

Kelly Brownell :

Hello, and welcome to Policy 360. I'm Kelly Brownell, Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. I'm very pleased to be joined today by Peter Feaver. Peter is professor of political science and professor in the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. He also serves as director of the triangle Institute for security studies and director of the duke program in American grand strategy. During the George W. Bush administration, Peter serviced as special advisor for strategic planning and institutional reform on the national security council, where he focused on national security strategy and political military issues. Prior to that work, Peter served as director for defense policy and arms control at the National Security Council during the Clinton administration. Welcome Peter.

Peter Feaver :

Thank you.

Kelly Brownell :

So you co-wrote with Hal Brands, historian Hal Brands, a paper recently in which you argue that it's time to critically examine this country's grand strategy and that need is becoming even more pressing. Tell us what you mean by grand strategy? And what do you mean that it's more pressing now than ever?

Peter Feaver :

Well, this paper comes out of a course that Hal Brands who was my colleague here at Duke, he's now at Johns Hopkins sys, but he and I co-taught a course on American grand strategy. Grand strategy is the theory of the case that guides our nations leaders at the top level, the president and his team, or her team, how they think about America's role in the world, what they think are the great challenges and opportunities confronting American, how they're going to navigate them. The classic illustration of a grand strategy is containment, which guided America's foreign policy during the Cold War.

Well, when the Cold War ended, we were in a period looking for a new grand strategy, what would replace the containment strategy. We have had such a strategy. We don't have a label for it. We don't have a single word that describes it, but it's a strategy that has said America's in remarkably favorable condition with the collapse of the Soviet union, we're the sole superpower. And we should prolong this condition as long as possible because it's good for America and good for the world. And that has been our strategy for the last 25 years. But it's increasingly coming under strain.

Kelly Brownell :

What are some examples of American policies that reflect this strategy?

Peter Feaver :

Well, one of them is to maintain a defense spending that's far in excess of what is needed to meet near term threats, but is a way of preserving a larger global order and empowers the United States to address problems anywhere in the globe before they become a threat to the global order. So it requires that the US be willing to engage globally, maybe even earlier than we would need to, if all we were concerned about where our immediate vital interest. But as a way of underwriting the global order, which is providing opportunities for progress and for prosperity, not just for Americans, but for everyone. And a premise of that grand strategy was that the US could maintain unrivaled military supremacy, that there would not be a rival that could be a near peer to them in military terms who could basically checkmate US military power either globally or more likely, regionally.

And what's happened in the last several years is the growth in Chinese military power and the growth in Russian assertiveness has meant that in certain regions, on certain issues, the US no longer enjoys that kind of overmatch in the regional narrow settings on issues that the US has some interest in. So for instance, we have treaty obligations in Eastern Europe, and we certainly have interest in what happens in the future of Ukraine. But Russia has been able to intervene militarily in Ukraine, seize territory in Crimea, and to interfere in Eastern Ukraine in ways that strain the United States ability to come up with options to respond. Militarily, we are limited in what we can do. And that's a new development, relative new development for the post Cold War era.

And then similarly in Southeast Asia, the rise of Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea is not just putting the possibility of crises, where we have either a diplomatic crisis or even a potential military crisis, but is also straining the military strategy that undergirded US involvement in the region. Because increasingly China's able to hold that risk, US Naval assets which previously could operate with relative impunity and now may not be able to do so. These and other changes are calling into question, whether America's post Cold War grand strategy can endure or whether we have to shift to some other kind of strategy.

Kelly Brownell :

So where do think it's going?

Peter Feaver :

Well, we end the peace. Hal and I end the piece by recognizing that these assumptions are under strain. We list a number of other ones. These assumptions are under strain, but they haven't collapsed. And that there is an opportunity for the US to adjust, sort of renew itself and perhaps breathe new life into those old assumptions for another indefinite period of time, if the US can adjust. And so in some ways what we are undergoing right now as a country is a moment of reflection and transition. Can we renew ourselves and then sustain the post Cold War grand strategy? Or is some form of decline inevitable in which case we have to adjust our strategy. And I think those issues are up for debate and up for grabs even now.

Kelly Brownell :

So what sort of adjustments do you think are in order?

Peter Feaver :

Well, you'd have to reverse the decline in defense spending. One of the interesting points of agreement in the 2016 election between Trump and Clinton, they didn't agree on many things, but one of the few things they agreed on was that they had to increase defense spending if they became president. They offered rhetorical commitment to that, but actually being able to find the money to do that, now that's a much more difficult problem because as you know, they would have to address the sequester problem, which had limited spending for defense and domestic policy. They'd have to lift the sequester that requires cooperating with Congress. And that requires cutting so many political deals across domestic, and foreign policy, and national security issues that frankly, the Obama administration has been unable to do with the Congress they faced.

So one of the big challenges for 2017 is can the new president negotiate a series of deals with Congress that lifts the sequester, sets domestic and crucially from my study, defense spending on a

sustainable trajectory. If they do that, then you can breathe new life into the post Cold War, grand strategy. If they can't, then we have some very hard decisions ahead for us as a country.

Kelly Brownell :

So let's say, that this comes true and defense spending increases. What do you see as the ultimate outcome of this? In what ways are we likely to be intervening in the world that this new spending would make possible?

Peter Feaver :

Well, one of the things it would do is it allow us to address Russia's involvement in Eastern Europe and China's involvement in South China Sea. And also the potential flashpoints that are around the globe, whether it's North Korea's nuclear program or the crisis on the South Asia subcontinent between Pakistan and India, that we could address all of those. And the large basket of problems leftover from the Obama administration, the unfinished business in Syria, the unfinished business in the middle east more broadly, the ongoing war on terror. That we could continue to meet all of those at a level of engagement that would achieve progress on them. As opposed to an approach that is retreating in one area in order to consolidate our position in another area. In the last several years, we've been on something of a global retrenchment posture, and that hasn't addressed the problems that has fueled them. And we're in worse shaped today than we were say, eight years ago, because of that. And a re-invigorated national security establishment in the next administration would perhaps be able to make more progress on those issues.

Kelly Brownell :

So you've mentioned China several times. And the US strategy has been that a richer and more globally integrated China will be a freer and more peaceful China. Do you agree with that?

Peter Feaver :

This has been the bet of the last 25 years. And so Bush 41, the father, made this bet. Shortly after the Tiananmen Square crisis, he concluded that we had to re-engage China and not hold the human rights concerns as first and foremost, that would block all other forms of engagement. Candidate Clinton ran against that and campaigned against that position, but then within a year, reverted back to it. And ever since, every administration, Clinton, Bush 43, and Obama has made the bet that if we engage China and give China an equity stake in the existing international order, then as China's power increases, as their wealth increases, they will see their stake in the existing order increase, and they will not want to disrupt it. That's been the assumption and the bet was that their desire to maintain the order would grow faster than their power to change the order has.

And in the last several years, that bet has looked increasingly risky. Xi, the leader of China has shown himself to be pretty hard-nosed in terms of cracking down on dissent at home and fairly risk acceptant in terms of foreign policy assertiveness abroad. And it's looking like he is committed to increasing China's wealth and prosperity, which we knew all leaders would. But also in a way that would allow China to rewrite some of the rules of the international order in ways more favorable to China. And he's doing that. And the Obama administration is struggling to address that. Of course, the alternative of direct confrontation with China is something no one wants. And so the challenge has been, is there a way of shaping the environment in which China makes its strategic choices, shaping that environment in a way that would lead China to conclude it's in their best interests to join the existing world order rather

than disrupt it. That's a taller challenge today than it was eight years ago. And I think that's going to be one of great strategic challenges that the new president in 2017 we'll have to wrestle with.

Kelly Brownell :

So you've written that a democracy's future has become cloudier. What do you mean by that? And how does that come to be the case?

Peter Feaver :

The greatest assumptions of the post cold war strategy was that the world was trending slowly but surely in America's direction. That politically, countries were moving in the direction of Western conceptions of democracy, and also economically, in the direction of Western conceptions of economic progress, capitalism and globalization. And that held true throughout the 90s and in some ways in the 2000s, but in the last eight years or so, we've seen the progress towards democratization plateau. And we've seen many other countries that had been moving in a positive direction, actually retreat and move further away from democracy. And you see many leaders looking for a different model, believing that democracy doesn't represent the future. Or that there might be other ways of organizing their political affairs that are more conducive to their own self-interest of holding onto power than democracy would be. This is sometimes called the Beijing model where they open themselves to a partial economic openness, but match that with cracking down politically. So they get the benefits of some economic openness without the risks of empowering their people who will then demand political freedom.

And increasingly leaders around the world have seen that as an attractive alternative to democracy. And the challenge that the Bush administration had in promoting democracy in the middle east that has furthered the global skepticism about democracy. And so it's a time where the American bet that they were on the right side of history, politically. That bet has looked less sure today than it did say, 20, 25 years ago.

Kelly Brownell :

So if you were talking not to me, but to the president right now, and the president were to ask you, what should we do with grand strategy, what would you suggest?

Peter Feaver :

I think it's appropriate to take a, zero-based look at the whole strategy and in particular, do what Hal and I did, look at the critical assumptions under girding it. We looked at just seven, but there's dozens more that a full national security team could evaluate. And then to make an assessment of what are the trade-offs and concessions I, the president of the United States would be willing to make on other things that I care about, but are not as vital as America's role in the world. To make deals with Congress, to set our house in order I think, the next president is going to have to make compromises with Congress that breaks some of the previous log jams. But to do that, you have to have a sense of the urgency of the foreign policy crisis.

And the next president is going to know that the president is inheriting a geo-strategic mess. We're in much worse shape today than we were eight years ago, geo strategically. But there's a temptation to view that as just a series of small pots that are over boiling. And if I just deal with each pot at a time, I'll muddle through. What we're suggesting in this piece is that those pots may be over boiling

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for a linked set of reasons, and you need to look deeper to see what those links sets and address those deeper underlying causes.

Kelly Brownell :

Well, Peter, thank you so much for joining us. This is fascinating and of course, on incredibly important topic. So we appreciate your contribution.

Peter Feaver :

My pleasure. Thank you for having me.

Kelly Brownell :

So I've been joined today by Peter Feaver. He's a duke professor and director of the duke program and American grand strategy. He co-wrote the paper we've been discussing with historian Hal Brands. Thank you for listening. I'm Kelly Brownell.