THE MARATHON INITIATIVE

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Getting Strategic Deprioritization Right

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I. INTRODUCTION

By A. Wess Mitchell and Jakub Grygiel [*]

> *But to whatsoever cause we ascribe it, it never so chanced that the Romans engaged in two great wars at the same time. On the contrary, it always seemed as though on the breaking out of one war, another was extinguished… [By their example the wise prince learns to concentrate on one enemy while he] studiously maintains peace with the rest; who, on their part, whether through fear of his power, or deceived by the methods he takes to dull their vigilance, are easily kept quiet."*
>
> *– Machiavelli*

In his *Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli tells us that the Roman Republic became a great power because its leaders knew how to concentrate on one main threat at a time. If Rome's primary rival at a given moment had attacked while Rome's main attention was focused elsewhere, the Republic might have been strangled in the cradle and never become the dominant player of the Mediterranean. The fact that this did not happen, Machiavelli tells us, was due not to "fortune" but to "prudence"—which is to say, strategy. Roman leaders first decided where *not* to fight and *how* not to fight there without forfeiting their Republic's stake in the place in question before focusing their energy on the thing that mattered most at the moment. Rome became great, in other words, because she learned how to deprioritize.

Deprioritization is not abandonment or retrenchment. Rather, it is the purposeful reduction of power that a state applies in pursuit of one object in order to wield it more abundantly or effectively toward another that it deems more important *without*

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fully relinquishing the first object. It is intimately linked to prioritization—they are two sides of the same coin. But because deprioritization involves a reduction of effort, which does not come naturally in politics, and can be penalized in geopolitics, it deserves to be looked at as a component of strategy in its own right.

The Romans were not exceptional in the attention they paid to deprioritization as a strategic discipline. All great powers at some point in their history have to deprioritize something. Only a few unusually mighty empires have been able to be strong everywhere at once, but even for those, this state of affairs lasted only for a season. Most great powers most of the time have had to make difficult choices about how to match finite means to seemingly infinite ends, usually in messy circumstances that are foisted upon them by events. These choices—the very essence of strategy—generate opportunity costs, and how those opportunity costs are managed is of great consequence for the security of the state. The Emperor Hadrian's consolidation of Rome's frontiers, Justinian's reconquest of Italy, Maria Theresa's preservation of Austria against Prussian predations, Britain's rescue of France in 1914 and loss of Singapore in 1941, Nixon's refocusing of U.S. attention after Vietnam, and Ronald Reagan's undermining of Soviet strength in Europe are just a few examples of strategies whose success or failure hung on effective prioritization—and its flipside, deprioritization. Indeed, so prevalent has been the necessity of ranking priorities, and so high the costs for getting it wrong, that skill in this task has a fair claim to being a *sine qua non* of effective grand strategy.

It is therefore surprising that deprioritization hasn't received much attention in the study of strategy. This may in part be because of the cognitive bias since Clausewitz toward the offense and against the defense in Western thinking.[1] To be sure, deprioritization can take offensive form, as when a great power surges efforts against one rival before turning attention to another. But it is most often associated with the defensive, which sometimes carries connotations of passivity. More broadly, there is a tendency among strategists to examine how states go about implementing prioritization rather than dealing with its flipside—that is, how states achieve a given top end, *once it has been identified as such*. The question of what the state had to give up

[1] See for example the discussion in Edward Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire from the First Century A.D. to the Third* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 61.

to achieve that end, and how it did so effectively, tends to get less attention. Deprioritization is, in other words, the ugly duckling of strategy.

The lack of attention may be due, in part, to the fact that deprioritization is hard. Understood as a controlled reduction in effort, it is neither abandonment nor domination; at heart, it's an exercise in managing tradeoffs. Economists tell us that human beings don't like tradeoffs and will go to great lengths to avoid confronting them. That's especially true of large bureaucracies, which have a well-documented tendency to resist changes that limit their authority and scope for budgetary growth. Politics often rewards extremes and punishes nuance. Few people remember the names of the generals or diplomats who presided over a successful deleveraging in the secondary frontier, while everyone remembers the failures—General Percival surrendering in ignominy at Singapore, the helicopters leaving the Embassy rooftop in Saigon.

Americans in particular seem to be averse to confronting tradeoffs. Our unique circumstances have lightened the burdens of scarcity and choice that were a mainstay for past great powers. Geography has allowed America to select the timing and extent of its involvement in Eurasian power struggles, and dominate those contests it enters without facing sufficiently severe resource constraints to put in doubt the final outcome. While there are examples of successful U.S. deprioritizations, including in the Nixon and Reagan eras, all too often the United States has swung in the opposite direction and opted for chaotic divestment to a large degree because the costs of doing so have been geographically distant and easily forgotten. The U.S. retreat from Europe after the First World War, as well as our abrupt exits from Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan are examples. In the common parlance, we tend to be all-in or all-out.

But the United States is likely to find value in studying strategic deprioritization in coming years, for three reasons.

First, the rise of China confronts America with the first peer competitor in modern U.S. history that possesses a larger economy than our own.[2] By the Pentagon's

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[2] An indication of the size of the China challenge can be seen in the fact that its GDP together with that of Russia is currently a little less than 80 percent of U.S. GDP, which is about the same percentage as the USSR, Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan *combined*. See Graham Allison, *Destined for War* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2017), Chapter 1, "The Rise of China: The Biggest Player in the History of the World."

reckoning, the United States does not have, and does not plan to develop, the ability to fight and win major wars in Europe and Asia simultaneously; handling China alone will require the commanding bulk of U.S. military power.[3] But China's rise doesn't mean that other problems—Russia, Iran, North Korea, and host of smaller challenges—simply go away. They still have to be dealt with because the regions targeted by them continue to be relevant to American well-being. But these challenges, and the threats they present to their regions, have to be addressed in a way that does not undercut our ability to focus on the main threat.

Second, the challenges that the United States will face in balancing tradeoffs in an era of great-power competition are likely to increase the temptation to divest entirely from international commitments. The confluence of a threat-rich external environment and a domestic political setting characterized by deficits and polarization in politics is likely to create constituencies in American politics for whom the siren-song of retrenchment is stronger than ever. Understanding how to sustain the country's accumulated geopolitical and economic advantages without going through the costly cycles of retreat and return is likely to be valuable for U.S. policymakers.

Third and relatedly, ongoing changes in military technology are raising the costs of reentry in regional security environments. In the past, there was an unspoken assumption that America could "cut bait" in a given region but still be able to fight our way back in at an acceptable price at a later date. But in an era when anti-access/area denial capabilities are becoming more prevalent in the arsenals of America's main adversaries, and when the United States faces two peer competitors possessing or pursuing nuclear parity, that is no longer a safe assumption. Once abandoned, lost ground may be much harder to regain. That puts a premium on knowing how to hold onto it in the first place, but at a more affordable cost than before.

This project is an attempt at gaining a better understanding of deprioritization as a discipline of strategy—its features, pitfalls and strategic potentialities, when states get it right. The project consists of four papers. In the first Wess Mitchell provides a definition of deprioritization and examines the means and ends that characterize its

[3] See the Pentagon's unclassified summaries of its two most recent National Defense Strategies (2018 and 2022) and Jim Mitre, "A Eulogy for the Two-War Construct" *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 4, (2018): 7-30.

use in strategy. In the second paper, Elbridge Colby assesses the international challenges that complicate the implementation of deprioritization strategies. In the third paper, Matt Pottinger looks at the domestic challenges to deprioritization and how U.S. presidential administrations have carried it out in practice. And in the final paper, Jakub Grygiel lays out the characteristics of successful deprioritization.

The four papers do not agree in every particular. They should be read as a conversation rather than as parts of a conceptual whole. But two golden threads run throughout the papers. One is the assumption that effective deprioritization is possible for the United States without divesting from our international role. Great powers in far less favorable situations than ours have dealt with a rising challenger without abandoning allies and relinquishing hard-won advantages in other regions. The other is the conviction that knowing how to deprioritize effectively represents an advantage in strategic competition. Managing tradeoffs effectively is an essential—arguably *the* essential—attribute of successful strategy. It can be carried out reflectively on our own terms in peacetime, or reflexively when the chips are down. The project was conducted in the belief that the former is preferable to the latter.

II. WHAT IS STRATEGIC DEPRIORITIZATION?

Beyond doubt… in matters of state, foresighted schemes undertaken and executed with good advice are as useful as mere force, or more so, especially when carried out wisely.
– Claude de Seyssel

By A. Wess Mitchell

Strategic deprioritization is the purposeful reduction of power that a state applies in pursuit of one object in order to wield it more abundantly or effectively toward another that it deems more important *without relinquishing the first object*.[4] It is *de*prioritization because it reflects a downward adjustment in the energy that the state expends on one thing relative to something else. It is *strategic* because this adjustment is made contemplatively in peacetime, on the basis of calculations about available ends and means, as opposed to reactively, once great-power war has broken out. Events have a way of imposing priorities on states, which makes strategy messy in the best of times. Deprioritization is at base an attempt by states, however imperfectly, to get ahead of events by proactive adjustments on their own terms.

Deprioritization is not to be confused with divestment, sometimes called retrenchment, which typically refers to the jettisoning of strategic commitments in a given place because the state can no longer afford them.[5] What distinguishes the two concepts is their relationship to risk. Divestment is the outer manifestation of inner constraints that are sufficiently severe to force the state to accept a higher level of loss

[4] There is a large literature on opportunity costs with potential applications to grand strategy. The field traces its origins to the 1st Century Roman agriculturalist Columella, whose treatise *On Rural Affairs* assesses the opportunity costs associated with investing in vineyards. The late 19th Century German Friedrich von Wieser formalized the idea of alternative costs and laid the foundation for modern theory. A non-exhaustive list of recent works would include Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir, *Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means So Much* (New York: Macmillan, 2013); James Buchanan, "Opportunity Cost" in Eatwell, J., Milgate, M., Newman, P. (eds), *The World of Economics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991), pp. 520-525; and Philip Fernbach, Christina Kan, and John G. Lynch Jr., "Squeezed: Coping with Constraint through Efficiency and Prioritization," *Journal of Consumer Research* 41.5 (2015): 1204-1227.
[5] For a discussion of accepting greater risk via a strategy of total divestment, see Andrew Krepinevich, Simon Chin, and Todd Harrison, Strategy in Austerity, *Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments*, 2012, p. 65ff.

than it would normally contemplate. Deprioritization by contrast attempts to manage risk proactively, in a way that remains within the state's means without forfeiting the advantages of its accumulated position. Deprioritization, in other words, seeks to avoids divestment. Its goal is broadly preservationist; to consolidate and conserve a great power's strength by reassigning values to the various ends competing for its attention and reallocating effort to them, with retention in mind.

Reevaluating priorities is necessary in any environment characterized by scarcity and choice—that is, in any environment where resources are finite and there are competing demands on how those resources should be used.[6] Anyone who runs a farm, owns a business, or manages a family budget must deal with prioritization on a daily basis. For states, the ability to do so especially important, because of the fluid nature of power. Interests may be permanent, as Lord Palmerston said, but the amount of effort that can be put toward them at a given moment, and the strength that a state enjoys relative to other states, are certainly not. Before states can do what they want, they must choose what they cannot or will not do. "The essence of strategy," as the economist Michael Porter puts it, "is choosing what not to do."[7]

Three aspects of deprioritization are worth stressing in the context of strategy.

First, deprioritization is an inherently political act. Setting priorities involves ranking preferences about what a society values, fears, needs and wants most, and by extension, what it is willing to risk or forego. Because states are amalgams of voices and interests, this inevitably produces disagreements. But because the question at hand is not an ordinary one but involves the very survival of the state, its resolution will ultimately be made on a political, rather than commercial, dynastic, sectarian or other basis. The resulting actions will reflect a decision among national leaders about what matters *most* to the state, and the successful imposition of their will over the various mechanisms of state to align national resources with that assessment.[8]

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[6] See Buchanan, pp. 520-525.
[7] Michael Porter, "What is Strategy?" *Harvard Business Review,* November/December 1996. See also Hwy-Chang Moon, *The Art of Strategy: Sun Tzu, Michael Porter, and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), especially p. 131ff.
[8] Barry Posen argues that national leaders formulate strategic preferences based on a 'reading of the tea leaves' of international power dynamics. They not only form preferences about what kinds of military power they need, how much, and where, but impose discipline on the internal organs of state to implement those preferences. See Barry Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1984).

Second, deprioritization manifests itself in physical outcomes, in how a state's coercive potential is arrayed in space and time. The fact that deprioritization is necessary at all is a reflection of the fact that power is finite and subject to temporal and spatial constraints. This runs against the grain of some modern notions of power as an ideational and seemingly inexhaustible construct that takes a range of nebulous forms—"soft" power, "smart" power, "generative" power, etc.[9] To produce effect, power must eventually be convertible into physical realities. As Geoffrey Woodhead put it in his study on Thucydides, power is only realized "when it expresse[s] itself in its actual exercise… power produces evident results."[10] A paper strategy that does not result in tangible changes in how power is arrayed in space and time is not a strategy; it's wishful thinking.

Third, deprioritization generates opportunity costs, and therefore risk. Deprioritization seeks to avoid the chaos and danger of abandonment and retain a decisive stake in the deprioritized place. But it does nevertheless entail consciously foregoing some advantage that had been possible when greater effort was expended toward the thing in question. The measure of deprioritization is the value that has been lost in foregoing that thing relative to something of higher value; the lower that differential, the more effective the deprioritization. It is this contingent quality of deprioritization, involving as it does an attempt at using judgment to limit risk amidst shifting power relationships without courting catastrophe, that makes it difficult.

To Economize or Prioritize?

Deprioritization is rarely the first instinct of states. As organizations, states differ from individuals and companies in that they exist to assemble and wield power. Power's logic is to grow until it hits hard limits, either financially from within the state or externally from other states. The natural desire of states is to have maximum security against all enemies at all times at the lowest cost possible. Deprioritization foists itself onto states when they discover that attempting to maximally counter all threats is not possible and that attempting to do so may open them up to heightened risks.

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[9] See for example Joseph S. Nye, "Public Diplomacy in a Changing World," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Scienc*e, Vol. 616 (March 2008), pp. 94-109 and Eric Schmidt, "Innovation Power: Why Technology Will Define the Future of Geopolitics," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2023.
[10] Geoffrey Woodhead, *Thucydides on the Nature of Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), pp.103-4.

Even then, the first instinct is usually not to deprioritize. Economists tell us that scarcity tends to prompt two responses from institutions: efficiency planning and priority planning, with a decided preference for the former.[11] Bureaucracies are apt to try to keep pursuing established ends even after resource constraints present themselves by economizing and attempting to "do more with less." The so-called 'efficiency trap' occurs when an actor that has embarked upon efficiency planning keeps paring to the bone in an attempt to keep meet all commitments, and in the process actually make the most important ends less attainable than if they had embraced prioritization earlier. It is typically only when risks elevate dramatically that people shift from efficiency planning to priority planning and attempt to modify their ends to reflect resource realities—often abruptly, and not always with the best results.[12]

What prompts the shift from economization to deprioritization in states is the realization that changes in the international environment are likely to generate unacceptably high geopolitical, financial or social costs unless the state alters its behavior. For Britain in the early 1900s, this moment came when Germany's naval buildup made it clear that Britain would not be able to maintain its two-navy standard without enormous exertions—and even then, it was six years before the Admiralty jettisoned economizing cuts in favor of a painful and sweeping reprioritization to Home Waters.[13] For Britain in the Interwar period, the moment came when the buildup of German air power made it clear that the British Isles could be in jeopardy without dramatic increases in British production to sustain air parity, by which point

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[11] See Fernbach, et. al., Ibid., pp. 1204-1227.

[12] As Fernbach et al. note, efficiency planning is attractive because it "feels free." A delayed shift to priority planning in the face of mounting opportunity costs is "often insufficient, and [individuals] tend to react to insufficient prioritization dysfunctionally, making a bad situation worse…efficiency may feel right in the moment, but it is counterproductive if it comes at the expense of more important priorities." Ibid., p. 1205. In his comments on this paper, Jakub Grygiel pointed out astutely that modern states may be especially susceptible to this tendency, because of the perception that technology can multiply power.

[13] It's worth noting Sir Jackie Fisher, the First Sea Lord who did most to promote the development and deployment of the dreadnought, was installed in the Admiralty with the initial task of reducing naval budgets, which he accomplished by scrapping obsolete vessels and prioritizing the best ships for the North Sea. Increases in the naval budget would come later in his tenure, as a way of enhancing Britain's edge in the decisive theater. For more on the British strategic debates of this period see Aaron Friedberg, *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895-1905* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

economizing cuts had rendered the Army and Navy incapable of meeting strategic commitments in France and Singapore respectively.[14]

In both of these examples, deprioritization was the byproduct of decisions by national political leadership to realign national resources with shifts in Britain's strategic environment. Barring this intervention from above, it's unlikely that British government bureaucracy would have made the needed changes, as each military branch fought to secure the largest share of the pie possible on a primarily organizational motivation.

The transition to deprioritization, in other words, is an extraordinary event in the life of a great power that occurs when the imperative of survival trumps other, very powerful organizational dynamics inside the state. Like any other type of strategic adaptation, it usually begins as a bureaucratic orphan. What 'gives it legs' is an unambiguous demand signal from national-political leadership that is given expression in strategic documents (what Matt Pottinger in an adjacent essay calls "scripture") and chaperoned to execution by a controlled process. This pattern shows up with remarkable consistency again and again in history.[15] The decision to deprioritize rarely

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[14] A key source for Interwar British defense conundrums is John Darwin's *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830-1970* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009). See especially Chapter 11, "The Strategic Abyss, 1937-1942" and the discussion of how the interwar British Defense Requirements Committee adjudicated resource tradeoffs between the RAF, Royal Navy and Army to reflect different weights assigned to Europe, the Far East and Levant respectively. As Darwin's analysis shows, even in extreme circumstances leaders are slow to give up on economization and move to prioritization: "[F]or all their agonizing…British leaders showed little desire to shrink their global commitments. Indeed, the whole logic of their policy…was a tenacious defense of Britain's worldwide claims." (p. 485).

[15] The essential features of successful strategy seem to be: (1) a leadership pod (usually an executive and capable lieutenant), usually aligned with the Exchequer, (2) an unambiguous expression of executive intent, and (3) a process for mobilizing bureaucracy behind that intent. Emperor Justinian and Belisarius, Maria Theresa and Kaunitz, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger are just a few examples of leadership tandems that carried out successful strategic overhauls. The strategic commissions that Maria Theresa formed to focus Austrian defense and diplomacy on the Prussia threat from 1749 onward is a good example of (3), as is Jackie Fisher's institutionalized process for prioritizing British home waters. As Andy Krepinevich pointed out in the working group session that accompanied this project, President Eisenhower's strategic planning board and strategic planning board were indispensable in initiating new a strategy and tasking follow-throughs.

attains the status of intellectual hegemony; resistance, either to the fact of it or to the form it takes, often continues well after the strategy has been implemented.[16]

The Ends of Deprioritization

States go to the trouble of deprioritization in order to enhance their security against that external actor possessing the greatest capacity to do it harm—what 20th Century British imperial defense planners called the "ultimate potential danger." That is to say, deprioritization is undertaken to serve an end other than the thing or place that is being deprioritized. The necessity for it usually manifests itself in the form of felt, or foreseeable, military inadequacies vis-à-vis one adversary.

It is worth pausing here to consider how states tend to define "ultimate potential danger." Very often, that has been the rival closest to the home area. In both world wars, Britain prioritized Germany over their colonial rivals in Africa and Asia. Similarly, the Habsburgs and Byzantines often deprioritized their economically most-vital regions to focus on threats closer to home. But there are also plenty of examples of great powers deprioritizing a nearby region closer to focus on a further-off threat.[17] It's tempting to simplify the matter by saying that states prioritize competition with the adversary possessing the greatest latent power potential (the largest GDP). But here too, there are many examples to the contrary.[18] The safest generalization seems

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[16] As Colin Dueck pointed out in the working group session that accompanied this project, resistance to Britain's pre-First World War strategic shift continued all the way to the outbreak of war. To cite another example, the Byzantine Prefect John the Cappadocian attempted to derail the Emperor Justinian's plan to deprioritize the Persian frontier in order to shift focus to North Africa on the grounds that prolonged campaigning overseas would be risky and expensive. He failed in scuttling the strategic shift but succeeded in convincing Justinian to keep the force being sent to Africa "small and cheap enough that it would not utterly ruin the army and treasury if it failed." See Warren Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 184.

[17] Successive Roman emperors deprioritized the nearby Rhine and Danube frontier to deal with the distant Parthian threats menacing economically-vital Egypt and Syria. The Byzantine emperor Justinian deprioritized the East to focus, for reasons of both prestige and resources, on the reconquest of North Africa and Italy, and one Habsburg emperor went so far as to downgrade the defense of his capital, Vienna, against the renegade prince Rákóczi to avoid the loss of his revenue-rich Italian provinces. But in these and other similar cases, the security of the home area was not seriously in doubt. See for example the discussion of Austria's deprioritization calculus in Lothar Höbelt, "The Impact of the Rákóczi Rebellion on Habsburg Strategy: Incentives and Opportunity Costs," *War in History* 13, no. 1 (January 2006), pp. 2-15.

[18] By this metric, Persia in the 5th Century AD was a far more potent threat to the Byzantine Empire than the nomadic Huns, but Byzantine Emperors consistently prioritized the latter. Similarly, the British deprioritized competition with the United States to focus on Germany in the early 1900s, despite the fact that the former possessed far more economic strength than the latter.

to be that states tend to prioritize competition with that opponent which poses the gravest immediate military threat. That may be the rival that is the most powerful, or it may simply be the one that is most vengeful and ready.[19] Motivation and opportunity, in other words, have to be taken into account, not just paper capabilities.

In any event, the main focus of prioritization and deprioritization is an adversary, rather than a region *per se*. But its effects tend to be manifested in spatial terms. In the 1970s, the United States deprioritized one adversary (North Vietnam) in order to reprioritize competition with another (the Soviet Union). The result was a reduction of U.S. military power in Asia and an increase of power in Europe. A decade later the United States increased effort in a place other than Europe—Afghanistan—but the focus remained the Soviet Union rather than Central Asia as a region.

Prioritization and deprioritization may also manifest themselves in functional, or technological terms. The prompt for deprioritization is usually the need to free up military capabilities of a certain kind, best suited to the main threat. Britain prioritized the development of big-gun battleships in the early 1900s for naval competition with Germany and deprioritized production of various smaller vessels better suited to policing far-away stations. In the Interwar period, Britain prioritized the development of long-range bombers for use against Germany and deprioritized land power.[20] It's not inconceivable that the United States could someday prioritize the development of nuclear or space weapons of a particular type against one adversary in order to free up conventional forces against another—or vice versa.

It bears mentioning here what might be called the unintended technological fruits that deprioritization can sometimes produce. The necessity to wield power in a different way than before to hold onto a secondary theater can generate applications or breakthroughs that might otherwise not have occurred. For example, during the 1920s, Britain used air power, then still in its infancy, as a stop-gap to police its possessions in the Near East. The Royal Air Force's resulting role not only allowed it

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[19] For example, Otto von Bismarck fought ferocious battles with the German general staff in the 1880s in an effort to prioritize France as the main threat to Germany, on the grounds that it was armed and eager for revenge over the loss of Alsace-Loraine, even though Russia was the bigger long-term threat.

[20] Between 1933 and 1938, spending on the Royal Air Force increased by more than 800 percent and spending on the Royal Navy by 230 percent, while the Army's budget stagnated. See N. H. Gibbs, *Grand Strategy Vol. 1: Rearmament Policy* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1976), p. 532.

to weather an era of budget cuts but led to the development of the concept of strategic bombing that would later prove useful against the main adversary.[21]

If freeing up military resources against the main threat were the entirety of the matter, there would be no need for deprioritization; great powers could simply cut bait and run. But the whole point of deprioritization is to ensure that a baseline of order and stability is maintained in the deprioritized region *in spite of* a shifting of resources. Chaos here cannot be permitted, for two reasons.

First, because the place in question holds *intrinsic* importance to the deprioritizing state's safety and prosperity. Britain still needed the resources and markets of India, the Gulf and Far East while dealing with Germany—so much so that allowing them to fall into the hands of a hostile power would have marked Britain's fall from the ranks of the great powers. And second, because of the *instrumental* importance of the secondary theater, as defined by its relation to the dynamic between the deprioritizing state and both its main and secondary rivals. Keeping a secondary region in friendly hands prevents an opponent—whether the secondary rival or the primary one—from amassing its resources for their own purposes. Losing it could put the deprioritizing state at risk not only in the secondary theater but also jeopardize its success in the primary one, as well.

Deprioritization also entails a related end of preserving a great power's overall economic position at an acceptable military cost. In seeking to keep order in the secondary region, a state aims to preserve the financial and commercial benefits that accrue from having the markets of place in question connected favorably with its own. But it seeks to do so in a way that avoids or at least mitigates the strains that would result from attempting to deal maximally with all dangers to its global position concurrently. The financial rub is never only about foreign policy; armies and navies must also compete for resources against the state's domestic priorities.

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[21] See Bruce Hoffman, *British Air Power in Peripheral Conflict, 1919-1976* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1989). One could add as examples the mobility doctrine that the British Army developed in this period and the Royal Navy's increased reliance on light cruisers to police the empire, both of which would have strategic benefits for Britain once the war broke out.

The deprioritizing state need not be in precipitous decline to feel this pinch. In theory, Britain in the early 1900s *could have* afforded a fleet large enough to maintain supremacy against Imperial Germany while keeping up her accustomed naval responsibilities in other regions. But successive British cabinets concluded that doing so would require them to accept either onerous tax burdens or borrowing on a scale that would prevent them from being able to raise funds on international markets in the event of a major crisis.[22] Similarly, the United States in the early 1970s *could have* afforded to sustain Vietnam-era defense deployments in Asia while mounting the renewed build-up of forces in Europe required for the 2.5 war standard. But the Nixon administration determined that doing so would compromise its ability to advance domestic priorities and place intolerable inflationary strains on the U.S. economy.[23]

A final end of deprioritization has to do with the prestige of the deprioritizing state. Any state's power stems from underlying economic and material foundations. But great powers derive from their abundance of these a kind of aura—what the Romans called *auctoritas* and 18th Century statesmen called "consideration"—that benefits the state in a variety of intangible but important ways.[24] Those benefits include tacit support from other states for terms of order that favor the great power in question, as well as privileged status in multilateral groupings and international currency and credit markets. Historically, an abrupt loss of influence in a region of accustomed influence can erode these benefits and raise the transaction costs of international influence. Precipitous retrenchments in particular tend to be punished, and deprioritization seeks to avoid that outcome by sustaining the state's overall power position at a manageable cost. Put differently, for great powers, the 'nature of the dismount' matters, for reasons that go beyond what's immediately at stake in the region where

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[22] See the discussion in Friedberg (pp. 91-3) on the calculus that influenced Britain's defense reallocations in the early 1900s. British leaders drew similar conclusions in the 1930s, except that by that point they had lost the ability to build the forces required for deterring Japan while managing the bigger threat of Nazi Germany.

[23] In Congressional testimony, Defense Secretary Melvin Laird pointed to domestic and economic considerations to justify the Nixon administration's decision to cut the FY 70 defense budget by $3 Billion (over and above the $4 Billion in reductions it had already made against the Johnson administration's budget projection). See Colin S. Gray and Jeffrey G. Barlow, "Inexcusable Restraint: The Decline of American Military Power in the 1970s," *International Security*, Fall, 1985, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Fall 1985), pp. 27-69.

[24] The point here is not that this moral authority is a form of power in its own right but rather that it gives states the advantage of influence. See G. R. Berridge's lively blog entry, "'Soft power' is nothing more than influence," January 17, 2014 (https://grberridge.diplomacy.edu/soft-power-is-nothing-more-than-influence/).

deprioritization is being attempted. This is an important factor in explaining why states go to the trouble of deprioritizing rather than simply divesting.

The Means of Deprioritization

The means by which states deprioritize are the same that they use to shape their security environment generally. What sets deprioritization apart from other types of strategic behavior is that by definition it aims at a net reduction in the state's overall exertion in a given place. It employs means with a view to employing less means, so to speak. Broadly speaking, the means for effecting it can be grouped into two categories: military and politico-economic.

1. Military Means. Physical force occupies a privileged place as a means of deprioritization, both because it is the *ultima ratio* of security and because delivering increased military power in the prioritized region is almost invariably its aim. Historically, the military methods of deprioritization have generally fallen into three categories: offensive strike, fixed defenses and defense-in-depth.

Offensive strike (sequencing) Paradoxically, deprioritization does not always translate into an immediate reduction of military effort in the deprioritized theater; indeed, in some instances in history it has meant *more*, at least initially. In principle, a great power may deprioritize a theater by offensive means—that is, by temporarily surging capabilities there in order to deal decisively with one (usually the weaker) of two opponents before shifting its attention to the other.

This appears to be what Machiavelli had in mind when he praised the Roman Republic's habit of handling one powerful neighbor at a time while "studiously maintain[ing] peace with the rest; who, on their part, whether through fear of his power, or deceived by the methods he takes to dull their vigilance, are easily kept quiet." There are plenty of other examples, but perhaps the most vivid is late-19th Century Prussia's sequential handling of Denmark (1864) and Austria (1866) before coming to grips with the main threat of France (1870).

Historically, most examples of offensive sequencing involving the state's direct military action are found among land powers, and especially non-democratic ones. Striking out at neighbors is more tempting for a state that is land-locked and thus susceptible to constant threats and pressure. And doing so is more readily pursued by

a system of government without separation of powers or extensive debate. A common variation favored historically by maritime powers, and democracies, is proxy war. Britain in the early 1900s for example pursued a policy of aiding Japan in order to defeat its colonial arch-rival Russia, which in turn allowed Britain to deprioritize the Far East and focus on Imperial Germany.

Fixed defenses. Historically, the chief recourse of states for safely shifting attention away from a given place has been to use fixed defensive positions. To cite perhaps the most famous example from Western strategic history, the Emperor Hadrian ordered the construction of vast networks of fortifications—the so-called *limes*— in Britain, Germany and Dacia in order to free up Rome's legions for deployment in the East.[25] Then and later, the utility of fixed defenses is their substitution of walls for soldiers: Forts buy time and permit economy of force. As a result, fewer and less well-trained troops can guard an area *in situ*, thus freeing up the main army to focus elsewhere and return at a moment of its choosing.[26]

While forts in the literal sense no longer exist, they find an equivalent in the modern era to large defensive installations in forward areas of the U.S. defensive perimeter. Historically, they provide a means of retaining an affordable deterrent in the deprioritized region. Forts do this both in the literal sense, as platforms for keeping escalatory capabilities in-theater and in the political and symbolic sense, in visibly underscoring to local allies the deprioritizing power's eschewal of total divestment. Their use in deprioritization usually goes hand-in-hand with a combination of local allies and a deterrent force deemed sufficient to hold the frontier.

The obvious danger of fixed defenses lies in their very permanence and symbolic power. Forts carry a renown that makes their loss politically very costly, which in turn can lead a defender to double down on holding them, even as its real ability to defend the position deteriorates. Not surprisingly, local allies tend to closely watch a patron's

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[25] For a description of these efforts, see Luttwak, p. 73ff. A good general source on the strategic role of forts is J.E. and H.E. Kaufmann, *The Forts and Fortifications of Europe 1815-1945: The Central States: Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Czechoslovakia* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Military, 2014).

[26] Egypt's Nubian forts, Rome's *limes*, the Great Wall of Qin and Ming China, Byzantium's eastern forts, Venice's fortified islands of the Aegean and Adriatic, Bourbon France's Rhine fortresses, Austria's quadrilateral forts of Northern Italy and the British Empire's bastion at Singapore are just a few of the fortifications used in this fashion.

attitude toward fixed positions as a barometer for its willingness to defend the region.[27]

Mobile forces. A second military means of managing deprioritization is through the use of mobile force, which usually involves conducting a defense-in-depth in the deprioritized frontier and surging reinforcements from a rearward reserve in a crisis.[28] While defense-in-depth is not incompatible with the use of fixed defenses, its logic centers on communicating to allies and rivals that the deprioritizing power remains capable of effective punishment and then trading space for time in the event of a crisis. In the era before railways, mobile force had particular utility in deprioritization scenarios for sea powers. Britain, Holland, Athens and Venice at various points all relied on navies to relieve pared-down garrisons on distant fringes of their empires while dealing with threats closer to home. The method has typically been more problematic for land powers, involving as it does a tacit surrendering of territory that may be difficult to recover.

The advantage of defense-in-depth is that it enables the deprioritizing state to concentrate military resources so that, at least in theory, they can be used in *either* the prioritized or the deprioritized frontier. The method's chief disadvantage is that, in the event of a major crisis in either theater, the defender is forced to commit his resources, thereby forfeiting flexibility and opening up vulnerabilities in the other theater. To this must be added the political disadvantage that local allies in the deprioritized theater are likely to view the adoption of a defense-in-depth posture as a signal of reduced reliability on the part of their patron and a harbinger of risk, since it is their territory that would be ceded or become the scene of fighting in a crisis, as the old advantages of forward or preclusive defense are relinquished. This reality can lead allies to take offensive action to force the patron's hand, or even to look more favorably on the option of bandwagoning with the local threat.

For all of these reasons, the viability of defense-in-depth as a means of deprioritization tends to correlate to the speed with which allies and rivals alike

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[27] This can result in a kind of self-deception on the part of the deprioritizing power and vis-à-vis local allies alike. For example, at the 1937 Imperial Conference, British defense planners deliberately concealed what they saw as the untenability of Singapore to Australian and other Dominion prime ministers. See Darwin, p. 486.

[28] An account of the rationale for defense-in-depth and difficulties it entails as a tool of deprioritization tool can be found in Edward Luttwak's account of Roman defense strategy during the crisis of the 3rd Century AD (pp. 127-90).

believe the deprioritizing state would be able to revert attention to the secondary theater in the event of a confrontation in its prioritized theater. This calculation turns in large measure on the magnitude of the power gradient facing the deprioritizing state: the greater the distance to the deprioritized region (or the more rugged the terrain between it and the imperial center), the greater the difficulty of deploying mobile force in "fire brigade" fashion to alleviate pressure on the deprioritized region. For this reason, the power gradient has historically been more difficult to overcome by global powers.

It has been plausibly claimed that distance-conquering technologies like long-range airpower, precision-guided munitions, and most importantly nuclear weapons have mitigated the power gradient problem, insofar as they offer the prospect of a globally fungible set of assets that can be employed across regions in support of allied forces.[29] At the same time, the proliferation in the arsenals of U.S. adversaries of military capabilities explicitly aimed at controlling territory against efforts at expeditionary reentry are likely to reinforce longstanding allied doubts about when and how the United States would utilize stand-off weapons if its attention were fully absorbed elsewhere.

2. Politico-Economic Means. The second primary means of deprioritization involves using some mixture of diplomacy, intelligence and financial power in place of, or in addition to, the deprioritizing state's own military resources.

Alliances. Forming alliances to defray risk is among the oldest recorded roles of diplomacy. A deprioritizing state in particular stands to gain from having capable and motivated friends in the region from which it needs to shift military resources, since such states have a vested interest in retaining the stability of the deprioritized region and are the most likely, on a voluntary basis, to fill the gaps created by the movement of their sponsor's troops. To cite just two examples: the Byzantine emperor Justinian's pivot from the Persian frontier was preceded by cultivation of the Ghassanid Arabs and the kingdom of Lazica, both of which were amply motivated to resist Persian encroachments; and the Austrian Empress Maria Theresa's deprioritization of the Ottoman frontier during the wars with Frederick the Great

[29] See for example Jim Thomas, "Readying the U.S. Military for Future Warfare: Hearing before the Committee on Armed Services," U.S. House of Representatives, 115th Congress, 2nd session, January 30, 2018.

made use of local allies in the border regions motivated by deep generational enmity toward the Turks.[30]

What binds the deprioritizing power with the local ally is shared antipathy toward the nearby threat. At the same time, the interests of the two parties diverge significantly in that the local ally wants to ensure that its own region is *not* deprioritized and continues to retain pride of place in the protecting power's resource allocations. This can create a dynamic in which the ally in the deprioritized region tries to convince its patron to continue to field force levels that allow the ally to neglect greater exertions of its own. Britain's move toward deprioritization of the Far East in the 1930s, for example, led Australian governments to lobby London, ultimately successfully, to retain larger British deployments in Singapore, which in turn allowed Australia to keep its own defense spending low. The dilemma for the deprioritizing power is that doing too much can create perverse incentives for allies to freeride, while parring its forces to too low a level can create incentives for local allies to swing in the opposite direction and align with the secondary rival, as occurred when the kingdom of Lazica abandoned Byzantium and joined with Persia after Justinian moved his main army to North Africa.

The best scenario for the deprioritizing power is to see reliable allies take a preponderant degree of responsibility for the deprioritized region. This can take two different forms. One is for local allies to themselves become the primary source of security in the deprioritized region, using either their own or the deprioritizing power's weapons. Britain in the pre-World War era was able to effectively outsource the security of its imperial possessions to America, Japan and France. The Nixon administration's Guam doctrine succeeded in jolting greater seriousness about self-defense in Australia, South Korea and Iran.[31]

The other variant of this approach is to have local allies take on low-intensity security duties while the deprioritizing power retains control over escalation dominance. This is what Rome did under the Emperor Hadrian, in recruiting the so-called *numeri*, or

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[30] Justinian's methods are just one example of the Byzantine strategy of lining the empire's frontiers with federated allies or so-called "limitrophe states" (Armenia, Crimea and Ethiopia are other examples) that helped to deflect and absorb threats and buy time for the empire to respond. See Alexander Kazhdan, "The Notion of Byzantine Diplomacy," pp. 11-14 in Jonathan Shepard and Simon Franklin, Eds., *Byzantine Diplomacy: Papers from the Twenty-fourth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies* (Cambridge, March 1990).

[31] See Simon Chin's analysis of allies' responses to U.S. deprioritization of Asia in Krepinevich, et al., pp. 25-29.

local auxiliaries, who could be backed by support from the legions in a crisis. Britain followed a similar logic in the Interwar Near East, by using a combination of light naval squadrons and aerodromes to backstop tribes and client states who provided manpower on the ground. If anything, this option has been eased by modern military technologies, which could enable the U.S. to outsource sophisticated conventional weapons to local allies while retaining control of the upper echelons of escalation.[32]

Economic integration. Historically, great powers have used various forms of economic engagement to cement security relationships, ranging from simple bilateral trade to complex regional commercial arrangements. The existence of such linkages can aid effective strategic deprioritization in a couple of ways.

First, they tend to strengthen deterrence.[33] A great power that has deep trade relationships with, and benefits economically from, similar states in a given region is more likely to identify itself as having a vested interest in ensuring the safety of that place. This doesn't mean, as discussed previously, that other factors won't rank higher in the hierarchy of state interests when the chips are down. But the presence of thick commercial ties undoubtedly creates a more compelling stake than would exist in their absence. This, by extension, translates into a stronger motivation to defend the place in question, and thus enhanced credibility in signaling to both foes and friends of the patron's willingness to fight. A stronger deterrence makes an attack by a secondary rival less likely, thus easing the deprioritizing state's ability to focus scarce military capabilities elsewhere.

Second, economic integration tends to improve the defensibility of allies in the secondary theater. It does so both in a general sense, by augmenting the wealth of individuals allies that can be converted into indigenous military power, and in a specific sense, by encouraging military-industrial collaboration with the states of the region in question. The latter is not without risk; since antiquity, the danger has existed that allies will use military technology to gain greater independence from, or even to attack, their erstwhile allies down the line. But this danger has tended to be heavily outweighed by the advantages that enhanced military capabilities offer in

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[32] For an example of this approach drawing on Guam as a model, see Jim Thomas, "From Protectorates to Partnerships," *The American Interest*, May 1, 2011.
[33] There is a sizable literature on this subject. See for example Aysegul Aydin, "The Deterrent Effects of Economic Integration, *Journal of Peace Research* Vol. 47, No. 5 (September 2010), pp. 523-533.

enabling allies in the secondary theater to carry more of the conventional defense burden in their local environment, which is directly linked to the deprioritizing power's ability to carry more of the burden in the primary theater.[34]

Détente. A final politico-economic route to deprioritization is to reduce tensions with the rival in the deprioritized region. Where local alliances allow the deprioritizing state to shift the security risks to friendly states, détente seeks to lessen those risks at their source by soothing tensions with the nearby threat. This has been a recurrent means of deprioritizing across the ages. Justinian's determined pursuit of the "Perpetual Peace" of 532 with Persia before setting Belisarius loose in North Africa; Venice's détente with the Ottomans at the outset of the Lombard wars; Charles V's theological concessions to the Lutherans before embarking on his war with the Turks; Maria Theresa's courtship of France before resuming her quarrel with Frederick II; Britain's thaw with Tsarist Russia on the brink of her clash with Imperial Germany; and the Nixon administration's thaw with Beijing to support a shift of U.S. attention from Southeast Asia are just a few notable examples.[35]

From the perspective of the deprioritizing state, the aim of détente is not so much to enlist the secondary rival's help against the primary threat, but rather to quiet the secondary rival long enough to conduct a successful prioritization elsewhere. That 'quietening' may aim at adjusting the rival's capabilities, its intentions or some combination of the two. Britain in the Interwar period used arms control agreements with other major naval powers to reduce its burdens in multiple theaters, and the Carter Administration attempted a similar approach with the Soviet Union in the 1970s, both with unsatisfactory results.

A recurring theme in détente is that the secondary rival often sees the strategic logic from the deprioritizing state's perspective and demands a pound of flesh to go along with the scheme, either in the form of money, as when king Khusrau demanded eleven thousand pounds of gold from Justinian before agreeing to détente in 532, or in the form of territory and influence, as when Britain granted concessions to Russia

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[34] See Jakub Grygiel, "The Best Way to Combat Putin's Nuclear Threats" *Wall Street Journal*, September 30, 2022.
[35] It's worth noting that the British government also favored a policy of détente with Imperial Japan in the 1930s to support a focus on Hitler, but these efforts foundered on concerns about jeopardizing the U.S.-British alliance. See Chihiro Hosoya, "The 1934 Anglo-Japanese Nonaggression Pact" *International Studies Quarterly,* Vol. 25, No. 3 (1981), pp. 491-517.

in Persia in exchange for the Anglo-Russian entente of 1907. To these costs have to be added the uncertain duration of détente, the chilling effect that it often has on the will of local allies to resist, and the possibility that the rival in question will renege on its terms and exploit the deprioritizing state's shift of focus to launch an attack. This is what ultimately happened to Justinian when the Persians responded to Byzantium's withdrawal of the bulk of its forces on the eastern frontier for the campaigns in North Africa by violating the treaty and launching an invasion in 539.[36]

It bears adding here that détente need not take the form of a grand gesture of rapprochement as in the examples above. Precisely because of the strategy's risks, great powers sometimes pursue a quieter, pragmatic flirtation with a secondary rival to enhance their concentration of power against the main opponent. A good example is the early Reagan Administration's policy toward China. While avoiding the more public-facing attributes of Kissinger's triangular diplomacy, Reagan used a mixture of weapons sales, the lifting of export controls and even assistance for the Chinese civilian and strategic nuclear programs to support the prioritization of Europe and increase pressure on the Soviets in the Far East and Afghanistan without reneging on U.S. commitments to Taiwan. [37]

As this example shows, the ideal outcome for the deprioritizing state is for both sets of diplomatic means to work concurrently—that is, to have effective local allies *and* to have a defused local threat. The problem is that the two aims are usually at odds with one another. From the perspective of local allies, the deprioritizing state's détente with the nearby rival tends to undercut its credibility as a security provider. From the perspective of the local rival, the deprioritizing state's retention of local allies serves as a pretext for hostility. It is therefore unsurprising to find that when détente founders, it is often either because the local rival demands abandonment of allies as the "price" of the arrangement, thereby undercutting the deprioritizing power's long-term position in the region, or because it abuses the opening provided by détente to grab what it wants in hopes of getting away with it.

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[36] See the discussion of Justinian's deprioritization and its consequences in Treadgold, pp. 174-93.
[37] See Matt Pottinger's adjacent essay. See also Patrick Tyler, *A Great Wall: Six Presidents and China* (New York: Public Affairs, 2000), p. 298ff; Raymond L. Garthoff, *The Great Transition: American–Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1994), p. 632ff.; and John Pomfret, *The Beautiful Country and the Middle Kingdom: America and China, 1776 to the Present* (New York: Picador, 2016), p. 501ff.

This points to an important characteristic of détente as it relates to deprioritization: it tends to work best when backed by a healthy dose of deterrence in the secondary theater. It's vital to credibly signal to friend and foe alike that the deprioritizing power is not simply conducting an abandonment in everything but name, and abnegating its role as an upholder of regional order. In the absence of such measures, the odds are high that the arrangement will fail, possibly at the moment the deprioritizing power is in the heat of its contest with the main rival, with cascading consequences for both theaters.

To cite one of many examples that underscore the point, we see that the Byzantine Emperor Theodosius' successful peace with Persia to focus on the Huns was backed by well-garrisoned forts on the Eastern frontier, while the Emperor Justinian's peace with Persia to focus on Italy, which was accompanied by a denuding of that same frontier, only invited a Persian attack.[38] One could add the more recent example of U.S. attempts at détente with the Soviet Union in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War, which, coming at a moment when the military balance was unfavorable to the United States in Europe, had the unintended effect of convincing the Soviet Union to become more aggressive and, inter alia, launch its invasion of Afghanistan. Détente, in other words, is a dangerous option, the risks of which must be mitigated by some form of "insurance policy."

The 'Ways' of Deprioritization

The various means of deprioritization are rarely used in isolation; states mix the means at their disposal in a fluid fashion that reflects their power potentialities, the state of technology, and the vicissitudes of a given moment. The exact mix varies. But from the examples mentioned above we may derive a handful of basic templates, or 'ways' of deprioritization that recur across the ages, each with its own distinctive logic, primary means of implementation and associated level of risk.

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[38] The 18th Century Habsburg Monarchy provides another compelling example. The Empress Maria Theresa's successful détente with the Ottoman Empire during the War of Austrian Succession and Seven Years War was backed by the maintenance of a double row of well-defended forts on Austria's southern frontier. Tellingly, at the end of these wars, the Habsburg emperor Joseph II constructed a similar line of fortresses in the north, which enabled him to later deprioritize the Prussian frontier and fight a war against the Turks without incurring unacceptably high risks vis-à-vis Frederick. See the discussion on this episode in the author's book *The Grand Strategy of the Habsburg Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), pp. 110-112.

1. 'Showing a tooth.' Under this approach, the deprioritizing state relies primarily on its own military strength to deter aggression in a secondary theater, even while it concentrates on preparations against the primary threat. While allies may be employed, the emphasis is on demonstrating the defensive resolve of the deprioritizing state itself. Diplomacy with the secondary rival also takes a backseat, insofar as a continued showing of the flag by the deprioritizing state precludes a meaningful détente.

The logic of this approach is that the deprioritized region will tend to remain secure so long as the prioritized region does. Referring to Britain's strategy before the Second World War, a senior British official, Robert Vansittart, summed up the basic idea thus:

> …the order of priorities which put Japan first pre-supposed that Japan would attack us after we had got into difficulties elsewhere. 'Elsewhere' therefore came first, not second; and elsewhere could only mean Europe, and Europe could only mean Germany.[39]

At the heart of this reasoning is a wager that a more thorough preparation in the primary theater can be accomplished quickly enough to produce positive trickle-down effects in the secondary theater. This approach's main advantage lies in retaining escalation dominance in the deprioritizing state's own hands and requiring minimal "trust" vis-à-vis the local threat. Its disadvantage is that it usually retains enough force in the secondary theater to estrange the local rival and disincentive allied burden-sharing but not enough to be effective if seriously challenged. In other words, at root it rests on a bluff. *Example: British Singapore strategy, Austria's 1854-6 Crimean strategy.*

2. Bait-and-pivot. Under this approach, the deprioritizing state seeks to decisively set the secondary theater in order as a prelude to turning its full military attention elsewhere. Its aim is to decisively reduce the need for security outlays in the deprioritized region and thus preclude the dilemmas over retention of escalation dominance by effectively sequencing threats. There are two variants of this approach:

- A <u>military-intensive</u> variant, in which the deprioritizing power seeks to achieve a decisive victory over the secondary rival using its own or proxy forces, as a

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[39] Quoted in B. J. C. McKercher, "National Security and Imperial Defence: British Grand Strategy and Appeasement, 1930-1939" in *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 19, no. 3 (2008): p. 414.

prelude to a low-cost containment or détente. *Examples: Britain during the Russo-Japanese War of 1905*

- A diplomacy-intensive variant, in which the deprioritizing power seeks a downshift in tensions with the secondary rival. *Examples: Justinian's Persian Strategy, Anglo-French Entente of 1904*.

The main advantage of bait-and-pivot is that it, if successful, it promises the deprioritizing state the ability to leave behind a *de minimis* military presence in the deprioritized region. The main risk of the military variant is that it can precipitate a crisis of such magnitude or protraction in the secondary theater that precludes heightened military investment in the primary theater. The main risk of the diplomatic variant is that the secondary rival will use the deprioritizing power's reduced defensive presence as an opportunity to build up and strike at a time of its choosing, after the former has become more fully enmeshed in the primary theater.

3. Allied outsourcing. Under this approach, the deprioritizing state seeks to decisively shift the burden in deprioritized regions to capable local allies while building up overwhelming military strength for the main theater that can be used in the future to return to and reestablish primacy in the deprioritized region.

The logic of this approach is that local allies have the greatest motivation to resist the nearby threat, and that they are likely to do so if backed by a convincing demonstration of power by their patron. Its advantage lies in the speed and comprehensiveness with which it reduces the military and financial costs for the deprioritized region, with immediate benefits for the prioritized region. The main risk of this approach is that the deprioritizing state will suffer credibility losses that cannot be quickly repaired after the primary threat has been dealt with. *Examples: Hadrian's consolidation strategy, Britain early 1900s, Nixon Administration's Guam Doctrine*

All of these approaches ultimately come down to some combination of one's own military power and that of others (whether allies or erstwhile rivals). And all must be measured by how well they free up resources for the "ultimate potential danger" while retaining baseline stability in the secondary theater. Of the historical examples cited here allied outsourcing (option 3 above) seems to have been overall the most effective strategy. It especially recommends itself to a country like the modern-day United States, for which the number, wealth and geographic extent of our alliances represents a potential advantage out of all proportion to anything earlier great powers possessed.

Conclusion

It's not hard to see from these examples why states are often slow to embrace deprioritization. Doing so carries opportunity costs and requires leaders to grapple with tradeoffs. Whatever form it takes, deprioritization involves a psychological, as much as strategic or political, acceptance that the state cannot 'do it all'—at least not in one moment in time. The reason that earlier great powers undertook deprioritization despite the pain it entailed was that they reached a moment in their histories when the risks of continuing with business as usual outweighed the risks of change.

But it should also be clear from these examples that such moments represent an opportunity for strategic creativity. Deprioritization can be a spur for states to adapt to changing international circumstances and leverage competitive advantages that they had previously underutilized: to develop technological breakthroughs, galvanize allies, and proactively enhance their overall position. The strategic renovations undertaken by Hadrian's Rome, Justinian's Byzantium, Maria Theresa's Austria and Edwardian Britain went hand-in-hand with periods of imperial rejuvenation that bolstered the vitality of these powers. In all of these cases, the great powers in question didn't give up the places they deprioritized; indeed, many found themselves *re*-prioritizing them in later years. The fact that they had this ability to toggle effort between frontiers while retaining their net positions is the ultimate hallmarks of their deprioritization success. Even the internal debates that deprioritization strategies provoke can be useful in breaking strategic stasis and leading to refinements that produce a better overall strategy in the end. In geopolitics as well as business and everyday life, competition can be a prompt to innovation.

The same is true today. The 21st Century United States possesses an abundance of strategic advantages that set us apart both from these earlier powers and from our major rivals today, including a uniquely dynamic economy, resilient system of government, favorable geography, and wide array of advanced allies. Drawing on these advantages, it's possible to imagine a variety of future strategies that could accomplish deprioritization at an acceptable risk to U.S. interests that would avoid the pitfalls of a precipitous divestment on one hand or strategic overreach on the other. History suggests that it's better to undertake this modification in peacetime, with foresight and contemplation, rather than reactively, amidst the "friction" of great-

power war, by which point the costs of adjustment have gone up significantly and the margin of error has shrunk.

APPENDIX A to What is Strategic Deprioritization?

by A. Wess Mitchell

Deprioritizing power	**Why it deprioritized**	**How it deprioritized**	**Results**
Roman Empire under Hadrian	Hadrian needed to concentrate Roman military power in the east.	Hadrian consolidated Roman positions along Rome's natural frontiers of the Rhine and Danube. He constructed new lines of fortifications in Britain, Germany and North Africa, increased Rome's reliance on **local allies** (the *numeri* system) and recruited local clients to hold e.g. the Dacian salient.	Peace with Parthia; general stability for around 30 years, until the outbreak of the Macromannic wars.
Byzantine Empire under Justinian	Justinian needed to concentrate Byzantium's striking power in the west to undertake the reconquest of North Africa and Italy.	**Détente** with Persia in the 'Perpetual Peace' of 532 AD. Moved the Byzantine **mobile field army** to west; stripped **forts** along in the east of their	Successful reconquest of Italy and North Africa. Peace in the east for seven years, until Persia exploited Byzantium's military weakness and invaded.

		garrisons. Increased reliance on **local allies** (e.g., Ghassanid Arabs and Kingdom of Lazica) in the deprioritized theater.	Restored peace only by returning the field army under Belisarius.
Habsburg Austria under Maria Theresa	Maria Theresa needed to concentrate Austrian military power in the north to fend off the threat from Frederick II of Prussia.	**Détente** with *all* major rivals (Ottomans, France, Russia) other than Prussia. Moved **Austrian army** to face Frederick; maintained **garrisoned fortresses** on the least stable deprioritized frontier (Ottoman).	Successful defense against main threat (Prussia). Stability on French frontier for 33 years; on Russian frontier for 100 years; on Turkish frontier for 48 years (until Joseph II's invasion in 1788).
Pre-World War One British Empire	Britain needed to concentrate offensive (naval) power in the North Sea to deal with the threat from Wilhelm II's Prussia.	**Détente** with all major rivals (France, Russia, Japan, US) except Germany; Removal of **major fleet assets** from all deprioritized theaters. Increased	Successful defense against main threat (Germany). Maintenance of British interests in 3 out of 4 deprioritized regions (North America, Far East,

		reliance on former rivals and **local allies** to maintain influence in deprioritized regions.	Africa). Increased tension and erosion of influence in one deprioritzed region (vis-à-vis Russia in Central Asia/Near East).
Interwar British Empire	Britain needed to concentrate military power in the British home area to defend against the threat from Nazi Germany.	Unsuccessful **détente** with deprioritized rival (Japan). Removal of bulk of **main fleet** from deprioritized theater (Far East), airpower buildup in primary theater; increased reliance on **local proxies** in Near East. Retained garrisoned **fortresses** (Singapore and Hong Kong) in deprioritized region.	Opportunistic two-front aggression by Germany and Japan. Loss of Singapore and Hong Kong (1941). Partial success in reentering deprioritized region post-1945, followed by loss of influence in India and abandonment of imperial possessions 'East of Suez.'
Nixon Administration post-Vietnam War	The U.S. needed to concentrate military power in Europe to counter Soviet power in	**Détente** with China. Returned to 70/30 force distribution in Europe/Asia.	Successful reprioritization of Europe. Loss in Vietnam offset by retention of order

	the wake of the Vietnam war.	Increased reliance on **local allies** Australia, Japan, South Korea and Iran under Guam Doctrine.	and influence in deprioritized region (littoral Asia) at lower cost. Successful prompting of Australia, Japan, South Korea and Iran to assume greater burdens for self-defense and regional security.

III. INTERNATIONAL CHALLENGES TO DEPRIORITIZATION

By Elbridge Colby

Deprioritization is a strategic approach by which a state seeks to reduce its attention or commitments in one theater in order to enable it to act more effectively in another, which it deems more important or urgent. The logic of strategic deprioritization is that a state can, by reducing its commitments in one theater or area, reallocate the resources, effort, and political capital previously committed to the deprioritized theater to another more significant or urgent one.

This paper addresses the international challenges to such efforts. It argues that successful deprioritization strategies benefit greatly from – and often require – active, creative, and focused attention to shaping secondary theaters and managing the impulse to reengage there at the expense of the primary theater. If we are to understand the international challenges to such a strategy and how to navigate them, though, we should first understand a) what deprioritization is, and b) what constitutes successful deprioritization.

Defining Deprioritization

To begin, four notes of definition and emphasis.

1) First, we are here interested in deprioritization by great powers, such as the United States. Any state can deprioritize, of course, but states whose influence is insignificant are unlikely to change the trajectory of a region by reducing their focus.
2) Second, it is important to emphasize that deprioritization is a particular strategy within an overarching national policy. It is not itself an overarching strategy; it is, rather, a second-level strategy, a part of rather than the whole plan. This is not to say it is unimportant; to the contrary, it may well be critical. But it should be judged on its own terms, precisely as a particular strategy, not on whether a state's overall foreign policy is successful.
3) Third, deprioritization is here defined as an attempt at a controlled reduction, not an abandonment. It is therefore distinguished from withdrawal. Deprioritization is an effort to maintain some material interests in a region, but at a lower cost and level of effort than before.

4) Finally, the basic reason for deprioritizing a theater we are interested in here is to promote or safeguard the withdrawing state's security interests by taking attention and resources from what it judges to be a theater of lesser urgency or importance and allocating them to what it regards as its primary theater. Security here means not only purely military considerations but also a state's geopolitical position and economic security. But the logic is basically that taking strength from one theater in order to allocate to a more important one will result in a better outcome for the shifting state's interests. We can think of this as *strategic* deprioritization.

Such strategic deprioritization, of course, has been common in history. Around the turn of the last century, Great Britain famously reduced its commitments in Asia and the Americas and settled issues in Africa to enable London to focus on what it judged its principal threat: Germany in Europe. Powers as diverse as Venice, the Dutch empire, and Cold War China have executed comparable such deprioritization efforts.[40] More recently, with the "Guam Doctrine" the United States sought to prune its obligations in Asia and the Middle East during the 1970s in large part in order to husband its resources and concentrate them on the Soviet Union in Europe. Such strategic shifts are premised on the idea that a reallocation will strengthen rather than weaken the shifting state's security in relation to its most pressing threats without causing too much danger in the lesser theater such as to outweigh those benefits. States sometimes have other, more specific or idiosyncratic reasons for deprioritizing, but we will not address those here.[41]

To recapitulate: ***deprioritization*** is here defined as a) a strategy undertaken by a great power; b) as a subset of its overall national strategy; c) to engage in a controlled reduction, not abandonment, in a key theater; and d) in order to promote or safeguard the withdrawing state's security interests for re-allocation of effort toward what it judges to be its primary theater.

Criteria for Successful Deprioritization

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[40] Many of these cases are discussed in detail in Wess Mitchell's and Jakub Grygiel's adjacent papers.
[41] For instance, the shift in policy by Tsar Peter toward Prussia during the Seven Years' War is commonly understood to be an idiosyncratic function of Peter's Prussophilia. See Brendan Simms, *Europe: The Struggle for Supremacy, 1453 to the Present* (London: Allen Lane, 2013), p. 79, and K. Schweizer and C. Leonard, "Britain, Prussia, Russia and the Galitzin Letter: A Reassessment" *The Historical Journal,* Vol. 26, No. 3, (1983), pp. 531-556.

In light of these factors, for deprioritization to be considered successful, the effort should result in two outcomes:

A) "Criterion A": *Actually* freeing up resources, effort, and political capital previously tied up in one theater toward another theater the deprioritizing state judges to be more significant.
B) and "Criterion B": *While avoiding* resulting in such costs as to overwhelm the benefits of that reallocation or completely vitiate the state's remaining (albeit likely downgraded) interests.

The first part of this formula, Criterion A, is essentially a matter of resolve and action by the deprioritizing state – a question of follow-through. But the second part is not solely a matter of whether the deprioritizing state executes the strategy. Rather, it is dependent also upon others' behavior – and in particular on the consequences of the policy not resulting in a negative outcome that outweighs the gain. This means, then, that deprioritization can fail in one of two ways: The state can simply fail to implement it. Or the effort can fail because the deprioritizing state followed through with its reduction of effort, but that policy resulted in costs for it that outweighed the benefits of the reduction or that resulted in the thoroughgoing elimination of the state's remaining interests in the deprioritized theater.

This paper will focus on the second source of failure: Criterion B. This is because Criterion A is largely about a state mustering the resolve needed, and thus largely a question of internal and organizational issues for the prioritizing state.[42] Moreover, failure on Criterion A is often a product of anticipation that those feared circumstances will emerge if deprioritization is implemented. Put differently, fear of failing on Criterion B is often *the cause of* failing on Criterion A.

The source of failure on Criterion B, then, is the fear that deprioritization will lead or has led in the lesser theater to a negative outcome more costly than the benefits of prioritizing the more important one or that fully vitiates the state's interests in the lesser theater. This is important to stress because it means that, for the policy to fail, there must not merely be costs, but that those costs are so significant that, even

[42] These issues are addressed in Matt Pottinger's adjacent paper.

though felt in or from a theater deemed secondary, they outweigh the benefits in the primary theater or result in the collapse of the state's position in the lesser theater. It is, therefore, substantially a relative standard.

Failure on Criterion B: Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

What could lead to such outweighing costs? It is important first to address the possibility of simple disorder or chaos being sufficient to keep a state in a region from which it wishes to pivot or drawing it back in, once it has reduced its profile there. This is because such an argument – that a deprioritization effort will lead to instability or even chaos – is commonly levied against efforts to deprioritize. It is often true that such deprioritization attempts do lead to instability and disorder, and it is certainly possible that these negative results can lead to such costs that a state judges it cannot prudently pivot away from a given region.

Instability or even chaos alone is not enough, however, to judge a deprioritization effort a failure. This is because normally a powerful deprioritizing state can find ways to shield itself from such consequences or mitigate them through less geopolitically taxing methods, especially in a theater that is subject to state failure and chaos. The European overseas decolonization effort can, for instance, be seen as an example of an effort to deprioritize away from Africa. While chaos and conflict often ensued in the region, this did not stop the Europeans from substantially reducing their commitments, even as they retained a more modest involvement there and kept significant commercial, diplomatic, and even military interests on the continent. Likewise, the United States deprioritized Southeast Asia after the withdrawal from Vietnam but did not abandon the region; it rather accepted that the costs of the loss of Indochina and the chaos that ensued in Cambodia were not enough to justify maintaining its previously much higher level of involvement.

In this context it is important to stress once again that deprioritization does not mean abandonment or total neglect. It means a material reallocation of significant, scarce resources –especially military assets, diplomatic and political capital, and money – away from a theater. But, consistent with this standard, a state can still conduct economy of force efforts in the deprioritized region and also use its resources to protect itself from the consequences of instability. It can still keep a significant diplomatic and intelligence presence in a region, for instance, and even conduct more select military interventions, as France has done in Africa in the period since de-

colonization. Meantime, it can use its own internal powers, such as border control and policing, to buffer itself from the consequences of the spillover effects of its reduction of effort.

The upshot of this is that chaos or instability alone should normally not be enough, logically speaking, to persuade a deprioritizing state to reverse its policy and heavily reengage in that region. Rather, there must be some compelling interest to make such disorder seem important enough to remain in or reenter the region. This is because a strategic deprioritization effort is normally driven by some *other* compelling reason to refocus, by a strong perceived need, not mere convenience.

This leaves two primary, fundamental challenges to deprioritization efforts.

1) First, there is the threat to the basic geopolitical calculation of deprioritizing – what we will call *the geopolitical threat*.
2) Second, there is the threat that a theater, even a relatively weak one, will become a base for asymmetric security threats such as terrorism, weapons of mass destruction (WMD) attacks, or pandemic outbreaks, that affect the deprioritizing state or perhaps also its allies – what we will call *the non-state threat*. For a state to reengage in the theater because of such a peril, these threats should be sufficiently grave to outweigh the benefits of reallocating effort *and* heavy reengagement should help redress or mitigate rather than exacerbate the threat.

We will address these two challenges in sequence.

Geopolitical Challenges

The most profound international challenge to deprioritization is one that strikes at the very heart of its logic: that it will result in a hostile state or states gaining a hold over the region's power or resources and turning them against the deprioritizing state's important interests enough to make the costs of deprioritizing that region too great.

These costs can emerge in at least two ways. One is the agglomeration of power by a hostile state solely in the context of the deprioritized region in ways that wholly vitiate the refocusing state's remaining interests or even make the costs too great in the lesser theater relative to the benefits in the primary theater. More dramatically, they can also

lead to the capture of the region's strength and its employment against the deprioritizing state even in terms of the more important region. Either of these, but particularly the latter, can undercut the foundational, first-order logic of strategic deprioritization, rendering it a failure on its own terms.

The critical point in the geopolitical context, though, is that the deprioritized theater remains important enough to matter, whether because of its geopolitical significance, its geography, or its natural resources. If a theater is unimportant enough, a state can simply withdraw and cuts its losses, consequences be damned. Few think that Great Britain downgrading its remaining interests in the South Atlantic or the South Pacific would matter for its stance in Europe or the Middle East.

A theater might retain geopolitical significance for a number of reasons. Most importantly, a theater may possess significant geopolitical power. While what constitutes geopolitical strength is debated, most analyses cluster around the matrix of large numbers of economically productive people and important natural resources. Of course, this is a matter of degree and to some extent of subjective and relative assessments, not mathematical precision. But we can achieve a rough order of magnitude degree of clarity. Using standard metrics of economic power, the three major theaters for the United States, broadly defined, are Asia, Europe, and North America. Asia constitutes roughly 40-50 percent of global GDP (and that growing); Europe roughly 20-25 percent (and declining); and North America an approximately similar amount, albeit almost entirely because of the United States itself. The Middle East is roughly 5 percent, with a special concentration of natural resources in the Persian Gulf. Latin America is 6 percent, Africa 2 percent, Central Asia 0.5 percent and Oceania 2 percent. Of course these are rough estimates, and each theater, moreover, can be further divided, but this gives a rough ranking of the relative importance of regions from a global geopolitical perspective.

A theater can also be important, however, because of its geography. This might include its significance from a military point of view for the deprioritizing state. For instance, North Africa and the Near East were relatively backward from an economic standpoint during the 19th Century, but British policy heavily emphasized that theater because of its critical role as a link between the British Isles and vitally important India as well as London's other possessions in the Far East. Similarly, the United States and China today jockey for advantage in the desolate South Pacific because of its importance for U.S. access to the critical Indo-Pacific area. Many northern-tier

countries are especially concerned about the barely-inhabited Arctic because of its potential as a new vector of influence.

A region's significance might also stem from natural resources that are of particular importance, again including in areas that do not boast highly developed economies. For instance, oil and gas as well as the resources needed for advanced technology, such as supercomputing and semiconductors, are distributed throughout the world, including in less developed areas of Latin America and Africa. Efforts to decouple from China and Russia in these sensitive areas may increase the relevance of countries in Southeast Asia, Latin America and Africa if they possess compensating supplies.

Whatever the sources of a region's importance, the key point is that these interests are important enough that the deprioritizing state does not want them simply to fall into hostile hands and be turned against it. In other words, deprioritization, unlike withdrawal, involves a wager that the deprioritized theater will not fall under the control of a sufficiently menacing hostile power or powers.

Thus the ultimate geopolitical challenge to a strategy of deprioritization is that a hostile or potentially hostile state will, whether because of opportunism, fear, or some other motivation, exploit the vacuum created to gain sufficient dominance over the theater and ultimately wield that agglomerated power against the deprioritizing state or its important interests to a sufficient degree to outweigh the benefits of shifting focus in the first place. This is the essence of the geopolitical challenge to deprioritization.

This challenge can come about in essentially two ways. First, the deprioritizing state's main rival (or rivals), even if not located in that theater, may exploit any vacuum the deprioritization creates to turn the region's resources to its own and against the deprioritizing state's advantage enough to outweigh the benefits of refocusing. Second, a lesser rival or indeed even a state not previously considered an opponent can exploit such an opportunity to consolidate a region's resources under its control and use that power base to materially threaten the deprioritizing state's interests.

Variant One: Main Rival Exploits Vacuum

The first variant can be seen in contemporary discussions, for instance, that China will take advantage of relative U.S. neglect of the Middle East, Latin America, or Europe

to bring these theaters into its own camp and turn them against the United States, undermining the latter's whole effort to confront China. We can think of this as the "leapfrogging" danger.

On the whole, however, this danger is normally not sufficient to outweigh the benefits of refocusing. This is for a straightforward reason: the compelling strategic rationale for deprioritization is that the *danger is greater and more significant from the main rival in the primary rather than the secondary theater*, so refocusing is necessary, lest worse consequences ensue. In other words, strategic deprioritization does not involve denying there are downsides in the secondary theater to such a shift in focus, but the whole point of strategic prioritization is to put scarce resources against a more pressing threat. And in these circumstances, the peril from the main rival is normally presumed to be greatest in another theater. For instance, in the case of China the argument is that the danger is greater in Asia and that Asia, as the world's largest economic area, is also the world's decisive theater. A similar logic guided British refocusing on Europe and Germany before the First World War.

More fundamentally, how serious one treats this concern tends to turn on the importance attributed to hard military and economic power as opposed to "soft" power and global issues. If hard power is more determinative, then the decisive theaters are those with the most power resources and the key rival is the strongest one. Thus focusing on that rival in those theaters is key, and consequences in other theaters are best mitigated, since by definition they are likely to be more manageable. Moreover, successfully contesting the main rival in the primary theater may undercut the rival's ability to devote resources towards exploiting secondary theaters. Even if that rival is able to gain advantage in secondary theaters, prevailing in the primary one is preferable. As Churchill put it, if we get things right in the decisive theater, we can put everything else right again.[43]

This is likely to hold true not only in terms of broad geopolitical resources, but also in terms of strategic geography and natural resources. For instance, the Western Pacific and the first island chain are so critical not only because of their concentration of large, highly productive economies, but also because of the area's military significance

[43] Winston S. Churchill to Viscount Haldane (6 May 1912), in Randolph S. Churchill, ed., *Winston S. Churchill* Vol. II, companion book 3 (London: Heinemann, 1969), p. 445.

in constraining or enabling Chinese power projection. If China cannot get its military in force through the first island chain, it is unlikely to be able to generate decisive military power in the Middle East. Thus holding the line in the decisive theater – and allocating resources from the Middle East to do so – makes sense not only in the decisive theater but is *also* beneficial to U.S. interests in the Middle East itself. In an earlier era, Britain husbanded its worldwide navy and air force in its home waters during the two world wars, judging that a German military bottled up in Europe was better than one let loose to enable an invasion of the British Isles or menace British interests worldwide. Even those German forces that did manage to get beyond the British blockade were eventually dealt with from a position of strength – as Churchill said: "Like a cut flower – beautiful, but fated to die."[44] Britain's calculations in the Napoleonic Wars were similar.

If power metrics are more about soft power and broader indices of international influence, though, then such prioritization is not clear, and the danger of the secondary theater turning against the serious interests of the deprioritizing state may be more serious.[45]

A second counter to this danger – really itself a strategy – is to actively work in the secondary theater to deny the chief overall rival the ability to agglomerate its resources or cause instability that would detract from the deprioritizing state's cost-benefit calculus in doing so. The United States during the Trump Administration, for instance, had a strategy of both prioritizing China but also actively competing for influence in Europe in order to deny gains for Beijing (and Moscow). In an earlier period, the United States competed for influence with the Soviet Union in Latin America and Africa, for instance, without relying heavily on its military forces but rather more on diplomacy, economic engagement, and intelligence capabilities. Such a move can leave a state confident that its losses in the secondary theater will not be claimed as direct, one-for-one gains by the primary rival.

On the whole, then, the danger of the main rival "leapfrogging" is usually insufficient to justify not focusing on the primary theater to deal with that rival there. By

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[44] Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis, 1911-1918* (London: Odhams, 1938), p. 177.
[45] Hal Brands and Jake Sullivan, "China Has Two Paths to Global Domination," *Foreign Policy*, May 2020.

definition that is the most decisive region and where the danger is felt to be most acute from the main rival, so getting things right there should be the priority.

Variant Two: Regional Actor Agglomerates Power

The second variant of geopolitical challenge, though, is a more complex matter. It involves the potential for a state *other than the primary rival* to take advantage of the vacuum that the deprioritizing state's reduction in presence has caused. If such a state can become strong enough, it can threaten the deprioritizing state – either alone or in concert with the primary rival – enough to outweigh the costs of the shift in effort.

This state may or may not already be a rival at the time of the deprioritization. Of course an established opponent of the reducing state is likely to try to take advantage of its stepping back. For instance, most analysts expect established U.S. adversaries Russia and Iran to seek advantage in Europe and the Middle East, respectively, as the United States tries to shift focus to Asia.

But a state need not be an established adversary to pose this danger. For instance, Japan was an ally of Great Britain, France, and the United States during the First World War. Yet in part in response to the vacuum created by these states' desire to reduce their strategic commitments and military obligations in Asia, Tokyo became more assertive and ultimately aggressive against them, ultimately switching sides and joining Germany in the Second World War.

The international pressures that can lead to this problem can be seen as almost hydraulic or dynamic in nature. If an important state with significant influence in a region seeks to deprioritize that theater, that will by necessity create some kind of a vacuum. And power, like nature, abhors a vacuum. States that previously were content with the regional order under the deprioritizing state's influence or were afraid to challenge it might now see reason to try to gain more power.

Not just hostile but also previously friendly states might well have incentives to react to this strategy in ways that lead to the deprioritization effort's failure on these terms. Since the deprioritizing state was presumptively powerful in the theater beforehand, the reduction of its power and presence there will necessarily change the situations and thus the calculations of the states remaining in the theater.

Thus states whose ambitions had been blunted or frustrated by the deprioritizing state will now have more room to advance. Meantime, states which had relied on the protection of or alliance with the deprioritizing state will now be more exposed to those from whom the withdrawing state had protected them. And states which had straddled the fence or free-ridden may no longer view those policies as wise; if they had relied on the withdrawing state to ensure a stable balance or had sheltered behind its defense perimeter, they may determine such a policy to be no longer prudent.

Moreover, because these changes are dynamic and interact with each other, the result is that the remaining states' calculations may shift, potentially in dramatic rather than merely incremental ways. States that had been status quo-oriented might become revisionist, whether out of fear or opportunism. States that had been cautious might become aggressive. And the reverse. At the end of the day, this vacuum can be filled in various ways, resulting in differing new equilibria.

In and of itself, such changes are not necessarily bad for the deprioritizing state. Indeed, they may be beneficial if they together lead to a tolerable new equilibrium. The most significant variant of this problem is the emergence of a newly dominant power in the region that is itself sufficiently dangerous or can league together with the deprioritizing state's main rival in ways that are sufficiently menacing, just as Japan leagued together with Germany in the Second World War.

This reveals an important point: *For deprioritization to make sense, a sufficiently tolerable new balance of power must emerge in the deprioritized theater*. Things do not need to be all "sweetness and light" in the deprioritized theater; it does not need to be stable or even particularly favorable to the deprioritizing state. It just needs to remain under a threshold of danger at which the region under a dominant new power causes more trouble than the shift in focus is worth, or leads to the elimination of the shifting state's remaining interests. Such new orders are common but cannot be presumed.

For instance, Great Britain's withdrawal from its America colonies after the War of Independence represented a major deprioritization away from North America. Instead of seeking to hold on to the thirteen colonies, London determined that the costs were too great, that the effort to do so was jeopardizing its interests in the primary theater of Europe and elsewhere, and that it could protect its remaining interests in British Canada and the Caribbean even in the face of an independent United States. This judgment proved to be correct. While Great Britain and the United States remained

rivals for another century, fighting the War of 1812 and nearly going to war on a number of other occasions, Britain was able to refocus its attention elsewhere after its defeat in the American War of Independence while protecting its remaining possessions from both the United States itself and its European rivals.

This underscores an important point. The danger of a new state becoming dominant is most likely to heighten if *the manner* in which the deprioritizing state shifts away or the new situation it leaves behind creates compelling temptations for such ambitions. In other words, the primary danger is if the deprioritizing state reduces effort in a way that creates a vulnerability or a vacuum that a potential new hegemon can take advantage of, and that fearful states determine is best placated rather than confronted – in other words, that it leads to coercion by the aggressive or acquisitive and bandwagoning by the targeted or potentially targeted.

In this context, the deprioritizing state is likely to be better off if it pursues a sound and realistic strategy to ensure that this does *not* happen – that it takes action to ensure that the new regional order that emerges is in fact tolerable, rather than presuming it. This means that the "nature of the dismount," as Wess Mitchell puts it, is critical. The challenge, of course, is that the deprioritizing state must seek to achieve this goal employing fewer resources, military and otherwise, and less political capital; the reservation of these scare assets for the primary theater being, after all, the point of the deprioritization. But deprioritization does not require lethargy. Rather, it can be consistent with an active strategy, but one that recognizes the limits within which it must remain, since to surpass those limits would defeat the point of the effort.

In such a context, a sound strategy should seek to *actively promote* rather than assume the emergence of a tolerable new regional balance of power. To ensure such an outcome, this kind of strategy needs to identify the state or the states with the main ability and potential resolve to pursue a regionally dominant position and seek to create a revamped or even new balancing coalition to check that power's aspiration. To reiterate, the prime danger in this respect may be the shifting state's traditional regional rival – but need not be. A sound strategy along these lines therefore needs to be predicated on a realistic reading of the geopolitical situations confronting the regional states that emerge from the deprioritizing state's effort to pivot away. This includes identifying not only those that may become more aggressive, but also those that might have a tendency to bandwagon as well as those that would be more willing to actively balance. Importantly, this reading may need to lead to change in the roster

of friends, foes, and neutrals, as well as empowering states that previously had been kept in a box or even collaborating with states previously scorned, depending on the needs of the new balance.

The deprioritizing state may pursue a number of different models to this approach based on its reading of the emerging balance of power in the deprioritized theater and its needs in the primary theater. The shifting state may, for instance, seek to promote a coalition to ensure that the most dangerous candidate to seize regional hegemony can be blunted. For instance, the Abraham Accords model in the Middle East reflects the idea that states such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates together could pick up much of the burden of containing Iran's ambitions for regional dominance. Alternatively, though, the shifting state may determine that ceding the theater to a new hegemon may be, if not ideal, tolerable. Great Britain resisted American domination of North America for a century after the Revolution but eventually relented to it, given the need to focus Britain's scarce resources on the European Continent and judgments that the Americans would not abuse that regional hegemony.

Indeed, such strategies are feasible even in more difficult circumstances, when a deprioritizing state is shifting not merely because of the needs of the primary theater but in very difficult conditions in the lesser theater. This is often because the very reduction of effort by the shifting state changes the calculations of other states to either do more to balance the aspiring regional hegemon's ambitions or can even involve a fundamental reorientation of key states that had previously been hostile.

The U.S. deprioritization of Indochina presents an illustrative case. The United States was heavily involved in Indochina from the 1950s onwards, and especially during the peak war years of the mid to late-1960s. Washington's aim was to stanch the spread of Communism in Southeast Asia and particularly to prevent the fall of South Vietnam to the Communist North. America had decided by the end of the 1960s, however, that it did not want to continue such a large-scale effort and began a tortuous process of withdrawal-cum-"Vietnamization." Regional states understood that this represented a major reduction in American power in Southeast Asia, dramatically intensifying after 1973, and ultimately resulting in the U.S. cutoff of aid to and the ensuing fall of the three non-Communist Indochinese governments in 1975.

The United States did not conduct a full-scale withdrawal from Southeast Asia, though. Instead, a new balance of power emerged after several years. This was not an accident. An active U.S. strategy to exploit Beijing's split from Moscow helped enable this deprioritization effort, as did regional fears of that Vietnamese power, backed by a comparably forward-leaning Soviet Union in the context of U.S. defeat as the "weary titan." By the time President Nixon outlined the "Guam Doctrine" in July 1969, the ideological split between China and the Soviet Union was increasingly clear. Washington capitalized on this shift in the balance of power through Sino-American rapprochement. Washington also worked to maintain key alliances and partnerships despite the collapse of South Vietnam and the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO). Even after SEATO collapsed, the key U.S. alliances with Thailand and the Philippines were affirmed, and SEATO states themselves began normalizing relations with China.

The critical piece was that China itself shifted camps – a remarkable transition given that it was a Marxist government that had provided massive support to the North Vietnamese war effort. Yet Beijing, judging that a weakened America was now less of a threat than the Soviet Union, with which it fought a border war in 1972, and Vietnam, with which it would clash in 1979, moved to the other side, providing major heft to counter the Hanoi-Moscow coalition. Indeed, this involved truly strange bedfellows, with Washington going so far as to take Khmer Rouge Kampuchea's side alongside Beijing in the United Nations when Hanoi invaded Cambodia in 1978-1979. By the early 1980s, a new balance had emerged in Southeast Asia that was acceptable from a U.S. point of view; no other U.S. allies or partners had fallen to Communism and the threat from Communist Vietnam had largely been contained. The result was a new, sufficiently tolerable balance of power for Washington, and at a much lower level of effort by the United States.

An earlier historical case is Russian deprioritization of the Pacific in the latter 19th and into the 20th Centuries. The Russian Empire had expanded to the Pacific coast of Eurasia by the 17th Century and acquired a string of possessions across the Pacific in the 18th and 19th Centuries, including Vladivostok, Sakhalin, the Kuril Islands, the Aleutian Islands, Alaska ("Russian America"), and even outposts as far as Fort Ross in northern California and Hawaii.
Yet, recognizing that it risked overextension, Russia in the period between its defeat in the Crimean War and its victory in the Russo-Turkish War sold its North American possessions to the United States and traded the Kurils to Japan for sole sovereignty

over Sakhalin. Russia continued to consolidate control over its continental Far Eastern possessions, setting it on a collision course with a rising Japan. But even after its defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, since the victory was so costly for Japan militarily and economically, Russia did not give up all that much in the Treaty of Portsmouth. In fact, Russian interests in its Far Eastern territory were basically safeguarded and Russia was able to devote a much larger share of its forces to the European theater in the Second World War than it otherwise might have.

This deprioritization effort took place over a long time period and across imperial and Communist governments, but its basic success in enabling Russia to focus on its primary theater while protecting its key interests in the deprioritized one is notable for a continental power.[46]

The Non-State Threat

A second form of international challenge to deprioritization efforts – and one with which the United States is now intimately familiar – is the potential for even geopolitically less important regions to emerge as bases for or sources of transnational threats to the deprioritizing state, even from a position of weakness. This is especially relevant for cases of terrorism, the use of weapons of mass destruction by terrorists or "rogue states," migration, and the development of pandemic diseases. Such threats can emanate from theaters that are less significant geopolitically, such as Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America.

While these kinds of threats of course pose real dangers to a deprioritizing state, they logically should be consistent with a deprioritization strategy. This is fundamentally because the deprioritizing state can adopt a more focused strategy to deal with these threats, as the United States does vis a vis Africa and Latin America, for instance. The basic reality is that these are primarily threats generated by weakness – ungoverned spaces, weak states, and the like. Accordingly, they should be more addressable through economy of force efforts – not perfectly, but to a standard whereby they do not overwhelm the benefits of refocusing. This is especially true because there is reason to think that at least some of these threats may get worse with too much intervention by the important state.

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[46] I am grateful to Austin Dahmer for this example.

Take the case of terrorism. The United States over the last twenty years has shifted from a strategy of heavy forward intervention in the Middle East to one that involves a combination of more focused military power projection, ongoing intelligence and law enforcement activities, societal defense and resilience, partnership with similarly-incentivized regional and extra-regional states, and a certain degree of realism about the ability to "end" terrorism. Especially useful for the Defense Department in such efforts are special operations forces and certain types of conventional forces. Counterterrorism operations, foreign internal defense, and security force assistance provide a relatively low-cost hedge against the terror threat emanating from geopolitically less significant theaters. Importantly, much of U.S. force structure in the Middle East over the last twenty years has consisted not of forces tailored for low-cost counterterrorism, but rather conventional forces engaged in stability operations, nation-building, and deterring Iran.

Deprioritizing the Middle East has therefore not had as large of a negative effect on U.S. counterterrorism efforts as some had anticipated and might actually lead to a lowered terror threat by reducing any provocation provided by large-scale U.S. force deployments. This system is not perfect, but it has allowed the United States to deprioritize the Middle East over the last decade without resulting in terrorist attacks that have outweighed the benefit of the approach. Indeed, it is even possible that the reduction in effort has lessened the terrorist threat.

Concluding Observations

The key theme that emerges from this analysis is the importance of actively formulating and implementing a strategy for the secondary theater that credibly reflects the new power realities, including the more limited power resources available for the now secondary theater. This is especially important in the practical context of real world bureaucratic and national politics, with direct relevance to the situation facing the United States today.

The United States is coming off a period of quasi-unipolarity; it therefore unsurprisingly exhibits deep inertial tendencies toward maintaining heavier engagement across the key theaters where it has been principally involved. Much of the resistance to prioritizing China and Asia, despite its potent geopolitical logic,

appears to stem from the gravitational pull that legacy commitments and connections in theaters such as Europe and the Middle East exert.

This study illuminates one promising way to counteract this gravitational pull: to actively plan how to manage deprioritized theaters in ways that reflect the new geopolitical realities the United States faces, rather than deciding to ignore or abandon them. Seeking simply to leave or even pivot away from lesser theaters, however compelling in the abstract, appears likely to leave the attempt hostage to the likelihood that trouble will emerge in those secondary theaters and draw the United States back in.

Instead of hoping for this not to happen, a prioritization effort seems more likely to succeed if the government specifically, actively, and clear-headedly *plans* how to manage these lesser theaters in a new fashion, reflecting not only the reduced power resources and political capital available for such management but also new, almost certainly reduced expectations for the *results* of such management. While this approach will not satisfy those who want to continue in the old ways, it will at least offer some realistic prospect for keeping the burdens of the management of lesser theaters at a level commensurate with genuinely prioritizing the primary one.

IV. DOMESTIC CHALLENGES TO DEPRIORITIZATION

"In the back of our minds, perhaps, there is a technocratic model of government in which these professionals should be left to go about their business uncorrupted by politics or even by policy influence from elected or appointed officials who may have their own philosophy or objectives in the matter. But in truth, this is the wrong model. The political process that is the ultimate determinant of national policy is not a corruption; it is the source of legitimacy. The abolition of politics is a mirage, and a dangerous one." – Peter W. Rodman, Presidential Command (2009)

By Matt Pottinger

Introduction

This essay examines domestic challenges to the strategic deprioritization of a region or other foreign policy problem.

As we have asserted elsewhere in this series, when deprioritization of a foreign-policy problem fails as a maneuver it is usually for one of two reasons: 1) The act of deprioritization ends up incurring costs that clearly outweigh the intended benefits; or 2) the state simply fails to follow through in implementing deprioritization.

Elbridge Colby's essay shows how international challenges can often deliver failures in the first category. Domestic challenges, by contrast, tend to cause failures of the second kind. They can sabotage a great power's ability to follow through with deprioritization, despite the best intentions of its leaders. This is particularly true in peacetime, when bureaucratic and societal inertia against change is greatest.

This essay explores the latter dynamic using examples from Ronald Reagan's first term in office (when his administration asserted a hardline Soviet policy and discarded the 1960s and 70s policy of "détente") and from Donald Trump's term in office (when his administration jettisoned a decades-old emphasis on "engagement" with China in favor of "great power competition").

Both presidencies ushered in significant peacetime shifts in strategic focus. Both also attempted to deprioritize other theaters (the Middle East in Reagan's case; the Middle East, Afghanistan, and Europe in Trump's) in pursuit of their main goals. And both encountered (or inadvertently induced) similar types of friction, including policy end-runs by cabinet officials, bureaucratic resistance by career officials, and opposition by private business interests, all of which seriously complicated the Presidents' strategies.

The examples below are illustrations of challenges that emerge from within the executive branch—from cabinet secretaries with conflicting priorities, say, or bureaucratic resistance to policy changes—as opposed to external domestic factors, such as congressional obstruction or heavy opposition to new policies by business, labor, or other interests. A few lessons emerge:

1) Deprioritization is more likely to fail when U.S. national security officials believe that a President's top priority—or the policy supporting it—remains unsettled and malleable. Indeed, any sign of vacillation by a President toward his new priority or in his resolve in executing it invites resistance from career officials and tempts senior political appointees to "relitigate" policy. This, in turn, can generate palpable friction against the deprioritization of established foreign policy objectives. In much the same way that uncertainty in financial markets can paralyze new investments by a business, uncertainty about a President's overarching intentions will inhibit a bureaucracy's willingness to mobilize and adapt to White House priorities and *de*-priorities. We will look at Reagan's second-guessing of his sanctions following the imposition of martial law in Poland, and how it invited bitter and repeated battles for the soul of his Soviet policy. Similarly, Trump's hot-again-cold-again desire for a trade deal with China delayed the execution of key aspects of the competitive strategy he had approved his first year in office.

   Uncertainty about top priorities make it more difficult to coalesce around deprioritized objectives, too. Uncertainty about whether Trump was committed to a sweeping strategic competition with China or more narrowly focused on rectifying imbalances in trade deferred decisions to align budgets, personnel, and military and intelligence resources to the great-power competition espoused in the formal strategies he approved.

2) If a top priority requires an explicit and unequivocal policy statement by a President, so, too, does a new *de*-priority. Put another way, just because a foreign problem has been deprioritized does not mean it can get away with a less clear statement of policy by the President. Desired ends and means may be more modest for a deprioritized objective than for a high-priority one, but *the policy statement from the President must be equally concrete for a low priority as for a high one*. A President's failure to be concrete heightens the probability of policy drift, with the result that a low priority can fester into a crisis, negating the whole purpose of deprioritization.

   There is a corollary: *A President, paradoxically, often must devote as much of his personal time to formulating the policies for low priorities as he does to executing the policy of a top priority*. Neglecting to do so, as we will see with the Reagan administration in Lebanon, is a recipe for trouble. Conversely, when Reagan took the time to develop conviction about, and clearly state, his policy for a lowered priority—as he did on U.S.-Japan trade policy and U.S. relations with Taiwan—deprioritization was more likely to be successful. Similarly, Trump's significant time spent on Middle East policy, including brokering peace between Arab states and Israel, ultimately supported his prerogative to deprioritize U.S. military commitments in the region, freeing up time and resources for the competition with China.

3) Third, and closely related to the other two, is the underappreciated utility of developing formal, classified strategy documents, approved by the President and disseminated to departments and agencies. This may sound obvious but many who assume high national security positions (this author included) have been stunned to discover how rarely internal-facing, all-of-government national-security strategy documents are actually produced and heeded.

   To be sure, written strategies are no panacea, even when they bear the President's signature. But they provide a powerful tool for affecting strategic change during peacetime, when bureaucracies are at their most stubborn, by giving officials "scripture" they can quote to break policy impasses and benchmark the progress departments and agencies make in fulfilling presidential directives. This essay looks at the important role formal, classified strategy documents played in the Reagan and Trump administrations, and how they can help strategic deprioritization succeed. Strategies work best when they

are accompanied by a mechanism for ensuring follow-through by departments and agencies, and when the White House Office of Management and Budget aligns its budget requests with the NSC-coordinated strategies. The Trump Administration attempted such a system of follow-through and budget alignment in 2019-20, with some success.

Battles for the Soul of Policy Under Reagan and Trump

Few U.S. Presidents have brought stronger foreign policy convictions to the White House than Ronald Reagan carried with him when he took office at the start of 1981. Reagan's visceral abhorrence of Communism was informed by his deep research on the subject, his religious faith, and his midlife conversion to political conservatism. "I had an agenda I wanted to get done. I came with a script,"[47] Reagan told an aide at the end of his eight years in office.

That script included plans to replace détente—the U.S. policy of easing tensions with the Soviets that had prevailed since the late 1960s—with a more confrontational policy. "Détente's been a one-way street that the Soviet Union has used to pursue its aims," Reagan stated in his first press conference as president.[48] Yet the parameters of that confrontational policy remained a matter of intense contention between his top national security officials throughout his first term.

Some in the administration, including Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, CIA Director William Casey, and several members of the National Security Council (NSC) staff, believed the policy's objectives should go beyond "containment" to what they termed "rollback" of Soviet power—an approach aimed ultimately at defeating the Soviet Union by bringing acute economic and other pressures to bear. The State Department, led first by Al Haig, resisted this interpretation of Reagan's will and sought to soften the aims and contours of the policy.

Matters came to a head in December 1981 when Poland, a key Soviet satellite, declared martial law and arrested the leaders of the anti-Communist Solidarity labor movement. Reagan, determined to impose heavy costs on the USSR, briefly

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[47] Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), p. 845n.2.
[48] Ronald Reagan, "Press Conference," *UC Santa Barbara – The American Presidency Project,* January 29, 1981. https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-992

considered shuttering the Soviet embassy in the United States before settling on economic sanctions against Poland and the Soviet Union. Haig, while initially supportive, soon proposed watering down the scope of the sanctions in light of negative reactions from West Germany and other U.S. allies in Europe, who were losing business and future access to Russian gas supplies under the sanctions. Reagan wrestled over whether to scale back sanctions. This made the matter into a proxy for the overall direction of the administration's Soviet policy—and over who makes foreign policy.

The disagreements were ideological, institutional, and often bitter. "One might have thought [State and the NSC] were two different and hostile governments," Richard Pipes, an NSC staffer who favored rollback, wrote in his memoir.[49] Haig, who threatened repeatedly to resign unless he was granted greater authority to make foreign policy decisions, sought to marginalize the NSC and other agencies. The policymaking process was, in a word, dysfunctional.

Reagan, perhaps to Haig's surprise, finally accepted his Secretary of State's resignation, settling the question of who makes foreign policy. "[Haig] said his differences were on policy…. Actually the only disagreement was over whether I made policy or the Sec of State did," Reagan wrote in his diary the day he let Haig go.[50]

Reagan had far greater confidence in Haig's successor, George Shultz, but the policy feuds between department heads continued, including over the Poland sanctions and the direction of Soviet policy. Reagan's decision, on Shultz's advice, to rescind many of the sanctions in late 1982 heightened the sense that the administration's Soviet policy was up for grabs. It wasn't until two years into the administration, in early 1983, that the policy was settled definitively enough to pause the battle for its overall direction.

Two contributing factors seem to have been: 1) the completion of an interagency classified strategy for the Soviet Union called National Security Decision Directive 75 (discussed in further detail below), and 2) a meeting in the Oval Office in which Reagan overruled key elements of a diplomatic campaign Shultz was proposing to

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[49] Richard Pipes, *Vixi: Memoirs of a Non-belonger* (Yale University Press, 2003), p. 169.
[50] Douglas Brinkley, Ed., *The Reagan Diaries* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), pp. 90-91.

attempt with Moscow. "It seems to me that in previous years of détente we always took steps and got kicked in the teeth," Reagan told Shultz and the dozen other top officials sitting in on the meeting.[51] With that judgment rendered, Reagan smoothed the way for the policymaking process to become more orderly.

A similar drama played out on China policy in the Trump administration. Trump lacked the deep-seated hostility to China's system of government that Reagan had for the Soviet Union. But Trump nursed an unshakeable grievance that Beijing had "taken advantage" of the United States in trade and through systematic theft of American intellectual property. The lack of public reference by Trump to a Cold War-style ideological contest convinced many in his administration that, if a trade deal could be reached, there would be a resumption of business as usual between China and the United States. Others, particularly at the NSC, viewed the Communist regime in Beijing as a grave threat to U.S. security as well as prosperity, and believed a broadly competitive approach was necessary.

Trump would eventually come to share that viewpoint, too. But for the first two years of his administration, especially, each new development related to China invited a policy battle pitting hardliners against soft-liners. Business leaders vied to lobby the President and cabinet-level officers from State, Treasury, Commerce, the U.S. Trade Representative, as well as the NSC and various other corners of the White House made end runs around one another to the Oval Office. The gamesmanship did little to settle the overall direction of policy. "[V]ictories won by end runs can be notoriously short-lived—in part because their legitimacy is usually not accepted by others," according to Peter Rodman, who served in senior national security roles across five administrations between 1969 and 2007.[52]

With Trump alternating between excitement and skepticism about the prospects for a trade deal with Beijing, policy prioritization—and deprioritization—were kept in suspense. The distribution of personnel, budgets, and time allotted across various foreign policy problems remained much as they had been at the end of the preceding administration, as bureaucracies maintained "level steady flight" in the clouds of policy ambiguity.

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[51] Pipes, p. 206.
[52] Peter Rodman, *Presidential Command* (New York: Vintage Press, 2010), p. 280.

Public and classified strategies endorsed by the President around the one-year mark of his Presidency helped provide clarity of direction to government agencies, as we will see in greater detail below. But it wasn't until Trump's final year in office, with the China trade deal already completed and with aggressive moves by Beijing (including its efforts to exploit the Covid pandemic, its border clashes with India and the imposition of draconian laws on Hong Kong) that Trump approved most of his hard-edged policies designed to impose costs on Beijing.

The examples above underscore some of the costs that can accumulate when a President hesitates to solidify the contours of a top priority. The advantages of maintaining policy fluidity are frequently offset by bureaucratic reluctance to align with presidential preferences that have yet to solidify.

Deprioritization Feats and Follies

Lebanon, on the other hand, provides a case study for what can happen when a President evades responsibility for formulating policy—including concrete ends and means—for a region he had hoped to treat as a low priority.

"The Reagan team had come into office primarily viewing the Middle East through a Cold War lens, which entailed supporting Israel and opposing any further Soviet inroads in the region," wrote William Inboden in *The Peacemaker,* his history of Reagan's foreign policy. "The White House soon found that the Middle East had complexities and demands that went well beyond Israel and the Cold War alone."[53]

Reagan quickly found himself reacting to Middle Eastern events over which he little foreknowledge and even less control, from Israel's bombing of Saddam Hussein's nuclear reactor at Ociraek in 1981 to a fast-mutating war in Lebanon. Reagan sent the U.S. military into Lebanon in 1982 on a peacekeeping mission amid Israel's military campaign to drive out Palestinian Liberation Organization guerrillas who were using Lebanon as a base for attacks on Israel. The situation in Lebanon, with its sectarian and ethnic fault lines and competing international influences, was immensely complicated and quickly grew more so after a peace agreement between Israel and

[53] William Inboden, *The Peacemaker* (New York: Penguin, 2022), p. 99.

Beirut became a *casus belli* for other regional powers, including Syria, which was being supplied with Soviet arms.

"The Middle East confounded all of Reagan's customary values and instincts," wrote Inboden in *The Peacemaker*. "In other strategic regions of the world, such as Europe and Asia, he employed some basic principles to guide his policymaking: stay committed to allies, build rapport with key heads of state, oppose Communist inroads, align power and diplomacy, and promote democracy and free markets. None of those verities applied in Beirut."[54]

Unsure about the objectives, Reagan delegated formulation of a policy to his fractious team of cabinet secretaries, who put forward radically divergent recommendations. Weinberger and the joint chiefs of staff pressed for a reduction of U.S. commitments, while Shultz pushed to expand U.S. involvement and goals—and to deploy more military forces to back up the strategy.

"Either Shultz's policy or Weinberger's policy would have been a coherent choice," wrote Peter Rodman. "What Reagan did, however, was evade the choice and split the difference…. Every time a specific decision was presented to him to respond to the deteriorating situation, the president would agree to an incremental increase in military pressure but never a decisive one." This incrementalism meant "that the United States was engaged enough to be taking sides and staking its prestige, but not enough to win." [55]

Two deadly bombings in Beirut in 1983, of the U.S. embassy and of the U.S. Marine barracks, forced a humiliating retreat by Washington the following year that would reverberate in negative ways for the United States, including by inspiring future arch-terrorist Osama Bin Laden, who perceived the episode as a sign that the United States could be coerced by terrorism to withdraw from the Middle East.

Lebanon is a cautionary story about the dangers of a President delegating away his responsibility for policy formulation, even when the matter is a low-priority one.

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[54] Inboden, p. 169.
[55] Rodman, p. 171.

Where Reagan maintained a firm hand guiding matters he chose deprioritize, such as Taiwan policy or trade tensions with Japan, the results were far better.

A bipartisan consensus had emerged in Washington to employ sharp measures against Japan's trade protectionism and growing surplus with the United States. But Reagan thought it was the wrong time for a confrontational policy with Japan, given his goal of enhancing Washington's Cold War alliance with Tokyo. Here, Reagan was on firmer ground conceptually and experientially than he had been on the Middle East. He had visited Tokyo and other Asian cities in 1978, before he took office—a trip that "reinforced his conviction that Japan anchored America's interests in Asia," Inboden wrote. "This was not a popular opinion in the United States at the time."[56] Reagan even decided to keep Jimmy Carter's ambassador to Tokyo, Mike Mansfield, because he shared Reagan's appraisal of Tokyo's value in counterbalancing Soviet influence.

Reagan didn't abandon U.S. trade grievances vis-à-vis Japan, but pressed Tokyo only after cultivating a strong rapport with his Japanese counterparts Suzuki and Nakasone, and in a way calibrated to minimize the odds it would upset his higher priorities for U.S.-Japan relations.

The policy was a successful example of deprioritization despite rising business and political pressures in Washington to confront Tokyo.

Taiwan was another such case. Reagan believed that Taiwan had been unfairly treated by the Nixon, Ford and Carter administrations. But he curbed his instinct to publicly re-embrace Taiwan, choosing instead to prioritize sustaining Washington's rapprochement with Beijing, since the latter policy supported Reagan's higher priority of complicating the international chessboard for Moscow. Reagan was irked by the concessions Haig made to Beijing in a 1982 communique—and so were members of Congress who criticized the document. But rather than distance himself publicly from the document, Reagan signed a secret memo containing his interpretation of the communique, thus deferring a confrontation with Beijing over Washington's Taiwan policy.

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[56] Rodman, p. 27.

The Reagan examples highlight a corollary to the rule that Presidents should provide concrete policy guidance for low priorities, just as they would for high ones: Presidents must also devote substantial personal time to formulating—and sometimes to executing—low-priority foreign policies if those policies are to succeed in freeing up government resources for top priorities.

Trump succeeded in reducing American commitments in the Middle East by paradoxically committing much of his time to the diplomacy required to pull off such a maneuver. In other words, he made deprioritization of the Middle East a personal priority. The diplomacy paid off in the form of the Abraham Accords, which bound Israel more closely—diplomatically, economically, and militarily—to erstwhile Arab enemies. The Accords created the basis for a potential Middle Eastern coalition that could help counterbalance Iranian aggression in the region. This supported Trump's prerogative to deprioritize U.S. military commitments in the region. The time invested by the president up front in the form of policy guidance and personal diplomacy ultimately rewarded his objective of conserving U.S. resources for higher priorities.

Strategy Documents as Tools for Prioritization

A similarity between the Reagan and Trump administrations that warrants discussion was their unusual reliance on formal, classified strategy documents. Emphasis on such documents is rare in other administrations, Peter Rodman has written in his seminal book on the foreign policymaking process, *Presidential Command.*

"For Reagan… these internal directives were a primary vehicle for articulating broad strategies. Usually their contents were laboriously negotiated among the departments and agencies…. [and] reflected the strong influence of a group of ideological soulmates of the president on the NSC staff," Rodman wrote.[57]

The Trump administration, particularly during H.R. McMaster's tenure as National Security Advisor (2017-18), placed similar emphasis on classified "interlocking, integrated strategies," as McMaster called them; their formulation involved equally intensive negotiations between departments and agencies, brokered by NSC staff.

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[57] Rodman, p. 151.

Perhaps it was precisely because Reagan and Trump each marked such sharp departures from prevailing foreign policy orthodoxy that their teams resorted to such documents. It is worth dwelling briefly on the role these strategies played because they offer clues for how to solidify disruptive new priorities—and de-priorities.

In the Reagan Administration, National Security Decision Directive 75 (January 1983) was, in some respects, a "containment" strategy of another kind: It contained the State Department's efforts to reassert a policy of détente by eviscerating its intellectual underpinnings. The NSC staff, in launching the policy review that would produce NSDD 75, circulated a paper that stated: "[This review] will proceed on the premise that Soviet international behavior is a response not only to external threats and opportunities but also to the internal imperatives of the Soviet political, economic, social and ideological system."[58]

When the strategy was finally signed by Reagan, it not only buried the concept of détente but even questioned the sufficiency of "containment." It instructed the U.S. government gradually to "reverse Soviet expansionism" and even promote "the process of change in the Soviet Union toward a more pluralistic political and economic system in which the power of the privileged ruling elite is gradually reduced." The document explicitly weaponized economic policy as a means of weakening the Soviet system and its capacity to commit aggression.

None of this is to say that NSDD 75, or any other strategy, *ipso facto* ends policy disputes, bureaucratic resistance, and policy end-runs by cabinet secretaries. Strategies aren't automatically heeded (even cabinet officers sometimes do their best to ignore them). The lead pen on NSDD 75, Richard Pipes, marveled in his memoir at witnessing Secretary of State George Shultz make a policy argument to Reagan that cut directly against the grain of the strategy that Reagan had signed only weeks earlier. Reagan himself sometimes tacked away from a literal reading of the text of his strategy by backing certain diplomatic initiatives.

Nor is it true that strategies must be perfect specimens of logical consistency. Such documents often reveal contradictions that reflect the interagency compromises that went into them. But looking for perfect symmetry is beside the point. "[I]ntellectuals

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[58] Pipes, p. 198.

who determine what is sophisticated and what primitive pay too much attention to the elegance of ideas, to their inner consistency, to their theoretical rather than practical utility. In so doing they tend to lose sight of the real world," wrote Pipes, himself a formidable intellectual as well as policy practitioner.[59]

Even with their imperfections, formal interagency strategies serve as a tool that can significantly improve the odds that a shift in foreign policy priorities takes hold across government. The essence of deprioritization, as explained in the first essay of this series, is to make policy adjustments contemplatively, on the basis of calculations about available ends and means, as opposed to reactively, on the basis of unfolding events (such as a war or other crisis) that have already rendered the old ranking of objectives untenable.

The process of negotiation and writing that goes into formulating official interagency strategies *is part of the act of contemplation and calculation* that can produce successful strategic deprioritization.

The experience of the Trump administration in formulating and executing its formal China strategy illuminates the immense difficulty of strategic reprioritization and deprioritization in peacetime. It also shows, however, how much more difficult such changes would be in the absence of a formal strategy.

The *Indo-Pacific Strategic Framework*, a secret interagency document approved by President Trump in February 2018, served—in conjunction with the 2017 *National Security Strategy* and 2018 *National Defense Strategy*—as the formal explication of the Trump administration's strategy for competing with the People's Republic of China.[60]

In an echo of the process that produced Reagan's NSDD 75, some of the most important arguments between the intelligence officers, assistant secretaries, and NSC staff who participated in its formulation were over longstanding—and, by 2017, threadbare—assumptions about Beijing's intentions and about the role of ideology as a driver of, and guide to, its actions.

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[59] Pipes, p. 165.
[60] "Indo-Pacific Strategic Framework," *The White House*, February 2018, https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/IPS-Final-Declass.pdf

Lingering tropes, rife across the U.S. government, that Beijing's actions were primarily in reaction to U.S. policies and didn't obey any inner logic of their own had led Washington to pursue a policy of enriching, reassuring, and avoiding offending Beijing. Policies also sought to "bind" Beijing to international institutions in the hope they would "shape" Beijing's behavior to align with the interests of free-market democracies. It hadn't occurred to policymakers that Beijing would turn out to be the one doing the shaping.

The *Indo-Pacific Strategic Framework* that emerged from the Trump Administration prescribed a new set of assumptions, goals, and terminology that served to weaken the arguments of career officials at CIA, State, and Treasury inclined toward sticking with the old policy of "engagement" with Beijing.

The interagency meetings used to debate and negotiate the policy also emboldened younger officials in the intelligence community and other agencies who knew the old assumptions and policies weren't working but had felt little bureaucratic incentive to challenge established models. The policymaking process provided an opportunity for them to speak up and have a hand in changing policy. The text of the final strategy also gave them—in the form of a document with the president's seal of approval—"scripture" they could quote to push changes in their respective bureaucracies.

But formulating strategies are one thing. Executing them is another. Political appointees of every administration are familiar with this problem. Departments and agencies often focus more attention on writing documents required by Congress than on heeding ones approved by the President. Officials responsible for formulating budget requests often write those requests in parallel—and not in coordination—with colleagues helping to write national security strategies. Even ensuring that key officials have taken the time to *read* secret strategies approved by the president can prove challenging.

The Trump NSC staff devised a mechanism for dealing with this problem that it called "campaign plans." These interagency documents, coordinated by NSC staff, sought to address the problem of actually implementing (and funding) formal strategies once they had been approved by the president. Campaign plans were detailed lists of the concrete actions required of each department and agency to fulfill the objectives prescribed by the formal, more generally worded, presidential strategies. Crucially, the campaign plans contained clear deadlines for each action, negotiated

between NSC staff and whichever department was responsible for execution. They also sought to align annual budget requests to support the strategies.

Failure to align the White House Office of Management and Budget with written national-security strategies is a common mistake that can render strategies—and their relative prioritization—hollow. Military officers are fond of quoting General Omar Bradley's dictum: "Amateurs talk strategy; professionals talk logistics." It should be axiomatic in foreign policy making that "Amateurs talk strategy; professionals talk budgets." The Trump NSC began insisting on having OMB personnel in meetings focused on the campaign plans for Asia policy. Other regional NSC directorates, including the Middle East and South and Central Asia, soon followed suit. The campaign plans noticeably improved the degree of budget and policy coordination in the final 18 months of the Trump Administration.
There was an ancillary benefit to having written strategies and corresponding campaign plans: They improved the odds a policy would outlast the administration that formulated them. This was part of the rationale for declassifying the *Indo-Pacific Strategic Framework* at the end of the Trump administration. Indeed, the Biden administration made a conscious decision to sustain the strategy and its campaign plans until the Biden team formulated their own, similar, strategy in the second year of that administration.

It is clear to me from my four years at the NSC that our China policy would have been far less coherent and effective without the *Indo-Pacific Strategic Framework* and its associated campaign plans.

Conclusion

The common theme of the examples above is the importance of treating deprioritization as a *command responsibility*. As we assert elsewhere in this series, upgrading and downgrading priorities "is an inherently political act. Setting priorities involves ranking preferences about what a society values, fears, needs and wants most, and by extension, what it is willing to give up." The President alone—by virtue of his stature as the top official in the executive branch and the only American official (besides the vice president) who is chosen in a nationwide election—has the authority to set priorities. It is a responsibility of the president's office to do so.

This means, as the examples above illustrate, that a President must strive to be equally concrete in defining policy for a low priority as for a high one. This also means a president frequently must devote significant personal time to low priorities—particularly early on when the policy is being formulated or later on when intensive diplomacy is required for its successful execution. Creating written strategy documents with interagency input, but with firm coordination by NSC staff who are familiar with the president's instincts and preferences, can be a useful instrument for reorienting government bureaucracies to the president's priorities.

V. MEASURING THE SUCCESS OF DEPRIORITIZATION

By Jakub Grygiel

Deprioritization is a difficult strategy to pursue successfully because of domestic challenges and international pressures. Historically it often happens only under duress. It is a strategy that begins from a recognition of geopolitical difficulty when a great power cannot maintain the same level of involvement in all the regions of its interest. It may be therefore particularly difficult for a maritime power whose worldview is global in scope due to its far-reaching interests.[61] The particular takes precedence over the universal; different frontiers are no longer all equal in value, and a geostrategic reorientation of the great power is required. But such a strategy is often pursued haphazardly when the great power is forced to rebalance quickly its attention and resources pressured by *force majeure*, a more pronounced threat in a region, a loss of an ally, or a limited military defeat.

Imposing a systematic analysis on what is inherently a messy process is a post hoc intellectual effort that establishes more order than existed. But to avoid a great power's panicked abandonment of a region resulting in the collapse of order and an inability to protect its interests, it is beneficial to think systematically about the best ways in which a successful deprioritization may be conducted. Like all strategies, implementing deprioritization requires prudential judgment – right reason in action – and therefore, it will vary on a case-by-case basis. But to develop that "right reason," it is useful to think through some principles of how to act and what best practices may be.

What makes such strategy successful? What are the metrics of, and therefore the variables that shape, success? There are two ways of evaluating the success of a strategy – such as deprioritization. The first measures the operational success or failure of the strategy; that is, it evaluates whether the strategy has actually been pursued. It is the evaluation of the action in itself. Did it happen? Was it pursued consistently? Did all relevant state institutions adopt it? The second way assesses the strategic success or failure, namely, whether the strategy has achieved the objective it

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[61] Seapowers think of the world, rather than of specific theaters. Admiral J.C. Wylie wrote in 1967 that "the sailor or airman thinks in terms of an entire world, [while] the soldier at work thinks in terms of theaters, in terms of campaigns, or in terms of battles." J.C. Wylie, *Military Strategy* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980), 2nd ed., p. 49.

sought. Did it obtain the desired results? Did it cause unanticipated and detrimental effects?

Obviously, for the latter to be possible, the former must be successful: the action has to be in place before one can evaluate whether it has achieved its purpose. The action is in the great power's hands, while the fulfillment of its purpose will also depend on other strategic actors. Therefore, deprioritization has to take into account how it will shape the strategic calculus and behavior of allies and rivals. The evaluation of the act of deprioritization is whether it happens; the evaluation of the effects of deprioritization is how it has happened and how it affects other actors.

Success of Abandonment vs. Success of Deprioritization

Before examining the features of a successful deprioritization, it is useful to clarify what this strategy is not, thereby avoiding evaluating a strategy that may look similar but is fundamentally at odds with it. Deprioritization is not the act of deserting a geographic theater that is deemed of no value. It is not insouciance about, and thus abandonment of, a region. Abandonment, arising out of a reassessment of the importance of a particular area, is relatively straightforward: a state packs up and leaves, not caring about what happens in the aftermath of its departure because that location has lost (or never had) strategic value. There are many reasons in history why a polity became involved in a region: military commanders sought glory or easy plunder, political leaders wanted to appear as being active, or simply because of wrong assessments of interests. Once the reason, born out of internal motivations rather than strategic considerations, for devoting resources to a region loses its significance, the state leaves regardless of the consequences to the political and economic dynamics in that place. Julius Caesar's foray into, and then withdrawal from, Britain is an example of such an abandonment of a region that carried no value for Rome at that time.[62]

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[62] The Romans, of course, tried to conquer Britain in the succeeding centuries, but failed in large degree because Domitian moved his forces to the Danube for another campaign against the barbarians there in the 1st Century AD. As Tacitus put it, the "Balkans were in turmoil, the Gallic provinces wavered in their allegiance, and Britain was left to fend for itself no sooner that its conquest had been completed." Tacitus, *The Histories*, trans. by Kenneth Wellesley (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 16.

Moreover, abandoning a region is possible, especially for maritime empires with distant possessions that can be replaced with an alternative access point or sea-lane. It is naturally a more difficult action for a continental power for which the circumference of its territory directly affects its security; abandoning a bordering region and not caring about what happens to it is a luxury it cannot afford. That is, abandonment of a region that has no or a very limited impact on a great power's security is not deprioritization – and it is more likely to be done by a maritime empire than a continental power.[63]

A successful abandonment is simple to evaluate because it is judged in absolute terms, not in relation to other theaters or other political considerations. A region has been abandoned without considering what the local consequences will be because there are no expected effects on the interests of the great power. In fact, the very withdrawal will save resources wasted in a region that was irrelevant in the first place – and where the involvement of the great power was, in retrospect, unnecessary and perhaps counterproductive. There may be, of course, reputational effects from a hasty retreat and abandonment, potentially perceived by others as a symptom of material weakness or poor statecraft. Reputationally, therefore, abandonment of an insignificant region can make life more difficult in the primary theater of competition.

Both as an action in itself and as an action with desired effects, deprioritization is a strategy that is relative – that is, it has to be judged in relation to the larger objectives that transcend the particular theater. Unlike abandonment, it is not driven by indifference to the region, which maintains roughly the same strategic value; the great power does not want to "lose" the region, but only to lower its efforts to keep it. It assumes that it is necessary to maintain a certain level and type of order in the deprioritized region, which is not insignificant but only less important than another one presenting more pressing challenges.

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[63] Paradoxically, while abandonment is more likely to be pursued by a maritime power, deprioritization is more difficult for the same because it requires maintaining order in a region where its presence becomes less pronounced and where, because of distance, it is more difficult to reinsert itself and to use its power to manage local dynamics. For example, Great Britain could abandon Europe with greater ease than, say, France but it could not do so without allowing a continental rival to rise to the point that it required either appeasement or a large-scale war. See Michael Howard, *The Continental Commitment* (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1972); G.C. Peden, "The Burden of Imperial Defence and the Continental Commitment Reconsidered," *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 27, No. 2, (June 1984), pp. 405-423.

Hence, to get deprioritization right, it is necessary to consider it in relation to how much the act of lowering the application of power in a region tries to improve or actually improves the attainment of goals in the higher priority theater without undermining a minimum of order/interest in the deprioritized one. It is not simply the withdrawal of resources from a region.[64]

The Act of Deprioritization: Getting it Done

This distinction between deprioritization and abandonment is more difficult to draw when we consider only the act of deprioritizing – that is, the series of actions that marks the lowering of interest in a region, and not its effects. Deprioritization can look remarkably similar to abandonment. But the first step in judging whether deprioritization is successful is to see if it is actually being pursued. It cannot be a simple statement that the great power is lowering its interest in a region to focus on a more valuable or threatened area. Words alone are a failed deprioritization. *Res, non verba.*

To have a strategy of deprioritization, *four factors* need to be present:

(1) hegemonic intellectual framework
(2) adapted technologies
(3) repositioned forces
(4) time commitment

The *first* factor – a hegemonic intellectual framework – that allows deprioritization is probably the most important as it reorients the tools and institutions of statecraft in a consistent way. Any strategy is first and foremost an intellectual effort imposing order on the conflicting assessments of the geopolitical map and of the role that the great power in question ought to play in it. Strategy is, in Hans Morgenthau's words, "the art of bringing the different elements of national power to bear with maximum effect upon those points in the international situation which concern the national interest most directly."[65] But as an art, it requires a cogent and powerful exposition of the

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[64] Deprioritization is also not a forced event, a result of a dramatic defeat that expels a great power from a region. Withdrawal because of a defeat is just that, a defeat, a failed deprioritization. Undoubtedly, the defeated great power can then reorganize its forces and concentrate its resources in a different region, appearing to reprioritize. But this is an action imposed by the rival, not a product of a carefully pursued strategy.

[65] Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations; the Struggle for Power and Peace*, (New York: Knopf, 1948), 4th ed., p. 105.

principles guiding it and of the preferred tools to apply power. Such exposition needs to clarify and convince that deprioritization is necessary and feasible – that is, without it, the overall security condition of the great power will be negatively affected and that by pursuing it, the deprioritized region will maintain an order beneficial to that power.

The intellectual hegemony of the deprioritization concept is needed especially in peacetime. Lacking the clarity imposed by a warring enemy, a great power will have difficulty deprioritizing a theater because various state bureaucracies and groups will push for their own interests, shaped by a preoccupation with their own welfare and by their own narrow worldview. Each bureaucracy tries to be free from the control and influence of other organizations as well as of the changing political leadership. This creates entrenched bureaucratic cultures, driven by ideas that may or may not be those shared by the leadership and that may or may not be appropriate to the international situation.[66] These ideas are hegemonic in the sense that they are hard to change and they control the behavior of the organization. As a result, bureaucratic splintering, with each institution pursuing its preferred strategy and dealing with its preferred enemy, is likely to trump a coherent grand strategy of the state.[67]

To alter the existing intellectual framework, it is usually necessary to introduce innovation from outside the particular organization. Hence, for instance, the best way to alter the military doctrine of a state's armed forces is by ensuring a strong civilian oversight.[68] Similarly, a defeat often forces a reassessment of the ideas that organized state institutions and that may have contributed to a poor performance. However, regardless of what causes a change in the ideas permeating state institutions, in order for a state to deprioritize it is necessary to alter the set of concepts that had organized its behavior until then. As described in the adjacent paper by Pottinger, such a change

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[66] As James Q. Wilson observes, "[w]hen the goals are too vague or ambiguous to permit them to become a ready basis of task definition, the tasks often will be shaped not by executive preferences but by the incentives valued by the operators." James Q. Wilson, *Bureaucracy* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), p. 48.

[67] Emily Goldman noted this tendency in peacetime. Two problems in particular are worth noting. First, "in the presence of peacetime strategic uncertainty, in the absence of a clearly articulated national security strategy, and with strategic priorities in flux, military organizations should be driven more by internal commitments than external responsibilities. Particularly given a lean resource environment, military leaders should be concerned first with protecting, maintaining, and if feasible, expanding the missions of their organization." Second, "without clearly established strategic priorities set by civilian leaders, military strategy is likely to become 'decentralized' with each service focusing on its 'preferred' threats." Emily O. Goldman, "Thinking About Strategy Absent the Enemy," *Security Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (1994), p. 49.

[68] Barry Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984).

is done most effectively through "scripture," written documents that provide the bureaucracy with ready quotes and benchmarks. The software, so to speak, needs to be altered for the hardware to behave differently.[69]

The *second* factor – adapted technologies – deals with the geographic nature of military technologies. Throughout history, weapons and other platforms have been developed as solutions to specific geographic problems. To deprioritize in a theater means to alter the technological nature of one's power. This is a particularly pronounced problem for maritime empires, which span vast spaces often characterized by very different geographic features. The navies of pre-modern Mediterranean powers, for example, were built to match the unique characteristics of this sea, making it extremely difficult to go beyond the relatively shallow waters with abundant coastline. Mediterranean powers, thus, were at a serious technological disadvantage in the Atlantic and the Indian oceans, and could not compete with the Atlantic powers.[70] In the most extreme example, to deprioritize a land theater relative to a sea frontier, a power has to figure out what to do with the platforms developed for it and whether (if at all) they are operable elsewhere. The more difficult to use them in the more important theater, the greater the pressure will be <u>not</u> to deprioritize. If a power has only land forces, it will not decrease its efforts on the continent in favor of the maritime realm until it has developed a naval capability. Strategy, that is, becomes driven by capabilities, especially in peacetime: we choose (or fail to deprioritize) the geographic theater according to the type of capabilities we have.

The *third* factor – repositioned forces – is the most tangible. For deprioritization to be more than just rhetorical performance, the military forces and the underlying infrastructure of bases have to be adjusted accordingly. Forces need to be repositioned to reflect the new set of priorities, which, for the region of lesser importance, means that they have to be drawn down from the existing levels. The specific quantity of forces and assets that would leave the deprioritized region is a

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[69] An emphasis on the causal role of ideas, as opposed to a dominating role of economic and other material factors, is much more pronounced in the thought arising in economically backward countries. Hence, for instance, "The *homo economicus* of industrial England, which had captivated Marx in the British Museum, cast less of a spell in the economically backward land of Saint Francis, Vico, and Croce." Thomas R. Bates, "Gramsci and the Theory of Hegemony," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (April-June 1975), p. 351.

[70] John Pryor, *Geography, Technology, and War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988); John F. Guilmartin, "The Military Revolution in Warfare at Sea During the Early Modern Era: Technological Origins, Operations Outcomes and Strategic Consequences," *Journal for Maritime Research*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (November 2011), p. 129-137.

product of prudential judgment, varying from case to case and depending on the nature of regional dynamics and the demands of the higher-priority theater. But, in the simplest formulation, deprioritization cannot be a successful action if there is no change in the military posture – in the actual transfer of forces and capabilities that allow the defense and control over territory or maritime space. Many variables shape this feature of deprioritization, from the intellectual victory of the new strategic framework to the political leadership specific to each moment in time. But the variable most relevant to the forces themselves is their mobility. The more mobile they are, the more likely that deprioritization can be achieved.

Mobility here is not merely a condition tied to the logistical capabilities of the forces – that is, to how many vehicles, ships, or airplanes are at their disposal to be repositioned away even though, of course, without these no movement is possible. Rather, it depends on the culture/nature and purpose of the forces. First, military forces tend to develop a territorial attachment to the region where they serve. Their bases in these outposts become comfortable and familiar, and with generational change, the soldiers (and their families) develop more links locally than with the homeland. If they have incurred losses in the past, there will be an even greater attachment – almost a blood attachment – to the particular location, something akin to the "sunk cost" problem whereby an individual or a group has a hard time divesting from a place or an asset because of the efforts or money invested in it. The decision to stay is not driven then by a calculation of costs-benefits or of the likelihood of success (however defined), but almost exclusively by the fact that so much effort or blood has already been expended for that purpose. The legions become territorial rather than imperial.[71] The greater their attachment to a particular frontier, the more difficult it will be to reposition them and thus to pursue deprioritization.

Second, the mobility of forces – and thus the ability to deprioritize a region – is tied to the purpose or role played by the forces. If their primary role is to garrison a region to keep internal order, removing them will be more difficult. Their departure will result in a rapid devolution of regional or domestic order as local factions, no longer restrained by the presence of constabulary forces, begin to vie for control of the region. The deprioritizing power can empower one faction before drawing down

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[71] Edward Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016).

forces, subcontracting its ordering role to a local group. But such a policy is unlikely to result in a sustainable order because other groups will seek very quickly to upstage the authorities anointed by the now absent foreign power. In fact, there may be a disadvantage in being seen as the faction supported by a power that is no longer in the region because the legitimacy of the authorities in charge is tainted by its foreign connection. If, however, these military forces are a frontier force whose purpose is to protect the region from external enemies, then it is plausible that they are more movable because it may be easier to find locals to replace them, to develop forces for internal regional order, or to field a frontier force to protect the region from hostile foreign powers.

The *fourth* factor necessary for a successful act of deprioritization is time commitment. Deprioritization needs to be a deliberate and consistent action across time. A visible but temporary movement of some military assets from the deprioritized region does not amount to deprioritization, the same way a tourist trip does not equal to a relocation. It is not merely a repositioning of troops, an action that can be done relatively quickly and, all else being equal, that can be undone with similar celerity. Rather, the deprioritizing state has to signal that its lowered presence and involvement in the region will be prolonged, requiring an adaptation in the political and security dynamics of the region. The simplest way to convey such a message is through consistency across time. For this to happen, it is again necessary to have a consistent and dominant intellectual framework that informs the behavior of the various state institutions. Without it, deprioritization will not be "sticky" and will not outlast the individual leader who seeks the change.

At the same time, deprioritization is not rushed, imposed by an unfolding crisis. A dramatically quick withdrawal of assets and forces from a region will look more like abandonment of it, driven either by fear of a costly war with the local rival or of an impending conflict in the high-priority theater. In either case, the rapidity of the deprioritization, even if a testament to great logistical efficiency and accurate appraisal of the need to concentrate elsewhere, may have the undesired effect of generating fear in the low-priority theater without increasing the deterrent in the high-priority one.

Strategic Success: Getting Deprioritization Right in its Effects

The second metric of success is in the effects a strategy produces. Once a strategy has been enacted (the "act of deprioritization"), its success or failure will be measured by

what it achieves (the "strategic success"). These effects are specific to the theater that is being deprioritized. The core definition of deprioritization is an action that repositions power in order to address problems in a high-priority theater without damaging the interests in the low-priority (deprioritized) one. This latter part – not damaging the interests in the deprioritized region – is the principal way of assessing whether this strategy has succeeded or not. The goal of deprioritization is to lower exposure in a theater without abandoning it to chaos, as described earlier. Success, therefore, is defined by the situation that arises in the deprioritized theater.

The wider purpose is, of course, to be able to focus more resources and attention on a more demanding region. Still, success or failure there can be, at least analytically, separated from the success or failure of deprioritization. Hence, the metric of success is not whether the deprioritizing great power succeeds in deterring or defeating the rival in the region that has become more important either because of the threat level or the change in other geopolitical circumstances (e.g., greater economic exposure). Failure here will depend on a whole set of other variables that are not all tied to the success of deprioritization. In other words, deprioritization may succeed in lowering a great power's exposure to a region (e.g., by moving forces away from it) while maintaining stability there, even if the higher priority theater descends into chaos or the conflict there ends in a defeat. Victory in the primary theater is not guaranteed simply because deprioritization in a secondary one has occurred.

Similarly, it is plausible to succeed in the principal theater even though deprioritization may have failed in some ways in the secondary one. For instance, regional stability may be shaken in the deprioritized region because of new and unexpected local political and security dynamics (e.g., ties fray between local partners and allies, the local rival becomes more aggressive and achieves frontline successes, etc.), but the great power manages to protect its interests in the principal theater (e.g., deter the rival, impose a settlement beneficial to it, or, in the worst case, defeat the rival in a war). Some strategists or political leaders may even advocate such path as worth the cost because of the value that they place in protecting and advancing interest in the high priority theater, making their strategy of deprioritization closer or equal to a simple abandonment of one theater in favor of the other one irrespective of what happens to the former.

Success or failure of one part (deprioritization of one theater or prioritization of the other) of the overall strategy does not automatically result in success or failure of the

other. Success of deprioritization will therefore be defined by the great power's ability to maintain – through new means and ways – its interests in the lower priority region.

In particular, four conditions will have to be established for successful deprioritization.

1) First, deprioritization has to be done gradually and avoid the image of an abrupt withdrawal that looks like an escape rather than a strategic move. It has to generate indigenous efforts at stability, rather than local competition and appeasement of rivals.
2) Second, deprioritization has to preserve the conditions for reentry into the region if the security conditions demand it at some point.
3) Third, deprioritization has to empower local allies, including by providing military capabilities until then seen as too risky (e.g., offensive capabilities) to maintain an equipoise of power, deter the regional rival, and prevent a deterioration of regional security to a degree requiring a great power's reentry into the region.
4) Fourth, while deprioritization involves a higher risk threshold (third point above), the great power pursuing it has to be able to maintain control over the highest escalatory ladder (e.g., through a nuclear deterrent).

First, a gradual change of a great power's geostrategic focus allows indigenous dynamics to take hold in the deprioritized theater. The goal of a measured and purposeful act of deprioritization is to minimize the local allies' fear of abandonment. Its success, therefore, will be if the local allies do not panic because of the possibility that the regional vacuum created by a lower involvement of the great power will be filled either by the regional rival or by a period of regional squabbling – in either case, by the exacerbated likelihood of a system-changing war.[72] The assumption is that until

[72] Power vacuums, created by a demise or withdrawal of a hegemon, rarely produce a smooth transition to a new order. They are areas of great instability and war. For some academics, however, they are beneficial because they are a safety valve for great power competition. Instead of fighting each other directly, great powers can jockey for a better position in a region lacking a clear hegemon and outside of anyone's sphere of interests; they are empty spaces that prevent a direct clash. Robert Gilpin, for instance, argued that the "intensification of conflicts among states is a consequence of the 'closing in' of space and opportunities. With the aging of an international system and the expansion of states, the

the strategy of deprioritization the region maintained its order, and independence of its members, because of the security provision of the now-deprioritizing great power. The ensuing stability was a product of the dominating or, to use a more gentle term, the ordering presence of the great power.[73] But in the moment a great power lowers its investments in a region, it leaves a vacuum, inviting other states, including its geopolitical rivals but also other states that until then were status quo powers, to fill it.[74]

The fear of a vacuum motivated Julius Caesar, who, after a campaign against a tribe of Helvetii in 58 BC, sent the defeated population back to the towns and fields they had abandoned, giving them enough food to survive and forcing them to rebuild their own region. As he wrote in the Gallic War, the "chief reason for so doing was that he [Caesar] did not wish the district which the Helvetii had left to be unoccupied, lest the excellence of the farmlands might tempt the Germans who dwell across the Rhine to cross from their own into the Helvetian borders, and so to become neighbours to the Province of Gaul."[75] Plutarch comments that this was a "noble act," implying that sound strategic considerations had been given greater weight than the desire to exact revenge on a rebellious population.[76] The vacuum left by Caesar's victory over the Helvetii would have led to an influx of other, more threatening tribes, exacerbating Rome's frontier tensions.

To minimize the possibility of a vacuum being created, the deprioritizing great power has to prepare the local conditions. A gradual and purposeful deprioritization allows for the development of new assessments of needs by the local parties, the preparation

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distance between states decreases, thereby causing them increasingly to come into conflict with one another. The once-empty space around the centers of power in the system is appropriated. The exploitable resources begin to be used up, and opportunities for economic growth decline. The system begins to encounter limits to the growth and expansion of member states; states increasingly come into conflict with one another. Interstate relations become more and more a zero-sum game in which one state's gain is another's loss." Robert Gilpin, *War and Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 200-201. E.H. Carr shares a similar view: "pressure could at once be relieved by expansion to hitherto unoccupied and unexploited territories." E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years Crisis, 1919-1939* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 60. See also Raymond Aron, *Peace and War* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1966), p. 319.

[73] Eric Voegelin, "Some Problems of German Hegemony," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 2, (May 1941), p. 159.

[74] A "vacuum surrounded by 'satiated' or 'status quo' states would remain as it is unless its existence were to change the character of these states and put them in the category of 'imperialist,' 'unsatiated,' or 'dynamic' states." Arnold Wolfers, "The Pole of Power and the Pole of Indifference," *World Politics*, Vol. 4, Issue 1, (October 1951), p. 44.

[75] Caesar, *The Gallic War,* Loeb Classical Library, Vol. I, Book 28, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 43.

[76] Plutarch, *Fall of the Roman Republic* (New York: Penguin, 1972), p. 262.

of new regional alignments, and, ultimately, the strengthening of local forces. But deprioritization by a security patron can shorten the shadow of the future for the local actors, making them believe that a new order will be established quickly, thus putting a premium on preemptive actions. The speed of deprioritization will encourage very short-term assessments on the part of the local states, pursuing quick gains either by grabbing easy spoils from weaker neighbors or by bowing to a new great power patron, including the until now shared rival power. It could also lead the local allies, expecting a degeneration of their security conditions, to strike the rival early, perhaps hoping to force their security provider not to pursue deprioritization.

Related to the celerity of deprioritization is the larger diplomatic posture toward the local rival. A deprioritization that is based on the appeasement of the regional rival is unlikely to result in a regional order beneficial to the great power because it will exacerbate – or more correctly, confirm – the local allies' fear of abandonment.[77] The effects will be similar to a quick deprioritization that does not allow for a gradual preparation of the local allies to a new security dynamic.

The *second* metric of success is whether deprioritization preserves the conditions of reentry for the great power. The deprioritizing power is in most cases a maritime power that is lowering its presence in a distant region – as opposed to a land power that moves its attention from one frontier to another, all around the circumference of its home territory. Consequently, the problem of reentry into a region is particularly pronounced for a maritime power; a land power deprioritizes by moving resources

[77] Broadly, deprioritization can be sought through three diplomatic and strategic postures: (1) striking a deal with and appeasing the rival which buys time to disengage while preserving a semblance of stability; (2) inflicting a substantial defeat to the local rival, forcing him to retrench and thereby creating another moment of stability; (3) subcontracting order to local allies that step up to deter the regional rival while avoiding the intra-alliance splits and conflicts. While all options carry risks, the latter is the most likely to achieve long-term stability because it does not empower the rival (option 1) and does not create conditions for allies to relax and potentially split in absence of a clear threat (option 2). Francesco Guicciardini's metrics for dealing with a rival apply very well: "Peace, I submit, is a sweet and holy thing, when it brings security, when it does not increase the power of enemies, when it does not pave the way to a more dangerous war; but when it entails these effects, it is bitter and pernicious." In fact, the first option (striking a deal with regional rival) is the worst because it creates the conditions of a much larger clash, only delayed. Commenting on whether Florence should accept a peace deal with the Duke of Milan who was seeking to appease it in order to extend his dominion over Genoa (after he successfully kept Venice satisfied by giving up his claims over Verona and Vicenza), Guicciardini noted that the "Duke is not asking for peace in order to have peace with us, but to consolidate his own state, rid himself of his troubles, and be able, in the end, to strike us with greater force." Rivalries, that is, do not disappear through negotiations, which have the effect of only postponing the clash. Francesco Guicciardini, speech by Niccolò da Uzzano, in Marco Cesa, ed., *Debating Foreign Policy in the Renaissance: Speeches on War and Peace by Francesco Guicciardini* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), p. 50.

and forces through internal lines of communications, while a maritime power has to cross longer distances and reenter allied but not its own space. Under some circumstances (e.g., defensive regimes have an advantage, geography favors continental control), reentry may be especially costly and, as a result, politically unfeasible for the maritime power.

A successful deprioritization, therefore, will establish and preserve some conditions to ease reentry. Two efforts are especially needed. First, the deprioritizing power has to retain good relations with the local allies, whose role is to keep the window of reentry open. This means that bases have to be maintained, logistical nodes and routes defended, and the ability to operate in unison well established. But deprioritization will affect the great power's ability to maintain these conditions precisely because of its lower investment in the region: its goal is to limit the resources expended on bases, logistics and time devoted to the lower priority threat. Unless allies pick up most of the costs, these capabilities will decay (similar to the historic degeneration of roads when empires declined).

Hence, the great power will have to maintain and demonstrate an offensive doctrine allowing for reentry and therefore also keeping allies favorably aligned. Reentry into a region is not holding the line, but projecting power where power is no longer present. An exposed ally or theater requires an offensive doctrine to preserve an extended deterrent, especially as the great power deprioritizes that region. The goal is not to engage in an attack against the lower-level rival in the deprioritized theater, but with offensive doctrine, it will be easier to preserve deterrence.[78] There are of course risks associated with such a reliance on offensive doctrines, but the strategy of deprioritization necessarily will increase risks in the lower priority theater. In fact, successful deprioritization is not measured by how much it lowers the risks, and the great power engaging in it must learn to function with a higher risk threshold.[79]

Moreover, appeasing the regional rival in order to be able to redirect resources and forces away from the region also lowers the ability of the great power to reenter this theater. Not only local allies will be less capable and even less willing to accept the risk

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[78] For the necessity of offensive doctrine for status quo power seeking to protect their allies, see Scott Sagan, "1914 Revisited: Allies, Offense, and Instability," *International Security*, Vol. 11, No. 2, (Fall 1986), pp. 151-175.
[79] Acceptance of risk is a problem in particular in government bureaucracies, which, unlike private organizations, do not reward risk taking. For more see Wilson, *Bureaucracy*.

of a return of the great power but the regional rival will likely be more powerful (by virtue of having gained some of its objectives in the process of appeasement) and at an advantage of playing defense.

The second way in which a deprioritizing great power can preserve the possibility of regional reentry is by strengthening its interests in the region. The credibility of reentry depends not only on the physical ability to do so at a low cost (the first point) but also on the existence of tangible interests of the deprioritized power. Usually, a way to build credibility when establishing deterrence is by placing one's own forces in the line of a potential attack to convey a commitment to that frontline. It is a way of creating clear interests to defend a distant area, extending a deterrent.[80] But this is exactly what deprioritization is designed to avoid. It wants to limit exposure to a region, lowering the resources devoted to it. Therefore, such a strategy must institute some other way of conveying that the deprioritizing power has sufficient interests in the region to warrant a reentry in case of a collapse of order. Historically, this has been done through a mix of some lower-quality forces and imperial officers left in the region to establish enough vulnerability that could signal commitment. While some forces will likely remain even now, a further way of creating vulnerability and thus commitment is by commercial ties. For instance, by placing or retaining the production of some goods in the deprioritized region, the great power signals that it maintains a strong interest in the order and, if needed, in the defense of this location. In other words, commercial and industrial ties signal that the great power, even if it had deprioritized the region in other ways, continues to have a strong interest in the preservation of the stability of this secondary theater.

The *third* metric of success is the empowerment of local allies. In its simplest formulation, deprioritization seeks to transfer the task of keeping order from the great power to the local allies in the region. This requires growth of their military capabilities comparable to what the great power withdraws to position in a higher priority region. Capable local actors have three roles. First, they must increase the costs for the aggressor, forcing him to escalate beyond his initial plans and perhaps his capabilities. Second, they must buy time and keep the window of reentry open for the great power that has deprioritized. Third, local defensive forces permit the conflict to

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[80] As Thomas Schelling put it, "What can 7,000 American troops do, or 12,000 Allied troops? Bluntly, they can die. They can die heroically, dramatically, and in a manner that guarantees that the action cannot stop there." Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 47.

remain limited, an outcome that is in the interest of all parties but especially of the deprioritizing power.[81]

The tradeoff is that the deprioritizing power loses some control over the regional security trends and escalatory dynamics. The more well-armed its local allies, the less control the great power will have. A successful deprioritization, again, requires a higher risk acceptance threshold. But in exchange the region may maintain defense dominance, a cult of defense rather than a cult of the offensive because well-armed locals may be more confident in their ability to deter, and if deterrence fails, to defeat the nearby hostile power.

Moreover, the deprioritized region will look different from before because internal dynamics will result in changes in the local security provision leadership.[82] Some local actors are more likely to rearm than others because they have domestic support for it and because the immediacy of the security threat may demand it from them. This may require a change in the strategic preferences of the deprioritizing power: its best allies while it was fully involved in the region may not be the best ones in the aftermath of deprioritization. To get deprioritization right, therefore, a great power has to adapt its diplomatic preferences and support allies or partners that may have been less valued beforehand while paying less attention to others that may have been favorites earlier.

The *fourth* metric of a successful deprioritization may be paradoxical, given the previous point, but it is essential: the deprioritizing power has to maintain control over the highest steps in the escalatory ladder. In the post-1945 age, this means keeping control over the threat and use of nuclear weapons, the highest level of military escalation. Hence, while local actors ought to be armed, nuclear weapons should remain under the control of the deprioritizing power. In the pre-nuclear age, escalatory dominance was preserved by the sheer size of a military force, combined with superior discipline (e.g., Roman legions) and some technological advantages (e.g., siege capabilities, artillery, naval platforms). In the modern nuclear age, the primary means of maintaining escalation dominance has been nuclear capabilities.

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[81] See also Jakub Grygiel and A. Wess Mitchell, "Limited War is Back," *The National Interest*, August 2014.
[82] On the local search for security, see Jakub Grygiel, *Return of the Barbarians* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 182-3.

Maintaining escalation dominance is necessary for both the preservation of an order in the region and for the ability of the great power to make its reentry – or promise of reentry – effective. The clear limits on the ceiling of arming establishes boundaries that can help keep a regional order. In particular, the rise of a local hegemon, even if friendly but still replacing the power that deprioritized the region, is not beneficial: it will generate internal balancing dynamics that will focus the attention of the local allies away from the main rival, ultimately weakening the preservation of stability and an order beneficial to the great power. Moreover, by keeping escalation dominance, the deprioritizing power can promise to its allies – and threaten to its rival – reentry into the region. It is the tool of last resort, so to speak.

It is of course entirely possible that once a great power deprioritizes an adversary and thus a region, there will arise an incentive among the local states to match the capabilities of their security patron. Such dynamics are inevitable, and Europe is a case in point. France, for example, has developed nuclear capabilities, a *force de frappe* that is meant to serve, at least in part, as a deterrent in light of a potential or perceived reduction in American nuclear protection.[83] Similar dynamics are likely to be unleashed in Asia were the U.S. be perceived as deprioritizing that region. Japan, for instance, is a prime candidate to acquire nuclear capabilities to protect itself against China. Nonetheless, both in Europe and Asia, the U.S. will continue to have superior nuclear capabilities, limiting the deterrent value of the local power to a subordinate, preferably complementary, role.

Conclusion

Deprioritization is one of the hardest strategies to pursue successfully because it requires relinquishing some ability to manage regional dynamics and demands a conscious effort to develop beneficial conditions without a sizeable presence. The difficulty is in part intellectual because strategy is the act of creating priorities,

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[83] It is also very plausible that France developed nuclear capabilities to be taken more seriously on the international stage and not be excluded from the negotiations and decisions of the great powers of the world. Furthermore, French policy often seeks to differentiate the country from Germany; in this case, to make France a serious, and perhaps primary, security actor in Europe while Germany is the economic potentate. Finally, there is a prestige element involved: the desire, that is, to be recognized as a preeminent, serious power and nuclear weapons are the means to achieve this recognition. See Bruno Tertrais, *French nuclear deterrence policy, forces and future* (Paris: Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, 2019); on the prestige motive, see Daniel Markey, "Prestige and the origins of war: Returning to realism's roots," *Security Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (Summer 1999), pp. 126-73.

elevating some objectives above others and thus focusing more on the higher level goals rather than those that have been demoted. It is easier – intellectually and institutionally – to focus on these higher, more pressing priorities because they are politically more attractive to address: the bureaucratic payoff is larger (more money), and the public attention is higher (more pressure to address the higher priority). But on the flip side of any prioritization is the problem of what happens with the functional or geographic tasks that *ipso facto* will receive fewer resources, less planning, and, more broadly, diminished attention from the great power. To deprioritize successfully, it is not enough to simply redirect efforts to a new theater. Instead, one has to do it while preserving its interests in the old theater. A great power, especially a maritime one, will not remain great if it does not successfully preserve its interests in multiple theaters.

VI. CONCLUSION

By A. Wess Mitchell and Jakub Grygiel

Is Strategy Still Necessary—and Possible?

This project set out to assess deprioritization as a discipline of strategy—to define it, to examine the domestic and international obstacles to it, and to describe what it looks like when it succeeds.

All of the papers agree that deprioritization is a method of strategic adaptation, whereby a great power attempts to match the resources at its disposal to the demands created by the most dangerous threat in its environment. All center deprioritization around the management of tradeoffs, and differentiate it from attempting to maintain maximal efforts on all fronts on one hand, and abrupt withdrawal and abandonment on the other. And all see deprioritization as a means of conserving a state's overall position by making judicious and preventative corrections in its allocation of effort.

The papers disagree in two important respects. The first is how deprioritization comes about, exactly. Grygiel posits that executing it requires "intellectual hegemony" across the state bureaucracy. Mitchell, by contrast, sees it as having usually come about as the result of a small group of leaders attempting well-timed policy heterodoxy, and Pottinger describes two recent examples—the Nixon and Trump administrations—that achieved a fair degree of success in both prioritization and deprioritization without widescale bureaucratic buy-in.

The second area of disagreement has to do with what constitutes a successful deprioritization—specifically, with respect to the amount of risk that national leaders should view as tolerable in the deprioritized theater. On Colby's account, deprioritization succeeds as long as it enables success in the prioritized theater, even if that produces a high degree of turbulence in the secondary theater. At the opposite extreme, Grygiel's account, deprioritization succeeds as long as the secondary theater remains stable, even if the deprioritizing state fails against the primary rival. Mitchell's paper suggests that the development of an "insurance policy" in the secondary theater is the litmus test for effective deprioritization.

While not trivializing these differences, it's important to view them within the context of a shared premise: that strategy, and most importantly a change in the geostrategic posture of a state, in today's world is both possible and necessary. In this sense the essays argue against the view that various aspects of modernity—institutions, technology, ideas—have expanded the horizons for what the state is capable of achieving to a point that opportunity costs cease to exist. If power has become an essentially "generative" substance, untethered from underlying material realities, geography in a sense no longer matters. Moreover, power conceived as an immaterial substance becomes infinite, and its application does not consume it. Why worry then about tradeoffs when you can "co-prioritize" and, in a sense, be everywhere at once?

The return of great-power competition suggests that this way of thinking may have been premature. The wars of the early 21st Century have demonstrated beyond any doubt that geography – from its simplest variables such as distance and space to the more detailed ones such as rivers, hills, and forests – still matters in the 21st Century. Recent events show that power is consumed at a rapid pace in a conflict and is not effortlessly replenished. Looking ahead, most of the main scenarios that one can imagine drawing the United States into a major conflict involve a big-power adversary coveting physical territory that currently lies beyond its control. And that's not likely to change. Technology may be derived from "innovation power," but the latter is still derived from resources and population. Until that changes—which is to say, until the fundamental nature of power changes—geography will continue to be the prize and its byproduct, distance, will continue to be the chief source of limitations on power.

This project was meant to provide a starting point for thinking about deprioritization as an under-studied aspect of strategy—to identify the gaps and frame the problem, rather than to provide a comprehensive framework for addressing them. The papers exercise suggests a few fruitful areas for further developing this line of inquiry.

One is the element of time in strategy. At base, prioritizing comes down to assigning values to different objects in space and time. The question of how much effort to put toward what, when, and for how long has attracted attention in engineering, investing, energy security and other fields, but not strategy.[84] It could be especially useful to

[84] See Nadia Schadlow's recent work on this subject—for example, "The Forgotten Element of Strategy," *The Atlantic*, June 2023 and "We Gantt Do This: The Gantt Chart Problem for Electric Cars," RealClearEnergy, May 23, 2023.

examine how the element of time affects the two main components of strategy—means and ends—in an interactive environment composed of multiple adversaries.

Another potential avenue would be to look more closely at the phenomenon of loss in strategy.[85] Tradeoffs often involve giving something up. Do bureaucracies, societies, and leaders think about avoiding, mitigating or coping with loss the same way? As noted in the first essay, people are generally reluctant to switch from economizing to prioritizing until the last minute. Yet it was also clear from the historical cases that states tend to get a competitive advantage from attempting strategic adaptation early rather than late—that is, before they have entered the "realm of loss." It could be worthwhile to compare cases where adaption occurred early or late, and the results. In America's case, an obvious corollary would be to examine whether the long-assumed late-mover advantage still applies and, if so, whether the threshold of loss is different for us than it was for other great powers in history.

A third area for potential study would be to look at how emerging technologies affect the power gradient that has historically complicated the ability of even very strong great powers to be "present" in more than one region at the same time. All of the examples considered in the papers above had to find some way to conquer distance, whether by land, sea or air, in order to hold down multiple points on the map simultaneously. Could some combination of nuclear, hypersonic, space, and stand-off conventional capabilities make that easier? What are the limitations of those new technologies, to what extent is in-theater ground power still the indispensable factor, and does it matter whether that is coming from the United States or an ally?

Yet another topic for study could be to look at how new strategies generally take root in leadership and bureaucracy. Is intellectual hegemony necessary? Or is the bar much lower? What explains the successful transition from the emergence of a strategic-intellectual heterodoxy to operationalization of the new approach? One could identify several different templates from the historical cases examined in these papers. Maria Theresa's process for adapting the Austrian state to the Prussian challenge in the 1750s, Jackie Fisher's process for implementing a new naval strategy in the 1900s, and President Eisenhower's development of the strategic planning board and operations

[85] See for example Natalia Weisz and Roberto Vassalo, "What You Lose with Your New Strategy," Harvard Business Review, July 13, 2022.

coordinating board all involved bureaucratic processes that took an idea from the white board to execution, and that achieved a fair degree of their intended outcome. What procedural lessons can we learn from these and similar examples, and from less successful ones?

Deprioritization is, as mentioned, an understudied area of strategy, but it is likely to be more relevant in the years to come. Strategic ubiquity is a dangerous illusion because, like past great powers, the U.S. cannot be present everywhere in equally effective ways and, given growing fiscal constraints, is likely to have less capacity to hold the entire length of the global frontiers that define the U.S. defensive perimeter without some kind of deprioritization, somewhere. Technology, "soft power" or globalization and all of its associated dynamics are unlikely to solve this eternal problem of strategy. Hence, the question is how to protect some interest in a region with a smaller expenditure of resources – that is, how to deprioritize one frontier in order to improve the chances of success on a different one. This study is an initial attempt to grapple with that question. How the United States answers it in the years ahead will have important implications for the country's success in an era of intensifying strategic competition.