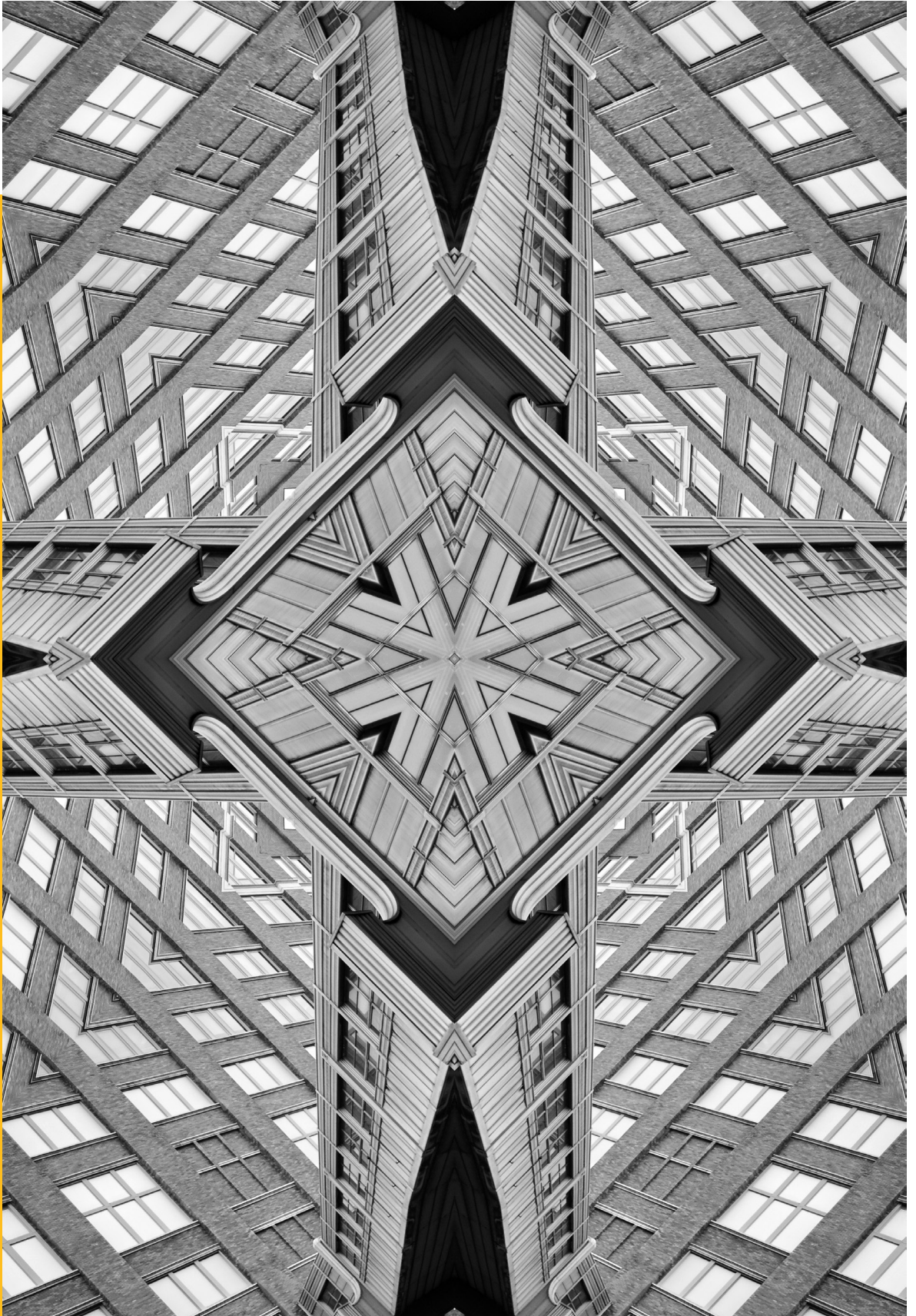


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A Proposed 'Classical Plus' Approach to the Grand Strategy Conceptual Debate

Harsh V. Pant and Sanjeet Kashyap

Abstract

Recent debate over the need for an explicit national security strategy (NSS) in India warrants an understanding of the term 'grand strategy'. The prevalent twofold typology—the narrow military-centric (Classical) versus the broader foreign-policy-centric definition (International Relations)—fails to capture the diversity in grand strategy literature. This paper surveys the existing material and expands the typology by proposing a fourfold classification along the means–end axis. It also advances the case for a Classical Plus definition of grand strategy. To develop a comprehensive Classical Plus approach, the paper also stakes out the position taken in ongoing debates regarding relevant actors, intentionality, the extent of planning, and flexibility involved in the grand strategic exercise. It concludes by offering a defence of the relevance of the concept for scholars and policymakers.

Since the summer of 2024, the Indian government's strategic circle has witnessed a vigorous revival of the longstanding debate on grand strategy against the backdrop of India's rising heft in global affairs,^{1,2} even as it faces a two-front security challenge in the form of China and Pakistan. Much of the debate has focused on the desirability of an explicitly laid-out National Security Strategy (NSS) doctrine.

Recent crises in India, such as the Galwan Valley conflict with China and Operation Sindoor against Pakistan, have reinforced the need for a coherent approach towards national security. At the same time, longer-term trends—China's military and nuclear modernisation, the United States' (US) relative decline and retrenchment, Pakistan's persistent obsession with India, technological disruptions, and the unravelling of the post-Cold War global order—present the nation with opportunities and challenges.

In this context, it is understandable that New Delhi's strategic community seeks an institutionalised framework to formally outline the means and ends of India's engagement with the world. A grand strategic doctrine will enable the 'whole-of-government approach'^a to underwrite national security. However, formulating an appropriate grand strategy requires engaging with the conceptual foundations of the term. It is a prerequisite for an informed debate on specific visions of India's national security.

Beyond South Asia, there is growing recognition of the relevance of a grand strategic approach. In an anarchic world of power shifts, increased insecurity, and heightened threat perceptions, getting national security right is crucial. It is no surprise, therefore, to see an increased interest in grand strategy.³ This maturation is reflected in the proliferation of university centres (such as the University of Texas at Austin), fellowships (such as the joint Harvard–Massachusetts Institute of Technology programme), degree programmes (for example, the Brady-Johnson Program in Grand Strategy at Yale University), think-tank verticals (like the Reimagining US Grand Strategy Program at the Stimson Centre), privately funded initiatives (like those supported by the Axel and Margaret

a The whole-of-government approach entails interdepartmental and inter-services coordination on the composition of desirable goals and requisite means, as well as the strategy required to align them.

Ax:son Johnson Foundation and the Charles Koch Foundation), and a growing list of academic monographs, handbooks, and edited volumes.

However, there is a lack of scholarly consensus on the conceptual tenets of grand strategy. At the most basic level, the debate questions the possibility and feasibility of the grand strategic exercise.⁴ Further, much of the writing that deploys grand strategy as a conceptual framework focuses on the US in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries,⁵ although the literature has diversified to cover historical city-states, empires, and individual emperors, as well as contemporary middle powers, declining powers, rising powers, and small states.⁶ This is further reflected in the descriptive, explanatory, and prescriptive nature of the scholarship.^{7,8,9}

The flip side is the absence of a clear, explicit delineation of its methodological premise.¹⁰ Scholars are also divided over the type of states with the required agency to pursue the grand strategic exercise. Early scholarship regarded great powers as the only actors with sufficient latitude for long-term conscious planning.¹¹ Recent literature increasingly, and rightly, recognises grand strategy as a viable pursuit for smaller states, even more so because of their resource constraints while responding to threats. Due to asymmetries of power, though, the grand strategy of smaller states is likely to be reactive to the international environment and regional in its spatial scope.¹²

The notion of grand strategy as a state's theory to align its available means with its desired ends has considerable traction. However, the scholarly opinion is divided about the scope of grand strategy. The varying scholarly position on the scope of grand strategy, in turn, is a result of the shifting international political environment and disciplinary trends. Given its relevance to policymaking, the grand strategy definitional debate carries much weight. An appropriate conception of grand strategy can help policymakers operate more prudently in the domain of foreign policy by helping achieve an optimal equilibrium between means and ends.

A useful approach to capture definitional diversity involves classifying the existing literature as belonging to the Classical or the International Relations (IR) traditions.¹³ The Classical definition emphasises the centrality of military affairs, focusing on the use of military power to ensure national security. In contrast, the IR definition expands the concept to include non-military instruments of statecraft and a plethora of national interests beyond survival and territorial integrity. However, this twofold typology does not adequately capture the whole range of conceptions in existing literature. The primary purpose of this paper, therefore, is to broaden this typology by way of a survey of the existing literature and to make a case for adopting the Classical Plus tradition (explained in a later section). Taking an explicitly reflexivist approach, the paper contends that this definition of grand strategy is suitable for the contemporary geopolitical context.

The first section provides a brief historical overview of the concept, followed by a survey of the existing grand strategy literature concerned with the definitional parameters. Since scholarship has expanded quickly, we focus on works that classify definitions rather than on individual case studies. Such a survey of classificatory works enables a better understanding of trends in the field and provides a systematic way of arranging contested approaches to define the parameters of grand strategy. It also gives a sense of the direction in which the field is evolving, in terms of key disagreements and potential research gaps.

In the next section, the paper outlines its stance on different dimensions of the ongoing conceptual debate on grand strategy. Here, it is concerned primarily with delineating the Classical Plus approach, so this section clarifies its position in the debate. A fully fleshed-out Classical Plus definition is necessary to operationalise the concept of grand strategy for future scholarship. Next, the scope of means and ends within the Classical Plus definition is laid out, and a case is made for the adoption of this approach. This is followed by the fourfold typology and an explanation of the shortcomings of the IR Minus tradition.

In conclusion, the continued utility of the concept of grand strategy for policymakers is defended.

Historical Evolution and Typological Overview

With its global reach and all-encompassing nature, the First World War validated the need to conceptualise strategy at a broader level, encompassing various instruments of statecraft in pursuit of victory and national interest.¹⁴ References to a higher level of strategy beyond battlefield manoeuvres abounded in interwar Europe.¹⁵ The interwar- and Second World War-era writings of Basil Liddell Hart and Edward Mead Earle are regarded as the inflection point for modern grand strategic thought. However, other scholars also made notable contributions. For instance, Julian Corbett first incorporated non-military instruments in his rendering of grand strategy, and J.F.C. Fuller is credited with defining grand strategy as an exclusively peacetime pursuit.¹⁶

The term ‘grand strategy’ and its synonyms (such as great strategy and major strategy) predate the First World War, albeit in a muddled form. The nineteenth-century concept of grand strategy particularly highlights its multiple meanings. In his genealogical study of the concept, historian Lukas Milaveski identifies four different meanings prevalent in nineteenth-century literature. Drawing on the experience of the Napoleonic wars and the American Civil War, these military-centric conceptions conflated grand strategy with military manoeuvre, the application of military force to the correct point, the use of military force for political purposes, and coordination of force across multiple theatres.¹⁷

By deploying the Koselleckian contextualist method^b in his intellectual history account, Milevski demonstrates how these different meanings of the same term have been driven by geopolitical trends, identified lessons of history, and the evolving intellectual landscape of the discipline of strategic studies.¹⁸ His insight is relevant to contextualise the recent proliferation of grand strategy literature that employs an expansive notion of the concept.

In the period between the American Civil War and the First World War, the range of concerns covered under grand strategy steadily expanded.¹⁹ However, the harrowing experience of the First World War led to two distinct redefinitions of the concept. First, the imperative of fighting and understanding a total war^c required a new conceptual vocabulary; the

b The contextualist method of historical inquiry rests on the premise that social and political concepts develop in response to wider sociopolitical changes. In that sense, concepts like grand strategy both reflect and catalyse historical, political, and social trends.

c ‘Total war’ involves the mobilisation of all available national resources to destroy the enemy’s war-making abilities.

Historical Evolution and Typological Overview

military-centric concept of strategy was inadequate to capture the extent of societal mobilisation involved.²⁰ Consequently, the notion of grand strategy expanded to include non-military instruments of policy as well, to achieve the national goal. Second, the death toll and economic destruction during the war led to a reconfiguration of the concept to account for the financial cost-benefit calculation and the preservation of peace. These two strands were reflected in the writings of Fuller and Hart, respectively.²¹

While the Second World War could have led to further intellectual engagement with the concept of grand strategy, the onset of the nuclear age and its preoccupation with limited war pushed grand strategy to the margins of strategic studies.²² The re-emergence of the term in academia occurred in the 1970s, when the breakdown of the foreign policy consensus in the aftermath of the Vietnam War and concerns over Japan's economic rise paved the way to engage with new concepts.²³

A Review of Grand Strategy Typologies

The proliferation of writings on grand strategy over the past five decades—concerned primarily with providing blueprints for nations' strategies or describing historical cases—has generated considerable debate over the concept's boundaries. To account for this diversity, a recent trend in literature involves classification by definition to map the diverse positions along different parameters.²⁴

Grand strategy differs from foreign policy or military strategy in terms of its long-term orientation, concern with only the crucial elements of national interest, and preoccupation with varied instruments of statecraft. Nina Silove (2018) categorises the existing conception of grand strategy as grand plans, grand principles, and grand behaviour. The 'plans' literature studies the detailed blueprint for the purposive use of various means to achieve a specific set of goals. The 'principles' approach dilutes the focus on the specificity of blueprints to instead analyse the overarching guiding framework of a nation's foreign policy. The difference between these two approaches lies in the level of detail.

Historical Evolution and Typological Overview

Finally, for the grand ‘behaviour’ approach, the detection of a long-term consistent pattern in state behaviour qualifies as evidence for grand strategy in operation. Scholars in this tradition, though, treat the issue of intentionality in different ways.

Silove’s typology has drawn criticism for its tight, compartmentalised structure, which may not correspond with the fluidity of statecraft in actual practice.²⁵ For instance, Kavin Narizny has pointed out the lack of substantive analytical differences between grand plans, such as the NSC-68, and grand behaviour, such as containment.^{d,26} Rebecca Friedman Lissner’s characterisation of US grand strategy during the early Cold War years as simultaneously corresponding to plan (NSC-68), principle (containment), and pattern of behaviour (the Korean War and the Marshall Plan) demonstrates the limitations of Silove’s typology.²⁷

As an alternative, Lissner provides a variable–process–blueprint typology of the grand strategy literature. ‘Grand strategy as a variable’ treats grand strategic outcomes as the dependent variable and seeks to find drivers of state behaviour.²⁸ The remit of this literature includes the interaction of structure and agency at the international, state, and individual levels that lead to foreign policy outcomes in grand strategic terms. The ‘process’ approach to grand strategy eschews the substance or content of specific grand strategy to instead cover the bureaucratic process of the doctrine’s formulation.²⁹ Often critical in tone and focused heavily on the US, this genre is concerned with the bureaucratic politics that goes into the production of purposive blueprints, such as iterations of the NSS. Finally, the ‘blueprint’ approach offers prescriptive advice in the hope of influencing a nation’s foreign policy.³⁰

Lissner’s typology provides an expansive formulation to capture the explanatory and prescriptive grand strategic scholarship, as well as works on the policy planning process. But she does not grapple with the underlying theoretical wagers that animate contending grand strategic visions. This gap is addressed by Avey et al. (2018), who offer a typology

d NSC-68 was a secret policy paper drafted by the US Department of State Policy Planning Staff in 1950. For its advocacy of a massive build-up of conventional and nuclear arsenal, the document is regarded as the foundational piece in the US’ Cold War strategy. Containment refers to the US approach of countering the growing Soviet influence by deploying military, political, and economic means in the Soviet Union’s periphery.

Historical Evolution and Typological Overview

concerned with the grand strategic blueprint debate in the US, but applicable to other cases as well.³¹ This framework explicitly lays out the underlying IR theoretical premise (grand principles) of specific grand strategic blueprints, as well as the latter's conception of the US national interest, objectives, and policy tools.³² The interest-objective-policy-tools framework holds promise for rigorously testing the contending grand strategic visions. It allows readers to uncover the underlying theoretical wager driving different grand strategic positions,³³ and then seeks to settle the debate by testing the propositions through empirical assessment.

The Means-Ends Definitional Typology

The coexistence of multiple definitions referring to different sets of means and ends warrants a classificatory scheme for more coherence. The typology by Balzacq et al. (2019) captures the definitional debate over the appropriate parameter for the national goals and instruments deemed suitable for grand strategy.³⁴ In their formulation, competing definitions coalesce around narrow (Classical) and broad (IR) accounts of grand strategy.³⁵

The Classical tradition dates back to nineteenth-century definitions wherein all four identifiable variations coalesced around military usage.³⁶ For adherents of this approach, national security in the backdrop of interstate competition warrants the highest priority, and consequently, grand strategy entails the deployment of military power to achieve security.³⁷ In the Classical definition, a state's grand strategy provides the underlying theoretical logic to assess the magnitude and urgency of security threats and identifies the suitable military instruments to address them.³⁸ Grand strategy thus becomes a state's theory of military victory. Barry Posen explicitly deploys this military-centric definitional approach.³⁹

Luttwak's earlier formulations of the concept could also be labelled as the Classical approach, concerned as they were with the operational level of war and their traditional security goal.⁴⁰ A modified version of the Classical definition would include the use of military power and diplomacy to ensure security for a state.⁴¹ Critics of this tradition, however, argue that such a narrowly defined formulation differs little from the contemporary

Historical Evolution and Typological Overview

definitions of military strategy.⁴² Further, an exclusively military-centric approach is at odds with the contemporary geopolitical environment.⁴³

The IR tradition envisages a broader concept of the means and the ends of grand strategy.⁴⁴ Under this, a state's grand strategy involves the use of both military and non-military instruments of statecraft to achieve a range of national interest goals beyond traditional security. Grand strategy supplies the logic for a state's conception of its national interests as well as the appropriate combination of military, diplomatic, economic, and psychological tools required to realise them. Seen this way, grand strategy becomes a state's theory of foreign policy. An increasingly large section of the contemporary literature operationalises this approach.⁴⁵ Critics, though, contend that incorporating non-military instruments in pursuit of national interests dilutes the focus of grand strategy, which ought to be concentrated on the crucial purpose of protection against military threats.⁴⁶ The prioritisation of national security concerns drives the pushback against the 'foreign policy-fiction' of grand strategy.

While accepting the twofold definitional classification of the grand strategy literature, this paper seeks to broaden the typology by including two additional definitions. Taken together, the fourfold classification lends to a 2x2 matrix arrangement of competing positions along the means–end axis of grand strategy.

The Classical Plus Tradition

Due to the richness of the grand strategy debate, it is tough to come up with a novel approach to the concept. At the same time, it is essential to articulate one's position on the faultlines in the existing literature. This paper argues that grand strategy is a nation's purposeful conception of the best way to achieve national security in the long term.⁴⁷ It operates at the highest level of policymaking and is an ecological, holistic exercise.⁴⁸ It is concerned both with aligning the available means to the desired ends in terms of national security and moderating the ends in light of the state's limited capability.⁴⁹

Since states operate in an environment of scarcity, making grand strategic choices must involve ruthless prioritisation and trade-offs among threats, interests, and resources.⁵⁰ All states are capable of indulging in the grand strategic exercise to survive in an anarchic international environment. However, the ability of a particular grand strategy to shape international politics is determined by the power differential, the wider geopolitical context, planning choices, and execution efficiency.

For a security-centric conception of grand strategy, the first consideration should be an assessment of the external international environment. However, domestic factors do play a crucial role in both the formulation and implementation of grand strategy. Further, a state's grand strategy operates both in times of war and peace. While its logic might be self-evident during wars, peacetime activities such as economic development, technological innovation, and diplomatic conduct influence the state's ability to dissuade or defeat adversaries in conflict. The balance of power among nations also shifts during peaceful interludes as an outcome of uneven growth rates.⁵¹ Consequently, grand strategy ought to be concerned with husbanding power and preparing for the possibility of war even during times of stability.

The Means–Ends Scope of the Classical Plus Approach

In terms of the means–ends parameter, this paper argues in favour of the Classical Plus approach of states using a range of instruments (military, diplomatic, economic, and intelligence) to serve national security goals. In this rendering, the goals remain limited to protection against external and internal security threats.

Internal challenges to a state’s claim of monopoly over violence risk turning the domestic domain anarchic. The survival of the state might come under strain, particularly if a weak state faces organised military resistance. In certain cases, internal challengers to state sovereignty might also receive support from external adversarial actors. Consequently, a fuller consideration of national security goals should involve taking into account internal security threats.

Due to the anarchic nature of international politics, survival is the baseline imperative, which accords national security the highest priority in the hierarchy of state goals.⁵² The most potent threat to a state’s survival involves challenges from rival nations. To protect against this, states rely primarily on military power. However, grand strategy is not solely preoccupied with the peacetime endeavour to prevent the outbreak of war, nor is it limited to coercion through displays of force.⁵³ Rather, its logic operates both in peace and war.⁵⁴ Depending on circumstances and leadership choices, it can be concerned with husbanding military power, mitigating the need for war in the first place, deterring adversaries by using threats and sending signals, and effectively harnessing the military power in conjunction with other instruments during war.

In terms of grand strategic means, a state’s ability to deploy military instruments of power on the battlefield remains contingent on harnessing power in the first place, which, in turn, depends on latent power derived from national wealth.⁵⁵ Further, modern battlefield effectiveness requires an advanced technological base and logistical arrangements.⁵⁶ Beyond battlefield dynamics, the possession of particular weapon systems serves to influence both allies and adversaries, with a direct bearing on a state’s security.

The Classical Plus Tradition

Armed suasion, involving both deterrence and coercion, entails sending signals to other states, in which the nature of weapons systems, force posture, and diplomatic interaction play a role.⁵⁷ The efficacy of armed suasion is determined by the targeted adversary's perception,⁵⁸ which has to be influenced by deploying a combination of military and diplomatic instruments. Moreover, to ensure an effective translation of wartime success—at the tactical, operational, and theatre levels—into the political end goal of national security, military power needs to be complemented with other instruments, including diplomacy, intelligence, and propaganda. If this is not done, military victory might fail to achieve the political objective set at the grand strategic level, as was evident in Britain's Trafalgar campaign and the French victory during the American War of Independence.^{e,59} Conversely, even the lack of military superiority or limited battle success might be leveraged by exploiting other instruments to achieve the grand strategic objective, as demonstrated by Anwar Sadat's handling of the 1973 Yom Kippur war.^{f,60} Effective grand strategy, therefore, involves the integration of military instruments of power with diplomacy, the strategic deployment of economic inducements (both carrots and sticks) by the state, the harnessing of intelligence, and the reliance on narrative building to achieve a favourable outcome in the domain of national security.

Apart from armed suasion, diplomatic instruments play an important role in bilateral or multilateral alliance cooperation with other states. When faced with a formidable adversary, states move beyond self-help to share their burden with other nations with similar threat perceptions. Alliance politics brings its own set of complications, including the possibility of abandonment or entrapment. Consequently, the masterful arts of persuasion, negotiation, inducements, and even coercion—the hallmark attributes of the craft of diplomacy—play out in alliance arrangements. For middle powers and small states, especially, defence diplomacy bolsters

e The Battle of Trafalgar was a case of tactical success for the British Royal Navy against the combined fleets of the French and Spanish navies. But continued British control over the Mediterranean did not translate into grand strategic success, due to an inability to commit troops on the ground, delayed diplomatic negotiation with allies, and Napoleon's quick moves at the Battle of Austerlitz. The French aid to the colonial insurgents in North America helped defeat Britain in the war but also imposed a heavy burden on its exchequer and failed to undermine British power.

f Sadat's masterful handling of the war saw Egypt convert battlefield setbacks into durable concessions at the negotiation table.

The Classical Plus Tradition

self-help and cements military cooperation through weapons acquisition, training, joint exercises, and liaising with friendly states. Diplomatic alliances also serve the function of power projection by furnishing basing rights in faraway places.

During crises or war, diplomatic negotiations support the grand strategic pursuit of security goals by acting as conduits to pursue a range of policy options, including confidence-building measures to prevent inadvertent escalation, accommodation, or appeasement to buy time; mutually beneficial deals; and the imposition of the victor's terms after comprehensive military success. That said, not all diplomatic activities undertaken by a state fall within the remit of grand strategy. In the Classical Plus tradition, only those initiatives with a direct bearing on a nation's security are considered a part of the grand strategic venture.

The Classical Plus approach also incorporates economic statecraft as a relevant grand strategic means for national security. To preserve conceptual clarity, this paper's approach to economic instruments of grand strategy is limited to the domain of international economic interactions purposefully employed by a state trying to shape the other states' behaviour and calculations. In the backdrop of the interconnected nature of economic exchanges, the perennial concern for relative gains justifies the inclusion of economic activities within grand strategy, given that uneven national economic growth rates remain a fundamental driver of power imbalance in international politics. An analysis of the causes of economic development itself is outside the remit of the field of grand strategy.

A state's economic and technological capabilities can serve as useful instruments of coercion and persuasion. In pursuit of national security objectives, it may deploy a range of economic statecraft instruments not only to impact other states' policy behavior, but also their beliefs, perceptions, capabilities, and propensity to act.⁶¹ The asymmetrical nature of resource endowment (capital, labour, natural resources, and technological base) provides the basis for economic statecraft, allowing states to leverage their economic advantages as carrots or sticks for political purposes.

The specific set of economic statecraft tools preferred by a state varies under different circumstances,⁶² but a fairly comprehensive mix includes measures such as industrial policy, foreign aid, foreign infrastructure investment, technology standard setting, control over supply chains, economic sanctions, intellectual property theft, foreign direct investment, tariffs, non-tariff barriers to trade, market power manipulation in financial services, and export controls for both natural resources and advanced technology.⁶³ These tools may work in tandem with other instruments of power to achieve desired outcomes. Their impact in shaping the targeted adversary's behaviour need not be reflected exclusively in the economic domain for them to be regarded as effective grand strategic instruments.⁶⁴

Since economic statecraft involves competitive dynamics, the paradoxical logic of strategy manifests here as well. Economic coercion often leads to countermeasures that nullify this leverage in future. Targeted states deploy pervasive nationalism to endure considerable pain due to economic statecraft measures in the face of external pressure; try to find alternative mechanisms to render the restrictions irrelevant; resort to illicit measures or smuggling to bypass the enforcement and verification mechanisms; or invest resources to build capability, either domestically or in concert with partners, to overcome external dependence.⁶⁵ Even the state that deploys economic statecraft measures has to bear costs. Consequently, assessing the success or failure of economic statecraft requires weighing the effectiveness against the costs incurred in the process.⁶⁶

Justifications for the Classical Plus Approach

This paper's advocacy for the Classical Plus approach runs analogous to Stephen Walt's criticism of the ever-expanding ambit of security studies and Daniel Drezner's disapproval of the proliferation of national security concerns.⁶⁷ It also echoes Lukas Milevski's call to rehabilitate grand strategy within the strategic studies discipline and away from its recent usage in IR literature,⁶⁸ and Colin Gray's argument for situating the concept within strategic studies to avoid the deprioritisation of military elements.⁶⁹

The Classical Plus Tradition

This argument essentially rests on the necessity of conceptual and disciplinary coherence. While the conceptual lexicon and academic disciplines ought to be open to expansion and incorporation of new elements, stretching a concept or discipline beyond its well-defined remit risks loosening the internal intellectual coherence.⁷⁰ The incorporation of non-traditional security concerns in security studies leads to reduced focus on the military dimension of security. Similarly, the conceptual stretching of grand strategy to cover aspects such as a state's theory of foreign policy, or even romantic relationships, risks reducing its utility.⁷¹ War and military power are central to international politics; therefore, it is better to limit grand strategy to traditional national security concerns.

The other contextualist argument in favour of the Classical Plus grand strategy approach rests on the current configuration of the international environment, which constrains nations' search for security. This paper outlines a rationalist, deductive, top-down definition of grand strategy, but recognises the role of contextual factors in shaping disciplinary and definitional trends.⁷² After all, the expansive, foreign-policy-centric definitions of grand strategy in the Western IR academia have mostly appeared in the unipolar era of international politics. For the post-Cold War Western IR experts, the absence of a rival great power meant a reduced urgency to address national security threats in terms of interstate competition and balance-of-power imperatives.⁷³ This relatively relaxed geopolitical environment has served as the backdrop for the IR theorisation of grand strategy in terms of non-military means and a multifaceted conception of national interest.

However, recent geopolitical events, such as China's military aggression in East Asia, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the US' focus on the great power competition, the wars in West Asia, and the Indo-Pak military conflict, signal a return to intense security competition under the condition of anarchy. At the systemic level, the shift in the relative distribution of power has turned the world bipolar.⁷⁴ Similar to the Cold War bipolarity, the global scope of the Sino-US competition has attendant strategic implications for both superpowers, middle powers, and smaller states.⁷⁵ In this backdrop, the concept of grand strategy needs to be redefined to tackle urgent issues in international politics.

The Classical Plus Tradition

Unlike the IR approach, the Classical Plus approach limits the end goal of grand strategy to national security. It also differs from the Classical approach in identifying non-military instruments of power as relevant means to attain the grand strategic goal. Thus, the Classical Plus approach is uniquely poised to render relevant the concept of grand strategy for foreign policy officials seeking to navigate the turbulence of contemporary geopolitics.

Critics may contend that threats to human survival and well-being do not emanate solely from the domain of interstate military competition; non-traditional security issues also pose genuine dangers to citizens' safety and well-being. The expanded ambit of the discipline of security studies is predicated precisely on the recognition of non-military threats to the safety and well-being of a nation's population. There exists a clear imperative for nation-states to respond to non-traditional security threats, including pandemics, resource scarcity, global warming, and natural disasters. States do plan specific strategies in means–ends terms to deal with these contingent scenarios, with military power playing a limited or non-existent role. But the disciplinary specialisation and expertise required to handle such threats fall outside the remit of strategic studies. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic posed a threat to people everywhere. In response, states had to come up with strategies to protect their citizens, including lockdowns, testing and tracing, social welfare schemes, and vaccines. The deployed policy instruments were not military-centric; instead, the disciplinary expertise in the fields of public health, economics, epidemiology, and legal regulations was more relevant. Extending the concept of grand strategy to cover these domains would entail an overstretch, such that the concept loses its coherence and meaning. Thus, grand strategy should be deployed only in the context of traditional military threats to national security.

A Fourfold Definitional Typology of Grand Strategy

Table 1: The Means–Ends Matrix of Grand Strategy

	National Security Goals	Foreign Policy Goals
Military Means	Classical	IR Minus
Mixed Means	Classical Plus	IR

Source: Authors' own, drawing on Balzacq, Dombrowski, and Reich (2018).

The lack of scholarly agreement on what constitutes grand strategy is reflected in the variety of definitions in the literature. Since the 1970s, there's been a broad consensus around the idea of grand strategy as a state's attempt to deploy a range of means to attain desired goals. However, there is debate over the acceptable parameters of the ends that states pursue and the range of means used to achieve them.

As mentioned earlier, a twofold typology of grand strategic traditions offers a systematic classification of this variation. But we argue that this typology does not capture the full range of variations in the literature.

In this paper's expanded typology, a third Classical Plus approach involves a state's pursuit of traditional military security using a mix of both military and non-military instruments. This approach harks back to the original formulation of grand strategy in the interwar years but has been deployed sparsely in later scholarship. This paper aims to reinstate this tradition and offer justification for its continued relevance.

The fourth and final approach to defining grand strategy, the IR Minus tradition, while not widespread in the literature, does find some mention, for example, in the definitions by Robert Art (1991) and Avey et al.

The Classical Plus Tradition

(2018).⁷⁶ It focuses on the use of military tools in the service of a range of national interests. Avey et al. provide a framework to make sense of the grand strategic blueprint debates in the US, focusing on the military means of the contending visions. They do not clarify whether their framework extends to non-military aspects. Hence, their definition is included in the IR Minus tradition.

The IR Minus tradition is not well-suited to guide a nation’s foreign policy conduct in an interconnected world. In an anarchic world of sovereign states, force might be the *ultima ratio* of international politics, compelling other states to behave in a manner that serves the enforcer’s national interest. However, military force is a blunt tool to achieve non-security, foreign policy goals, and the costs and uncertainty associated with it render it a sub-optimal tool of statecraft under most circumstances. Moreover, military force often only works well in conjunction with other instruments of power. Also, once spent, military power cannot be recovered. Therefore, a prudent grand strategy emphasises careful husbanding of military power and suggests deploying it primarily for urgent threats.

While the IR Minus conception might be a valid definitional approach, the limitation of the military-centred view would prevent policymakers from adopting it.

Table 2. A Fourfold Definitional Typology of Grand Strategy

Grand Strategic Traditions	Classical	Classical Plus	IR Minus	International Relations
Means–Ends Scope	Military means to achieve national security goals.	A range of instruments (military, economic, diplomatic, and intelligence) to achieve national security goals.	Military means to achieve a certain set of national interest goals (security, prosperity, liberty).	A range of instruments to meet various national interests.

The Classical Plus Tradition

Grand Strategic Traditions	Classical	Classical Plus	IR Minus	International Relations
Proponents	Nineteenth-century conceptions. Barry Posen, Edward Luttwak, Stephen Walt, A. Wess Mitchell. ⁷⁷	Tami Davis Biddle, John Collins, Richard Rosecrance, and Arthur Stein; William D. James, Joshua Rovner. ⁷⁸	Paul C. Avey, Jonathan N. Markowitz, and Robert J. Reardon; Robert Art. ⁷⁹	Paul Kennedy; Kevin Narizny; Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth; John Lewis Gaddis; Colin Dueck; Hal Brands; Edward Luttwak; Peter Trubowitz; Dhruva Jaishankar. ⁸⁰
Criticism	Not meaningfully different from military strategy.	The difficulty of deductively determining the relevant instruments to pursue national security.	The inappropriateness of military instruments for pursuing a wide range of goals.	A case of conceptual overstretching.
Causal Logic	A state's theory of military gains.	A state's general theory of national security.	A state's militarist theory of foreign policy.	A state's general theory of foreign policy.

Source: Authors' own.


Grand strategy is difficult to get right. The future is uncertain, making predictions challenging.⁸¹ The law of unintended consequences manifests with full force in the strategic domain, where actors seek victory over a thinking adversary with reflexive and adaptive capability. There is also a paradox between grand strategy as ordered planning and the battlefield as the domain of friction. Recognising these limitations, some scholars advocate for an ad hoc, piecemeal, and reactive policy approach,⁸² as they feel that grand strategy is too challenging an exercise for accuracy. Introducing rigidity in a state's threat perception and the understanding of the means to address those threats might risk undermining national security.

However, the potential pay-offs of aligning scarce means with purposeful ends are too large for states to abandon the grand strategic exercise. States do not need to get grand strategy right all the time for them to fruitfully employ the concept in policymaking. Rather, the threshold should be their ability to get it right enough times to meet vital national security goals.⁸³

To address the uncertainties, policymakers could take a suitable grand strategic blueprint as the initial departure point, with periodic modifications in both the means and ends in response to shifting domestic and international conditions.⁸⁴ Admittedly, the delicate task of balancing the adherence to a fixed vision-driven plan while allowing for flexibility in response to shifting circumstances makes grand strategy a difficult art, but this is inherent in the business of national security, given the stakes involved.

For proponents of grand strategy, purposeful, overarching planning may hold promise to navigate the perilous geopolitical environment. But conceptual variations in the grand strategy literature risk creating confusion about its constituent elements. This paper argued for the Classical Plus approach to define the appropriate set of national means and ends. It made the case for limiting grand strategy to the remit of strategic studies in terms of national ends. In terms of means, it took an expansive view of the utility of non-military tools of statecraft for national security. Such a definitional approach is particularly suitable for the era of great power rivalry in the backdrop of weaponised interdependence.

In line with other grand strategy optimists,⁸⁵ the paper recognises the need for an explicitly enunciated NSS to guide New Delhi's statecraft. But advancing the case for an NSS doctrine is the first step in a long-drawn and contested policy process. The more substantive next step would require the strategic community to formulate grand strategic blueprints for contestation in New Delhi's marketplace of ideas.⁸⁶ So far, the Indian government has shown a reluctance to adopt a formal grand strategic doctrine.⁸⁷ Subject to a shift in the government's position, the bureaucratic politics of grand strategic planning and implementation would also require further scholarly attention.⁸⁸

Finally, any evaluation of India's grand strategic performance would be contingent on identifying a coherent behavioural pattern, whether in terms of blueprint, process, or behaviour. To that end, the Classical Plus conception could serve as the cornerstone for the Indian policy debate on grand strategy. 

Harsh V. Pant is Vice President for Studies and Foreign Policy, Observer Research Foundation.

Sanjeet Kashyap is a PhD candidate in International Politics at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, and a former intern with the Strategic Studies Programme, Observer Research Foundation.

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20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area,
New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA

Ph. : +91-11-35332000. Fax : +91-11-35332005

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Website: www.orfonline.org