercise his political judgement. As he argued in his report on the defence of the British Isles:

This Committee did most excellent work; but it did *not* reconcile the views of the soldiers and the sailors...The Committee of Imperial Defence have felt it to be their imperative duty to come to some decision on this protracted controversy. No decision can, indeed, be final...But the Government of the day, if their military policy is to be based on anything except tradition and accident, is clearly bound to adopt some conclusion...⁹⁸

⁹⁷ BL: Add MS 49718, Esher, ‘National Strategy’, 27 March 1904, p. 6-8, 14.

⁹⁸ TNA: CAB 3/1/18, Balfour, ‘Draft Report on the Possibility of Serious Invasion’, 11 Nov 1903, pp. 1-2.

The direct intervention of the Prime Minister on matters such as the level of risk to be run in defending the British Isles, the number of men available to defend India, and the size of the garrison of Egypt produced a discernible improvement in co-ordination between the two services in an organisational sense.⁹⁹ By aligning naval and military policy in this manner - something Esher had described as a function of 'national strategy' - Balfour enabled significant strides to be made in the re-organisation of the Army and its orientation towards expeditionary warfare, setting the scene for the Haldane reforms of 1906-12. For a fleeting time, these proposals were also accompanied by discussions of a new sub-committee of naval and military officers intended to prepare schemes for joint operations. The Admiralty in particular lobbied hard for the inauguration of such a body, which would hold executive authority to plan offensive projects against enemy territory for implementation at the outbreak of war. It was noted that 'a very large part of the...preparations could be made beforehand in time of peace', in order to enable instant action at the outset of war.¹⁰⁰ Ultimately, and much to the disappointment of figures such as Lord Esher, this body never came to meet, owing to inter-service tensions and the fall of Balfour's Unionist government at the end of 1905.

The subsequent Liberal administration was altogether more reluctant when it came to planning for a future war. After the Liberal victory in the December 1905 election, the very future of the Committee appeared in some doubt, and no Liberal statesmen applied himself to questions of strategy in the manner Balfour had done so between 1902 and 1905. This has left a legacy of controversy over the performance of the Committee between 1906 and 1914.¹⁰¹ During this period an increasing proportion of the CID's time was dedicated to resolving relatively technical issues of inter-service co-operation, to the detriment of the co-ordination and preparation of national strategy. The activities of the Army and Navy thus drifted apart, and their plans for war against Germany increasingly came to contradict and conflict with one another, lessening the chances of beneficial collaboration.

Historians have tended to depict the pre-war years in terms of an intense rivalry between the two services.¹⁰² This interpretation is clearly merited: significant disagreements over British strategy did exist and they prompted fierce debates. As one soldier remarked in 1905, 'there is a very grave divergence of opinion between the Naval Intelligence Department and the General Staff, not so

⁹⁹ Morgan-Owen, *Fear of Invasion*, Ch. 3-4.

¹⁰⁰ TNA: CAB 17/95, Ottley, 'Preparations of Plans for combined Naval and Military Operations in War', 17 July 1905, p. 7.

¹⁰¹ For conflicting interpretations see F.A. Johnson, *Defence by Committee: The British Committee of Imperial Defence, 1885-1959*, Oxford: OUP, 1960; N. d'Ombrain, *War Machinery and High Policy: Defence Administration in Peacetime Britain*, Oxford: OUP, 1973.

¹⁰² See, for instance, J. Gooch, 'Adversarial Attitudes: Servicemen, Politicians and Strategic Policy, 1899-1914' in Smith ed., *Government and the Armed Forces*, pp. 53-74.

much on the general question of strategy as upon the whole question of war policy, if not indeed upon the question of what war means.¹⁰³ Yet virtually all of the various schemes for prosecuting an Anglo-German conflict that that were put forward prior to 1914 accepted the crucial role of sea power, stressed diplomatic considerations, and incorporated the impact of war on economies and societies. They were therefore conducted within parameters dictated by Britain's strategic context. As Major-General Douglas Haig argued in 1906, 'maritime preponderance is essential to our existence...and to be successful in any war we must as our first object keep or win command of the sea.'¹⁰⁴ These statements were not mere platitudes, as can be seen by the General Staff's horrified reaction to the news that the Admiralty intended to weaken the British naval presence in the Mediterranean in 1912. They argued that 'our strategic plans of offence and defence have hitherto been based on the supposition that Great Britain would have undisputed command of the sea in the Mediterranean', and that any change to this position which required more troops to be dedicated to garrison duties 'will put a strain upon our military resources which, at their present strength and under their existing organisation, they are quite unable to bear.'¹⁰⁵ Moreover, the loss of control of the Mediterranean would have seriously complicated the Staff's hopes to draw troops from India and the colonies into the European theatre. They viewed such reserves as crucial: 'in view of the absolute necessity of concentrating effort at the decisive point on the part of the whole Empire, India should be prepared to place at the disposal of the Empire the whole of her military resources in the shape of personnel, animals and material'; and, as recent research has shown, both money and effort were invested in plans for Empire wide military integration.¹⁰⁶ The individual often depicted as the arch proponent of continental warfare, Brigadier Sir Henry Wilson, thus spent much of 1912 bemoaning the government's unwillingness to pay for a larger Navy:

Winston told me his Cabinet was quarrelling with him still.
They won't make an Alliance.
They won't pay for enough ships.
He won't let them reduce the ships in the North Sea.¹⁰⁷

The General Staff may have embraced continental warfare before 1914, yet they did so in a far more limited sense that was to prove necessary during the First World War itself, and only became committed to a full-scale commitment to the Western Front in 1916.¹⁰⁸ Britain entered the War in

¹⁰³ TNA: ADM 116/3111, Grierson, 'Further Memorandum on Military Policy in the Event of War with France', 1905, p. 2.

¹⁰⁴ National Library of Scotland: Haig Papers, Acc 3155/40P, 'National Defence', 20 May 1906, pp. 1-2.

¹⁰⁵ TNA: CAB 4/4/33, French, 'Memorandum by the General Staff on the Effect of the Loss of Sea Power in the Mediterranean on British Military Strategy', 1 July 1912.

¹⁰⁶ TNA: WO/106/49/C, General Staff, 'Co-operation of the Indian Army with the Expeditionary Force', August, 1911; D. Delaney, *The Imperial Army Project: Britain and the Land Forces of the Dominions and India, 1902-1945*, Oxford: OUP, 2017.

¹⁰⁷ [I]mperial [W]ar [M]useum: HW 1/32, diary for 14 July 1912.

¹⁰⁸ H. Strachan, 'The Battle of the Somme and British Strategy', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 1998, pp. 79-95.

1914 with many shortcomings in her organisation and readiness,¹⁰⁹ but with a consensus that she would prosecute the war along limited lines. A shared idea of grand strategy defined these parameters. It would, however, be profoundly misleading to suggest that Britain possessed a conceptual edge over her allies or opponents in the making of strategy on the eve of war. The CID had taken important steps to improve specific issues of co-ordination, but had been largely ineffective at preparing the economy for war, or investigating how to exert commercial pressure upon the Central Powers. The British may have developed the beginnings of a bureaucratic framework that would prove valuable in overseeing her war effort, but it would take three years of wrangling and bitter disagreement before it evolved into an effective supreme command.

VI

The outbreak of war highlighted the fundamental disjuncture between peacetime policymaking, and controlling a global war effort. Prior to 1914, significant state intervention in the economy, the rationing of food, or the control of employment would have been political impossibilities. Yet by mid-1915 it was becoming increasingly apparent that the government would need to involve itself in virtually every aspect of the life of the nation in order to prosecute war on the scale necessary to render victory possible.¹¹⁰ In response, the British developed a system of administration and organisation beyond anything in evidence in the Central Powers.¹¹¹ This bureaucratic machine proved vital to the efficient management of the war effort, and was recognised as sufficiently impressive that it formed the model for the secretariat of the League of Nations in the inter-war years, and the US system of national security after 1945.¹¹² By contrast, the German and Austro-Hungarian war efforts were consistently hobbled by inefficient systems of administration and control, and the lack of a single hierarchical body able to oversee the various authorities involved.

The War also challenged British assumptions about strategy. Britain's ability to exert her will on the conflict quickly appeared more limited than some before 1914 had believed. The need to find money and supplies for her allies, to raise a mass army to fight on the continent, and to maintain relations with powerful neutral nations, above all the United States, all limited the choices available to her. Alternatives to the policy she pursued did exist, however understandings of war as a continuation of politics were revealed to be optimistic: far from being the servant of British policy, the war shaped it in the direction which her pre-1914 diplomacy logically led.

¹⁰⁹ M.S. Seligmann, 'Failing to Prepare for the Great War? The Absence of Grand Strategy in British War Planning before 1914', *War in History*, Vol. 24, No. 4, 2017, pp. 414-37.

¹¹⁰ D. French, *British Economic and Strategic Planning, 1905-1915*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982.

¹¹¹ P. Kennedy, 'Britain in the First World War' in A.R. Millett and W. Murray eds., *Military Effectiveness, Volume 1: The First World War*, Cambridge: CUP, 1988, pp. 40-41.

¹¹² F.A. Johnson, 'The British Committee of Imperial Defence: Prototype of US Security Organization', *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 23, No. 2, May, 1961, pp. 231-61.

The varying demands of grand strategy in peace and war were seen clearly in the various systems through which the government sought to control the British war effort. Within weeks of the outbreak of war the body responsible for the formation of grand strategy in peacetime, the CID, had given way to direct cabinet control of the war effort. This was out of recognition of the fact that, lacking in executive authority, the CID was ill-adapted to the rapid decision making required in wartime. As Sir William Robertson, [C]hief of the [I]mperial [G]eneral [S]taff 1915-18, would later lament, ‘previous to 1914 very few people in the Empire had considered how the functions of High Command would have to be exercised should we become engaged in a great war.’¹¹³ For Robertson, wartime command and peacetime administration and organisation involved fundamentally different considerations.

The cabinet may have had the authority to take meaningful decisions, however so large a grouping of nominally equal voices proved an incumbrance to rapid decision making. Asquith attempted to remedy the situation by forming a War Council in November 1914, whose membership essentially reflected that of the pre-War CID. As the disastrous Dardanelles/Gallipoli campaign of 1915 showed, this body too possessed serious shortcomings. Particularly troublesome were the relative positions of the civilian and military members, and the degree to which politicians could legitimately overrule professional objections couched in terms of ‘military necessity’.¹¹⁴ A series of alternative arrangements were tested over the following three years, culminating in the War Cabinet and Imperial War Cabinet in 1916-17.¹¹⁵ These changes were accompanied by a significant strengthening in the powers of the CIGS, and his elevation to the sole source of professional military advice to the War Council upon Robertson’s appointment in December 1915. Yet these shifts did little to address what was fundamentally a cultural clash between military professionals and civilian politicians. As David French has thus rightly concluded, much of the management of the war effort thus depended upon the relationships between individuals in key positions.¹¹⁶ Ultimately, the United Kingdom and her allies emerged victorious in 1918. The superior systems of organisation and co-ordination they developed in terms of supply, logistics, and finance undoubtedly played an important role in this process. These measures were aided by the broader understanding of strategy which had developed before 1914.¹¹⁷ Yet conceptions of strategy were far from the decisive factor in deciding the War’s outcome: the vastly greater

¹¹³ W. Robertson, *Soldiers and Statesmen, 1914-1918*, London: Cassell & Co., pp. 150-51.

¹¹⁴ M. Hankey, *Government Control in War*, Cambridge: CUP, pp. 32-37.

¹¹⁵ J. Turner, ‘Cabinets, Committees and Secretariats: the Higher Direction of War’ in K. Burke ed., *War and the State: The Transformation of British Government, 1914-1919*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982, pp. 57-83.

¹¹⁶ D. French, ‘A One-Man Show?’ Civil-Military Relations during the First World War’ in Smith ed., *Government and the Armed Forces in Britain*, pp. 75-108.

¹¹⁷ H. Strachan, ‘Military Operations and National Policies, 1914-1918’ in H. Afflerbach, *The Purpose of the First World War: War Aims and Military Strategies*, Oldenbourg: De Gruyter, 2015, pp. 23-25.

resources at the Entente's disposal, the unwillingness of Germany's leaders to seek a reasonable compromise peace, and a host of other factors must weigh heavily on the scales.

Why contemporary British strategic practice – from whence ideas of 'national' and 'grand' strategy originated - ought to form the basis for a theoretical understanding of grand strategy across history is thus far from clear. Britain enjoyed numerous enviable economic, commercial, and geographic advantages at the outbreak of the War. That the conflict eroded several of these strengths must surely beg questions as to the efficacy of her strategy making during the War.¹¹⁸ Critiques of how the Central Powers prosecuted the war predicated upon their distinction from British practice are similarly ill-founded. As Dennis Showalter has argued, the Central Powers faced a fundamentally different strategic problem than that which confronted Britain. That they went about solving it in alternative ways is not evidence of inferior ways of thinking about strategy.¹¹⁹ The argument that Germany ought to have conceived of grand strategy in the same way as her opponents between 1914-18 is thus just as misguided as the claim that Britain would have been better served if she possessed a more Teutonic approach to war in 1939-40.¹²⁰ For both nations considerations of geography, history, and culture played a crucial role in their approaches to warfare, and to understand one solely from the perspective of the other presents neither a realistic nor helpful interpretation.

VII

After the Allied victory, numerous writers began interpreting the events of the previous four years. Many spilled considerable volumes of ink on the topic of British grand strategy during the conflict, and the structures and organisations necessary to direct it more effectively in future. It would be beyond the scope of a single article to do justice to these multiple interpretations. It is, however, instructive to highlight some aspects of their work – especially because the various contributions Fuller and Liddell Hart produced in this period feature so prominently in many interpretations of the 'origins' of grand strategy.

Debates about grand strategy conducted during the 1920s and 1930s were, overwhelmingly, a British concern. Neither of the most influential French writers on strategy active in this period – Raoul Castex and Ferdinand Foch – embraced the concept,¹²¹ and American thought was sparse in comparison to the British.¹²² Perhaps the most notable feature of British writing on the topic was the manner in which - despite interpreting the experience of the Great War in markedly

¹¹⁸ D.A. Baugh, 'Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond and the Objects of Sea Power' in J. Hattendorf and J. Goldrick eds., *Mahan is Not Enough*, Newport, RI: USNI, 1993, p. 43.

¹¹⁹ Showalter, 'German Grand Strategy: A Contradiction in Terms?'

¹²⁰ H. Strachan, 'The British Way in Warfare Revisited', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 26, No. 2, Jun., 1983, p. 457.

¹²¹ Strachan, 'The meaning of strategy', pp. 32-33 and 'War is War: imperial legacy and current conflict' in his *The Direction of War*, pp. 204-05.

¹²² Milevski, *Evolution*, pp. 61-67.

different ways – writers consistently returned to arguments which sat in the strategic tradition evident in the pre-1914 era. Whilst inevitably deeply influenced by the experience of the Great War, they rejected the idea that it was a harbinger of things to come or that it marked a fundamentally new epoch in warfare, and their ideas reflected Britain’s imperial, geographic, and historic context. This much was certainly true of some of the most prominent figures who contributed to debates about grand strategy, not least JFC Fuller and Basil Liddell Hart.

Fuller’s work sought to reassert that war remained a useable tool of policy, and that it could be controlled through adequate preparation and organisation.¹²³ For him, the Great War had been ‘based on a gigantic misconception of the true purpose of war, which is to enforce the policy of a nation *at the least cost to itself and the enemy*’.¹²⁴ This was the central theme of the work in which he first expanded his conception of ‘grand strategy’, *The Reformation of War*, published in 1923. Fuller argued that technological innovations would make future wars more decisive, and therefore shorter and less costly. By co-ordinating the Empire’s resources more effectively, Britain would thus be able to use limited war to produce a cost effective, high technology approach to imperial defence. He thus sought to develop notions of ‘total war for limited objectives’, which had been prominent in late-nineteenth century German thought, and to develop them into a theory of war suitable to a British context and an age of financial retrenchment and war weariness. He embodied these aspirations in the dedication of the book, which explained his hope that ‘war may be ennobled and reformed.’ Yet his was not an argument for continuity, but rather one of the vital importance of radical change. Fuller conceived of a conflict between ‘tradition’ and ‘the new doctrines of warfare’ which only the correct employment of history could resolve. ‘In place of solidifying reason, history should liquefy the imagination’, he wrote, ‘history never actually repeats itself, for it constitutes one continuous transformation.’¹²⁵ In turn, this approach informed his ideas about grand strategy, which he viewed as an important *new* departure in the science of warfare: ‘unlike the strategist of the past, the grand strategist of to-day must no longer be a mere servant of his ever-changing government, but a student...of the nation to which he belongs.’¹²⁶ For Fuller, the First World War had thus been an aberration predicated upon faulty assumptions about the character of modern warfare. In future, a more far-sighted and co-ordinated approach would be necessary to achieve victory at a reasonable cost, and especially so in the British case.

Similar arguments were made by the British ‘maritime’ school of thinkers, who bemoaned that the influence of sea power on the War had been curtailed by the insidious ‘continentalist’ strategies

¹²³ B. Holden Reid, *Studies in British Military Thought: Debates with Fuller and Liddell Hart*, Lincoln, Nebraska UP, 1998, pp. 96, 101-06; Strachan, ‘Lost Meaning of Strategy’, p. 39.

¹²⁴ Fuller, *Reformation of War*, p. 7. Fuller’s italics.

¹²⁵ Fuller, *Reformation of War*, p. 94.

¹²⁶ Fuller, *Reformation of War*, p. 218.

propounded by the War Office – in other words that a failure of integrated control and strategic foresight had hampered the British war effort. This critique was developed in the three volumes of *Naval Operations* that Corbett produced for the CID official histories series before his death in 1922, and were sustained by others such as Herbert Richmond thereafter.¹²⁷ The central thrust of these writers was that a greater use of sea power could have enabled Britain to have engaged in the war on more limited terms, strengthening her ability to exert her policy on the conflict. This was true both in terms of naval operations, and the campaign of economic warfare against Germany. Richmond in particular heaped opprobrium upon the government for its apparent willingness to sacrifice Britain's belligerent right of capture during the negotiations preceding the Declaration of London in 1909. 'Although it was not ratified by Parliament', he claimed, the Declaration 'removed any anxieties which Germany might feel about British sea power.'¹²⁸ For Corbett and Richmond, the sea remained vital to British grand strategy, and the experience of 1914-18 was a discontinuity which could be explained away as a betrayal of the true principles along which such a strategy should run.

This perspective found its widest audience in the polemical writings of Basil Liddell Hart, whose 'British way in warfare' thesis and arguments in favour of an 'indirect approach' held out the tantalizing possibility that the sea could have enabled Britain to avoid much of the carnage of the Western Front. Liddell Hart overstated his case for effect, but the more measured assessments upon which he based his ideas were contributions to a tradition of British strategic thought that stretched back into the 1870s. This discourse had different objectives to much continental writing about strategy. As the CIGS, Field Marshal Sir George Milne, wrote in 1929 the foreword to Frederick Maurice's *British Strategy* in 1929: 'for years past British soldiers have been nourished on the ideas of continental strategists, generally expressed in terms untuned to British ears and dealing with situations likely to affect continental Powers more than the British Empire.' The British Empire had 'special characteristics',¹²⁹ and these formed the conditions for a unique way of thinking about war, which ultimately resulted in the concept of 'grand strategy.' That this concept owed much more to debates about Britain's imperial and geostrategic situation than to changes in the nature of war can be seen by the continuities between pre-1914 and post-1918 writing. It is sometimes easy to overlook the fact that the 1920s saw Britain more powerful than her main European rivals, with an Empire significantly extended, and a renewed claim to be the key centre

¹²⁷ A. Lambert, 'Writing the Battle: Jutland in Sir Julian Corbett's *Naval Operations*', *The Mariner's Mirror*, Vol. 103, No. 2, 2017, pp. 175-95.

¹²⁸ H. Richmond, *British Strategy, Military & Economic: A Historical Review and its Contemporary Lessons*, Cambridge: CUP, 1941, p. 128.

¹²⁹ In F. Maurice, *British Strategy: A Study of the Application of the Principles of War*, London: Constable & Co., 1929, xv-xvi.

of global finance. Crucially, she was also still a power of the first rank in the thinking of the other Great Powers.¹³⁰ The essentials of the strategic challenge she faced thus remained conceptually similar to that which had prevailed prior to 1914, as did the notions of strategy which emerged throughout this period. This situation would only change gradually with the introduction of more powerful aircraft in the inter-war years, and with the advent of nuclear weapons after 1945. Before then, the notion that sea power, superior organisation, and technological advantage could facilitate a strategy of limited war returned, and exerted a significant influence over British policy well into the Second World War.¹³¹

VIII

This article has described the evolution of how strategy was practiced in Britain between the 1870s and 1920s, and the debates associated with those shifts. During this period, approaches to defending Britain and her Empire increasingly became understood in the language of national, major, or ‘grand’ strategy. The application of the word ‘strategy’ to realm of national and imperial policy was the product of Britain’s unique administrative, political, geographic, historic, technological, military, and diplomatic circumstances. Contemporaries believed that Britain had to adopt her own approach to ensuring her security, as her requirements and resources were fundamentally different to those of her competitors or potential allies. This was a central argument of many of those who sought to expand their ideas about strategy in writing, particularly Corbett, Richmond, Fuller, and Liddell Hart.

That terms such as strategy, national strategy, major strategy, or grand strategy became used to refer to British practice at this time reflected the changing way in which the state was administered and the new modes of political and strategic thought rendered possible by technological change. They did not, however, fundamentally alter process of making strategy at the highest levels of government. ‘Grand’ or ‘major’ strategy were new ways of understanding the changing practice of strategy in Britain, not a fundamentally new departure in how states made war. There is thus nothing which marks British practice in this period out as being superior to other traditions of strategic thought and practice which developed before it, in parallel to it, or which came after it. British conceptions of strategy were certainly broad in that they embraced areas beyond the solely military, however this was borne of her geography, and her unique maritime and imperial position. These factors influenced the emergence of a tradition of strategic thought which combined the naval and military with issues of economics and law, and considered

¹³⁰ J.R. Ferris, ‘The Greatest Power on Earth: Great Britain in the 1920s’, *The International History Review*, Vol. 13, No. 4, Nov., 1991, pp. 726-50.

¹³¹ D. Edgerton, ‘Liberal Militarism and the British State’, *New Left Review*, No. 185, 1991, pp. 138-69.

both peace and war.¹³² These ways of thinking were vital for a global, maritime Empire which lacked a large army but could boast considerable shipping, financial, and infrastructural resources. However, there was nothing universal or inherently more effective about how Britain made strategy, or how it conceptualised it during this period. Indeed, much strategic thought in Britain at this time was the product of a keen awareness of her weaknesses and of the limits of her power. The ‘breadth’ of maritime strategy thus sought to make good the dispersion of Britain’s modest military resources, the absence of conscription, and the changing conditions of warfare on land. Moreover, as the experience of war in 1914 showed, whatever conceptions of strategy had existed in Britain at this time were very far from having been translated into practical action, or into concrete preparations for a major conflict. Locating the origins of an enduring concept of grand strategy in the history of Britain in this period would thus be a pointless endeavour, which distorts arguments put forward at the time, and confuses what we mean by grand strategy today.

This essay has emphasized the importance of context. It should be stressed, however, that this is neither to remove the role of agency from key actors, nor to imply that continuity was the defining feature of this period of British strategy making. The ideas of grand strategy which grew up in Britain in this period were, first and foremost, the product of change. Notions of imperial defence or grand strategy were ways of explaining how shifts in communications, geopolitics, and government had necessitated new approaches to the defence of a global maritime empire. These developments were cumulative and evolutionary, but were nonetheless significant in their scope. That the meaning of strategy should change in response to these shifts is unsurprising. However, as this article has demonstrated, such changes can only be understood if they are contextualised with a deep appreciation of a broad range of contextual factors – from practices of government to social anxieties and fears of decline. Encompassing this slew of issues under the banner of ‘culture’ risks obscuring their variety and oversimplifying their influence.

My aim in this article has also been to advance a series of broader arguments about the study of grand strategy today. The first of these has been to challenge the notion of a unifying definition and theory of grand strategy. Such an idea implies a fixity of meaning and continuity of practice which runs against the essence of what the practice of strategy at the national level entails. Conceiving of grand strategy in this manner risks running roughshod over the multiple unique factors which shape the concept in different locations and at different times. By doing so, it perpetuates overblown modern expectations of what strategy can achieve today. Yet approaching the issue with a definition as broad as ‘matching aspirations to objectives’ is neither satisfactory,

¹³² H. Strachan, ‘Maritime strategy and national policy’ in Strachan, *The Direction of War*, p. 153.

nor helpful.¹³³ Instead, I would argue that our understanding of grand strategy ought to be predicated upon the absence of an agreed meaning. By accepting that the term has been, and continues to be, used in different contexts and for different purposes, we can take the important step of acknowledging that none of these instances has a monopoly over its meaning and definition.¹³⁴ We are thus not looking for *the* meaning of grand strategy, we are more interested in its multiple conceptions. By compiling a fuller picture of the different ways in which the concept has been, or has not been, understood, we can thus develop a much more realistic appreciation of its changing meaning and employment across time and space. This would assist us in understanding the varying ways in which strategy has been practiced across time – an outcome which, if we are to increasingly view strategy as a process, would have considerable enduring relevance. It also offers the prospect of curbing the excessive expectations attached to ‘grand strategy’ in debates about foreign policy and international affairs today.

The active involvement of historians in the study of strategy is crucial to this endeavour. Just as the historiographical turn in International Relations has challenged and nuanced the interpretation of key texts within that discipline,¹³⁵ so can a greater interface between history and strategic studies improve our understanding of strategy. In particular, history can highlight the dangers implicit in grandiose modern usages of the term ‘grand strategy’, which impose a unity of vision which experience shows to be artificial and unattainable. In so doing, they risk privileging continuity over change, and the importance of vision over the requirements of pragmatism. They also imply an exaggerated degree of agency and control, such as the past would caution against.

¹³³ Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy*, p. 21.

¹³⁴ McMahon, ‘The Return of the History of Ideas?’, p. 24.

¹³⁵ D.S. Bell, ‘International relations: the dawn of a historiographical turn?’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Apr., 2001, pp. 115-26.