

CHAPTER ONE

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## Introduction

## STATESMEN, PARTISANS, AND GEOPOLITICS

IN THE SPRING OF 1795, President George Washington faced an agonizing political choice. His special envoy to England, Chief Justice John Jay, had returned from London with a draft of a treaty that strongly favored the British. Revolutionary France's bid for empire in Europe had fanned tensions in Anglo-American relations, and Washington hoped to avert war. He sent Jay to London hoping to reassure London about American intentions and to head off the possibility of a conflict with Britain. But Jay came back with a treaty that was so pro-British that the president was viciously attacked by his partisan foes for a near treasonous deal with the former colonial power. Having delayed action on the treaty for some months, as long as diplomacy would allow, the president now had to decide whether to send it to the Senate for ratification. George Washington faced a strategic dilemma. If he threw his support behind Jay's treaty, the president risked destroying his fragile government from within, through paroxysms of partisan rage. If Washington shelved the treaty to quiet his political detractors, however, there would likely be war with England, which had the potential to destroy the nation from the outside. Geopolitics and domestic politics were two faces of the same coin: the president could not respond to one threat without weighing its impact on the other.

Washington's dilemma was especially acute, but his strategic conundrum was as old as statecraft itself. Political leaders have always had to deal with cross-pressures and trade-offs between geopolitics and domestic politics. This is because leaders face conflicting institutional incentives. One set of incentives is generated by the executive's role as statesman in world politics. The other is generated by the leader's role as chief of a ruling coalition or party on the home front. The tension inherent in this dual role is present in regimes of all types but is especially intense in democracies such as the United States. In democracies, where a leader's hold on power depends on popular support, leaders must respond to shifting geopolitical pressures while *simultaneously* competing to secure the political backing of not only partisans but also a decisive slice of the national electorate.

This book is about how leaders manage these conflicting institutional incentives at the broadest level of foreign policy—the level known as

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grand strategy. International relations scholars use the term “grand strategy” to refer to the purposeful and planned use of military, economic, and diplomatic means by states to achieve desired foreign policy ends, whether in peacetime or during wartime.<sup>1</sup> *Politics and Strategy* focuses on the determinants or sources of grand strategy: How do leaders select or choose their grand strategies? Why do some leaders pursue ambitious, costly grand strategies, whereas other leaders adopt narrower, cheaper ones? When do leaders respond assertively to check foreign threats, and when are they likely to rely on less confrontational means to deal with external challenges? International relations scholars do not yet provide satisfactory answers to these questions.

## THE TWO FACES OF GRAND STRATEGY

Two general approaches dominate the study of grand strategy in international relations.<sup>2</sup> The first draws on the tradition known as *Realpolitik* or realism. It argues that grand strategies are determined by a country’s geopolitical circumstances and especially by its position in the international system.<sup>3</sup> Scholars in the realist tradition stress international factors such as a state’s relative material power (e.g., military strength, gross national product, population size), whether prevailing military technology favors the offense or defense in fighting wars, and the distribution of power among states in the international system (whether the system is multipolar, bipolar, or unipolar). These and other international constraints, realists argue, shape states’ ambitions and possibilities, defining what strategies their leaders might reasonably expect to succeed in a world

<sup>1</sup> Though some scholars trace the basic idea back to Machiavelli, the term “grand strategy” was not used until the eighteenth century, when German military writers popularized it (Wheeler, 1993). Grand strategy originally referred to such things as military training, battle tactics, and campaign operations, or, for lack of a better term, “generalship.” Gradually, it came to refer to the planning as well as the use of military resources. The scope of grand strategy was also broadened to include peacetime as well as wartime planning and economic and diplomatic resources in addition to military ones (Paret, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> A third, more recent approach, sometimes referred to as *Ideapolitik* focuses on the influence of national policy ideas (e.g., strategic culture). It shares some common features with *Innenpolitik*. However, *Ideapolitik* is sufficiently different to warrant treatment as a separate tradition of analysis. See, for example, Kupchan (1994); Johnston (1995); Katzenstein (1996); Kier (1997); Tannewald (1999); Finnemore (2004); Legro (2005); Dueck (2006); Samuels (2007); and Qin (2008).

<sup>3</sup> Realist literature on the topic is vast. See, for example, Spykman (1942); Knorr (1956); Luttwak (1976); Jervis (1978); Waltz (1979); Gilpin (1981); Posen (1984); Kennedy (1987); Walt (1987); Friedberg (1988); Snyder (1991); Desch (1993); Wohlforth (1993); Christensen (1996); Zakaria (1998); Van Evera (1999); Copeland (2000); Mearsheimer (2001); Gaddis (2005); Layne (2006); Schweller (2006); and Yan (2008).

that is fundamentally anarchical. These considerations determine leaders' foreign policy strategies and choices.

Realist explanations of statecraft differ sharply from a second approach that argues that grand strategy has a domestic face. Scholars in this domestic politics or *Innenpolitik* tradition point to pressures *within* states, rather than pushes and pulls from the outside, to explain leaders' choices. The domestic politics approach starts from the premise that societal interests (e.g., industrialists, bankers, merchants, interest groups) have a stake in whether a nation's foreign policy is expensive or cheap, offensive or defensive, or coercive or cooperative.<sup>4</sup> Leaders are thought to respond to these interests in setting grand strategy and choosing national priorities in international affairs. In *Innenpolitik* accounts of grand strategy, states' foreign policy choices are thus constrained, and perhaps even distorted, by societal interests and pressures. *Innenpolitikers* argue, for example, that the roots of the classic problem of "strategic overextension," in which a state's reach exceeds its grasp, lie on the domestic side: the combination of powerful economic interests and weak, ineffectual governing institutions allow narrow special interests to push political leaders into overly ambitious foreign policies.

In this book, I argue that this international-domestic distinction misses the essential dynamic that defines how leaders set grand strategy. The fact is that leaders take both geopolitics and domestic politics seriously, and they do so for a simple reason: to do otherwise is to risk their reputation as leaders and their hold on political power. It is clear that leaders who misread or ignore the interests of their domestic coalitions or parties risk losing power and office. But as Niccolò Machiavelli warned, the same is true for "princes" who misjudge their state's geopolitical circumstances and capabilities. They too risk political punishment by their partisan supporters and domestic publics. The unanticipated rise of a foreign challenger, the failure to take an old or new foe seriously enough, or the headlong pursuit of an ill-advised foreign adventure can seriously damage a leader's reputation and credibility, at home as well as abroad. Failure or defeat in international affairs throws open the door to domestic opponents and would-be challengers to the throne.

<sup>4</sup> The literature here is substantial and diverse. See, for example, Hobson (1902); Kehr (1930); Schumpeter (1955); Mayer (1971); Fischer (1975); Block (1980); Cain and Hopkins (1980); Olson (1982); Kahler (1984); W. Harris (1985); Davis and Huttenback (1986); Gourevitch (1986); Frieden (1988); Lamborn (1991); Rosecrance and Stein (1993); Fordham (1998); Solingen (1998); Trubowitz (1998); Lobell (2003); Newton (1996); Narizny (2007); and P. McDonald (2009). A few realist scholars in the defensive realist school also weigh the impact of domestic interests, most notably Snyder (1991) and Van Evera (1999).

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## STATESMEN AS STRATEGIC POLITICIANS

*Politics and Strategy* advances an argument about how leaders make grand strategy that centers on these distinct international and domestic sources of political pressure. It builds on a growing body of scholarly literature that sees leaders as strategic actors who choose their policies on the basis of political self-interest.<sup>5</sup> Leaders are motivated by a concern for their reputations as effective statesmen on the international stage, as well as by the need to strengthen the political coalitions that secure their claims to office. Grand strategy is thus Janus-faced: its formulation, I argue, has as much to do with leaders' ability to govern effectively at home as it does with guaranteeing the nation's security abroad.<sup>6</sup> In contrast to *Realpolitik* and *Innenpolitik* approaches that emphasize either the external or the internal face of foreign policy making, this book shows how geopolitics and party politics *combine* to produce grand strategy.<sup>7</sup> Shifts

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Hechter and Brustein (1980); Bates (1981); Levi (1988); Lake and Powell (1999); and Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2003). On the general approach, see Frieden (1999).

<sup>6</sup> The idea that international and domestic politics are somehow interconnected is not new. Rosenau's (1969) efforts to catalog instances of what he called "linkage politics," Keohane and Nye's (1977) writings about "international interdependence," Katzenstein's (1977) work on the interaction of international politics and domestic structure in foreign economic policy, and Gourevitch's (1978) analysis of the international sources of domestic politics are some of the better-known efforts to connect these two domains. Perhaps the approach that is closest in spirit to the one I develop here is Putnam's (1988) "two-level" analysis of international negotiations. Putnam takes statesmen as strategic actors who are constrained by both domestic and foreign pressures: their choice of diplomatic tactics and strategies in international negotiation is constrained by what foreign leaders will accept, and by what their own domestic constituencies will ratify. He does not extend this intuition to the analysis of grand strategy and does not propose a theory of either geopolitical or domestic constraints.

<sup>7</sup> One variant of realism, neoclassical realism, does attempt to combine international and domestic politics. My approach differs from neoclassical realism in three important ways. First, neoclassical realists give pride of place analytically to the international environment; they rely on domestic politics to try to explain deviations from "the" national interest, which is dictated by international circumstance. My model takes realism as fundamentally underdetermining when it comes to defining the ideal choice point for national leaders—domestic interests shape definitions of a nation's long-term security objectives (see also Trubowitz, 1998). Second, neoclassical realists have no theory of domestic politics: they do not consider the competition and conflict between groups with different visions of the national interest, and shy away from arguments about domestic electoral and distributional conflicts over foreign policy. Neoclassical realist models typically operationalize domestic politics in terms of institutional structure, political culture, or elite values—factors to which *Innenpolitik*ers (and I) assign little analytic weight. By contrast, in my model, electoral competition and distributional conflict are theorized as systematic influences on grand-strategy choice. Third, neoclassical realists do not ground their theories of grand strategy at the microfoundational level—that is, in the strategic choices of political leaders. As one neoclassical

in the parameters of strategic choice—be they international, domestic, or both—produce changes in grand strategy over time.

A nation's grand-strategy options can be described generically as varying along two distinct dimensions: the cost dimension and the ambition dimension. There are expensive, offensive strategies designed to alter the international status quo, such as expansionism, and cheaper offensive means, such as blackmail. There are also costly defensive strategies designed to maintain the status quo (e.g., so-called defensive or just wars) and relatively inexpensive ones, such as appeasement. Examples of each option abound in the international relations literature. Napoleon's expansionist drive in the early nineteenth century was a costly, offensive strategy aimed at changing the status quo—of shifting the balance of power in France's favor. There are also examples of cheap revisionist strategies (e.g., blackmail, subversion). John Mearsheimer (2001) characterizes Germany's repeated attempts in the run up to World War I to subordinate its European rivals, Britain, France, and Russia, as a strategy centered on intimidation. Edward Luttwak (2009) describes the Byzantine Empire's sustained reliance on covert operations and subversion as a cheap strategy aimed at consolidating its imperial gains. An example of an expensive, status quo strategy is Franklin Delano Roosevelt's intervention into World War II to check and balance against German and Japanese ambitions. A classic example of cheap status quo strategies is Neville Chamberlain's famous decision to conciliate Adolf Hitler over the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia. What connects the various incentives and constraints that produce these divergent foreign policy choices is national leaders' political self-interest. Faced with different international and domestic circumstances, leaders tend to invest in the grand strategy that best serves their desire to hold on to political power.

At the core of *Politics and Strategy* is a model of executive choice. Which type of strategy a leader will choose depends on two main considerations, I argue. The first has to do with the international security situation and, especially, the presence or absence of a foreign challenger. How compelled leaders are to invest time, energy, and resources in foreign policy depends partly on how much "room for error," or what I call "geopolitical slack," the international environment affords. Executive choice also depends on a second factor: how much a leader benefits domestically from investing material resources in "guns" as opposed to "butter." National leaders have a strong incentive to invest in public poli-

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realist (Rathbun, 2008, 315) points out, neoclassical realists "explicitly juxtapose" their approach to work cast at the microfoundational level. Instead, they start from the classic realist assumption that leaders seek to promote the national interest. On the neoclassical realist approach, see Rose (1998) and Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro (2009).

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cies that appeal to their partisans. In democracies, they have strong incentives to play to their own party's electoral strengths. One implication is that leaders' willingness to pursue ambitious, expensive foreign policies depends on whether their coalitions or parties have a sizable political (electoral) stake in investing national wealth in military strength, as opposed to domestic welfare.

This approach to the incentives and pressures shaping executive choice generates a series of hypotheses for explaining variation in the types of grand strategies that leaders choose and for tracking changes in a nation's grand strategy over time. These hypotheses are tested using case study analysis. The main cases developed here are twelve American presidencies—from George Washington's to Barack Obama's—that were intentionally selected to maximize cross-case variation on the two causal variables: geopolitical slack (measured by the presence or absence of a clear foreign challenger) and coalitional or party preference (measured by party support for investing in “guns” versus “butter”).<sup>8</sup> I ask whether there is a systematic relationship between the values on the causal variables and the predicted outcomes—that is, the type of grand strategy in which each president invests.

The chapters that follow show that these international and domestic variables go far in explaining presidents' choices in the domain of grand strategy. Presidents vary widely in terms of foreign policy ambition and in terms of how far they are willing to go in investing domestic resources to achieve those ends. The variance in grand strategy is explained by the amount of geopolitical slack presidents enjoy and by the intensity of their party's preference for spending on guns as opposed to butter. Presidents who hold office when the nation faces a clear geopolitical threat will respond, but how heavily they will rely on military power (as opposed to alternative, cheaper means) depends greatly on their party's preference on the guns-versus-butter trade-off. Conversely, very different levels of geopolitical slack can produce grand strategies that are broadly similar in terms of cost or expense. This can happen when presidents are responding to similar sets of domestic political incentives.

America's history and political system make it exceptionally useful as a laboratory for testing theories about how leaders choose their grand strategies. Because America's international position has varied greatly over the course of its history, it is possible to assess how variations in the level of a state's international security shape and constrain presidential choice in the domain of foreign policy. Partisan differences over foreign

<sup>8</sup> In the concluding chapter, I extend the argument to non-American cases. I show how this model of executive choice can help explain the grand strategies of China's Hu Jintao and Russia's Vladimir Putin.

policy are also often stark in America's two-party system, with one party committed to ambitious and expensive strategies and the other party preferring narrower, less expensive options. Moreover, party preferences change over time. Republican and Democratic sensitivities to the costs of grand strategy have varied considerably, even over the course of the twentieth century. By comparing presidents from different parties under similar geopolitical circumstances, it becomes possible to assess how changes in party control of government influence foreign policy choice.

*Politics and Strategy* focuses on presidents of differing talents, persuasions, and experience. Some of the presidents analyzed here are widely considered to be among America's greatest leaders. Others are remembered mostly as disappointments or worse, failures—as presidents who overreached or underperformed. The analysis shows that, in the foreign policy arena, most of the presidents we examine acted in expected ways most of the time—they chose grand strategies consistent with their geopolitical and partisan circumstances. The theory helps to explain why both realism and *Innenpolitik* overpredict expansionism and to qualify (or disqualify) theories of grand-strategy choice that focus on state “strength,” political ideology, or leaders' personal qualities. But some presidents do not behave as predicted, and this can be just as revealing, theoretically. The empirical analysis points to areas where we need more refined theories of how resource constraints and popular opinion may affect leaders' ability to deliver the strategies their partisans prefer, of how international shocks can affect policy preferences inside leaders' coalitions, and of how leaders assess risks, both domestic and geopolitical, of nonstate challenges such as terrorism. My hope is that this book provides a theoretical basis for addressing these questions in more nuanced and empirically grounded ways.

#### GRAND STRATEGY PAST AND PRESENT

Understanding how leaders choose their grand strategies is not merely of historical and theoretical interest. It also offers some much-needed perspective on the challenge of balancing geopolitics and domestic politics today. Scholars and practitioners debate whether “unipolarity” increases or reduces the likelihood of continued U.S. engagement with the world, and especially its willingness to lead. Although neither of America's two major parties favors a strategy of disengagement, withdrawal, and isolationism, they do disagree sharply about *how* America should engage the world. Should the country's leaders seek to capitalize on America's huge power advantages to revise the international system in ways that better serve U.S. interests, or should they rely on strategies of self-



restraint and international collaboration in hopes of preserving the status quo? If the past is any guide, the outcome of this “great debate” will depend on whether one party is able to impose its preferences decisively by breaking the current political stalemate and establishing control over the machinery of national government.

Unipolarity also poses new challenges for leaders of other states in the international system. Early predictions that unipolarity would cause China, Russia, and other states to actively “balance” against the United States have not fared well. Some analysts attribute the absence of hard balancing against America to the huge power disparities favoring the United States. For so-called secondary states, the risk of punishment for balancing against the “unipole” is said to be too high; the power gap between America and the rest is simply too great. Other scholars attribute the absence of balancing against U.S. power to America’s continued willingness to provide international public goods and to play by the existing rules and norms of international order. As long as the United States is acting in accordance with international mores, they argue, other states have less reason to resist or challenge America’s authority. *Politics and Strategy* suggests that the debate so framed is missing a critical factor in the calculus of “secondary states.”

Today, America’s potential rivals have little incentive *domestically* to try to shift the balance of international power to their advantage. China’s leaders are preoccupied with economic development; Russia’s are busy consolidating power. The analysis presented here suggests that for these leaders, cost is the decisive determinant in responding to unipolarity. The practical realities of holding on to power in China and Russia today give their leaders strong domestic incentive to avoid costly grand strategies to check American power. For the international relations analyst, the critical task is judging how long this confluence will last. That requires a method for determining when leaders will find it in their political self-interest to actively balance against concentrated power and when they will not. This book takes the first steps toward developing a model to explain how such choices are made.