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The Grand Strategic Thought of Colin S. Gray

Lukas Milevski
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ABSTRACT: Colin S. Gray distinguished himself from other scholars in the field of strategic studies with his belief that grand strategy is indispensable, complex, and inherently agential. This article identifies key themes, continuities, conceptual relationships, and potential discontinuities from his decades of grand strategic thought. Gray's statement that "all strategy is grand strategy" remains highly relevant today, emphasizing the importance of agential context in military environments—a point often neglected in strategic practice.

With a career spanning from 1970 to his death in 2020, Colin S. Gray was a titan of modern strategic studies. His contributions to the field touched on most of the myriad dimensions of strategy and may be all but unsurpassable. He was also greatly respected as a scholar of grand strategy, though it was never the main subject of his books or articles. Much of his work frequently referenced grand strategy as a higher form of strategy, at times equivalent to statecraft.

This article compiles, organizes, and reconstructs Gray's overall grand strategic thought over the decades, identifying key themes, continuities, conceptual relationships, and potential discontinuities. It argues Gray's conception of grand strategy emphasizes the *agential context* of military strategy. War is more than a simple military contest: it inherently involves nonmilitary forms of power. Grand strategy as agential context is an essential reminder to military strategists the polity they represent can employ other methods—economic, diplomatic, and so forth—to wage war, and it is vital the various agencies wielding these dissimilar forms of power do not work at cross-purposes.

Gray's conception of grand strategy contradicts the mainstream interpretation particularly favored in the United States, in which grand strategy is identified as the master of policy. This view gained credence following Paul Kennedy's well-known remark that grand strategy "was about the evolution and integration of policies that should operate for decades, or even centuries."¹ Some scholars are wary of the expansiveness of this definition. Colin Dueck has carefully argued "grand strategy is not synonymous with foreign policy in general," even though he also suggests "[i]t includes peacetime as well as wartime

1. Paul Kennedy, "Grand Strategy in War and Peace: Toward a Broader Definition," in *Grand Strategies in War and Peace*, ed. Paul Kennedy (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 4.

polymaking.”² Most scholars, however, have embraced it enthusiastically. Christopher Layne asserts, “[G]rand strategy is about determining a state’s vital interest—those important enough to fight over—and its role in the world.”³ More recently, Charles Martel has argued, “In effect, strategy tells us *what* policies to pursue, whereas foreign policy is about the *how* to do so. Missing is the broad question of *why* the state pursues such policies using particular strategies, which is the precise function of grand strategy.”⁴ In placing grand strategy above policy, authors have essentially turned it into ideology; particular grand strategies are specific ways of interacting with the rest of the world for the sake of interacting with the world in that specific way.⁵ As a crucial side effect, “[s]cholars—and, too often, policymakers—sometimes skip this step [of performing grand strategy] on the implicit assumption that if the plan is good enough, implementation will work itself out.”⁶

Basic Views on Grand Strategy

To appreciate Gray’s recurring invocations of grand strategy, one must begin with his basic views on the concept. His fundamental understanding of grand strategy has four dimensions: (1) the awareness that, in some ways, grand strategy is a compromise; (2) his preferred definition and what it encompasses; (3) the relationship between grand strategy and the general theory of strategy; and (4) the indispensability of grand strategy. These underlying perspectives set up all further elaborations.

Although Gray referenced grand strategy in earlier writings, after the end of the Cold War he came to believe it could serve as a compromise between two disparate scholarly camps. One camp, strategic studies, emphasized the continued relevance of military strategy, despite the relative peace of the 1990s. The other camp, security studies, argued military power was no longer relevant and the security agenda needed to be broadened to encompass myriad forms of security.⁷ Gray recognized grand strategy as a compromise position for accepting the broadening—but not demilitarization—

2. Colin Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders: Power, Culture, and Change in American Grand Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 10, 11.

3. Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 13.

4. William C. Martel, *Grand Strategy in Theory and Practice: The Need for an Effective American Foreign Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 4.

5. Adam Elkus, “Must American Strategy Be Grand?,” *Infinity Journal* 3, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 24–28.

6. Paul D. Miller, *American Power & Liberal Order: A Conservative Internationalist Grand Strategy* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2016), 221.

7. Joshua Rovner, “Warring Tribes Studying War and Peace,” *War on the Rocks*, April 12, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/04/warring-tribes-studying-war-and-peace/>.

of security.⁸ This compromise understanding immediately separated Gray from scholars following the mainstream, academic, international relations-inspired approach to the field, which broadly defines grand strategy as the framework into which foreign policy fits.⁹

This middle way inspired Gray's favored definition of grand strategy: "The direction and use made of any or all among the total assets of a security community in support of its policy goals as decided by politics. The theory and practice of grand strategy is the theory and practice of statecraft itself."¹⁰ This description is broadly identical to his definition of strategy: "By strategy *I mean the use that is made of force and the threat of force for the ends of policy.*"¹¹ Though similar, there are key differences.

The first obvious difference is breadth. Grand strategy simply encompasses many more instruments of power than does strategy. Indeed, Gray suggests grand strategy is statecraft itself, which seems potentially at odds with his view of grand strategy as a middle way which provides a role for the military. Statecraft does not inherently require a military dimension in conception or specific practice and so seems closer to security studies than a middle way, which also encompasses military power. On the other hand, Gray did not specifically clarify whether or not any particular practice of grand strategy required the use of military power. While his writings never considered grand strategy without a military dimension, this absence could be due to the fact that strategy, rather than grand strategy, was almost always his primary topic. Considering statecraft without a military dimension in specific contexts was beyond the scope of Gray's writing but not beyond the scope of the concept.

The second difference concerns political direction. According to Gray, strategy was instrumental without any control over the overall purpose, while grand strategy also encompassed some degree of political *direction* over that purpose. The inclusion of direction establishes grand strategy as a level of analysis distinct from and superior to strategy. It also brings grand strategy closer to policy, which provides guidance for and direction of strategy.

The third difference between Gray's conceptions of strategy and grand strategy is the latter controls all instruments of national power, rather than military force alone. He rarely enumerated the instruments of grand

8. Colin S. Gray, "Approaching the Study of Strategy," in *International Security and War: Politics and Grand Strategy in the 21st Century*, ed. Ralph Rotte and Christoph Schwarz (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2011), 17.

9. See Hal Brands, *What Good is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 86.

10. Colin S. Gray, *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 18.

11. Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 17.

strategy, however, and was largely content with describing them as the total power available a polity. He provided a taxonomy of grand strategy only once, identifying the instruments of statecraft as diplomacy; trade and investment; economic and financial assistance; propaganda, information, and education; cultural influence; espionage, covert action, and political warfare; military assistance and arms sales; military power (threat or use of force); arms control; peacekeeping; and humanitarian assistance.¹² Notably, the list included positive inducements (such as various forms of assistance) as well as coercion, marking another difference between the coercive logic of strategy and grand strategy.

Nonetheless, Gray was adamant strategy and grand strategy should only be understood through the general theory of strategy, although again this statement may contradict other claims concerning grand strategy's equivalence with statecraft. "The general theory of strategy covers both grand and military strategy."¹³ The sibling relationship between strategy and grand strategy has three conceptual consequences. First, "[g]rand-strategic and military-strategic analyses interpenetrate . . . When, acting grand-strategically, policymakers select the mix of instruments they will employ, that selection must be influenced critically by the plausibility of the competing promises of net strategic effectiveness."¹⁴ The interpenetration of strategy and grand strategy is a recurring theme.

The second conceptual consequence is that both grand strategy and strategy are performative. Neither is simply about choices but also about how effectively those choices are implemented. "All military strategists, and most grand strategists, cannot perform their duties unless their schemes, great and small, are done, 'in the field,' by soldiers willing to be led in that physically and psychologically horrendous circumstance of the most acute personal peril."¹⁵ Notwithstanding the reference to specific military implementation, Gray believed performance was equally crucial for nonmilitary power.

The third conceptual consequence is, like strategy, grand strategy suffers from what Gray called the currency conversion problem. "The trouble is that there is a radical difference in nature, in kind, between violence and political consequence . . . this dilemma of currency conversion is central to the difficulty of strategy."¹⁶ That is, how does a strategist

12. Colin S. Gray, *Explorations in Strategy* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 87.

13. Gray, *Strategy Bridge*, 19.

14. Gray, *Explorations in Strategy*, 86–87.

15. Gray, *Strategy Bridge*, 214.

16. Gray, *Strategy Bridge*, 136.

ensure any action leads toward the desired political consequence? Although it is fair to assert the currency conversion problem probably afflicts military power more than nonmilitary power, it is still relevant for grand strategy. Gray's exploration of the relationship between strategic theory and grand strategy cements the differences between his understanding and that of the American mainstream, which typically ignores issues of performance and currency conversion.

The final foundational perspective Gray held about grand strategy was its indispensability, reflected in the natures of war, the enemy, and security. Gray asserted, "The necessity for some approximation to a grand strategy is revealed in literally every conflict conducted by all societies. In times of troubled peace as well as actual war, communities do not compete with their armed forces alone."¹⁷ Gray recognized the enemy has input into the course and outcome of war, but he also understood this vote is grand strategic: "it does not follow that the terms of engagement can be dictated by American strategy. A smart enemy may succeed in finding ways to prosecute conflict asymmetrically, grand strategically and not only militarily."¹⁸ To create and exploit asymmetric advantage in war, the enemy can also employ nonmilitary instruments.

Gray recognized the security problems any polity might face are inevitably multidimensional—and even if not, good (grand) strategy would try to overdetermine the outcome anyway, particularly given the difficulties of currency conversion. Thus, Gray suggested, "US policy and grand strategy would be all but certain to have to resort to several tools (for example, diplomacy, economic sanctions or assistance, and possibly some regular military deployment and maneuvering for political effect)."¹⁹

In contrast to Gray's belief in the indispensability of grand strategy, some scholars have proposed alternatives to, or declared the end of, grand strategy.²⁰ This divergence stems primarily from basic definitional differences. Gray considers the employment of nonmilitary instruments generically mandatory, a sentiment not shared by all scholars or practitioners toward foreign policy frameworks.

In summary, Gray believed grand strategy: (1) obeys the dicta of the general theory of strategy even though it is closer to policy than strategy

17. Gray, "Approaching Study of Strategy," 17.

18. Colin S. Gray, *Maintaining Effective Deterrence* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2003), 37.

19. Gray, *Explorations in Strategy*, 211.

20. See for example, Daniel W. Drezner, Ronald R. Krebs, and Randall Schweller, "The End of Grand Strategy: America Must Think Small," *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 3 (May/June 2020): 107–17; and Peter Layton, "Grand Strategy? What Does That Do for Me?," *Strategist* (blog), Australian Strategic Policy Institute, July 23, 2012, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/grand-strategy-what-does-that-do-for-me/>.

itself; (2) potentially employs inducements alongside coercion; and (3) is indispensable. Although there are a few points of potential inconsistency or vagueness, Gray's appreciation of grand strategy is intertwined with his understanding of strategy and war. His writings also reveal other interesting and important conceptual relationships between grand strategy and (1) geopolitics and strategic culture; (2) power; (3) war; and (4) policy. These elements all culminate in a final relationship between grand strategy and context.

Grand Strategy, Geopolitics, and Culture

Coincident with the first decade of Gray's career, three big ideas emerged—or reemerged—within strategic studies: geopolitics, strategic culture, and grand strategy.²¹ Gray's writings demonstrate close links between these three concepts, such that it is perhaps impossible to address one fully without mentioning the other two. This connection is perhaps most vividly demonstrated in Gray's 1991 article on geography and grand strategy, the first substantive section of which focuses on strategic culture.²²

Gray believed geopolitics and grand strategy are essentially synonymous, a view he enunciated early in his career. In the introduction to *The Geopolitics of Superpower*, he wryly noted, "Had the long-hallowed British verbal formula of 'grand strategy' not been expropriated to such a persuasive effect by Edward Luttwak, this book might have been called *The Grand Strategy of the United States*."²³ The essential equivalence between grand strategy and geopolitics is unsurprising given, first, Gray also equated grand strategy with statecraft and, second, geography is inescapable: "[a]ll politics is geopolitics," "[a]ll strategy is geostrategy."²⁴ While it does beg the question why he would use two different terms if they were essentially synonymous, no definitive answer appears in his published writings.

Geography was also crucial to Gray's appreciation of strategic culture: "The first-order subjects of interest to pursuit of the cultural perspective on strategy have to be geography and history," and further, "[t]he physical geographies of particular security communities, including their spatial relations in all senses with other communities, always have had a large

21. Lukas Milevski, *The Evolution of Modern Grand Strategic Thought* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), 109–10.

22. Colin S. Gray, "Geography and Grand Strategy," *Comparative Strategy* 10, no. 4 (1991): 311–29.

23. Colin S. Gray, *The Geopolitics of Superpower* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988), 1.

24. Colin S. Gray, "Inescapable Geography," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 22, no. 2–3 (1999): 163.

influence on strategic choice.”²⁵ Geography shapes preferences; preferences turn into choice; choices turn into history; and history in turn shapes new grand strategic preferences. Gray may have been inspired by well-known British warfare concepts, including a grand strategic-level cultural notion encompassing not just how to use—and not use—land power and sea power, but also financial power. Like Gray, authors such as Dueck and Alastair Iain Johnston identify close relationships between grand strategy and strategic culture.²⁶

Yet, this connection with strategic culture also betrays a limitation of Gray’s grand strategic thought. Gray understood the importance of tactical performance for strategic success and extended this principle to grand strategy as well. However, he rarely discussed grand strategic performance except when military activity contributes to it. Instead, whether encompassing the cultural dimension of grand strategy explicitly or not, he focused on the choice of instruments rather than their performance. This decision indicates the sheer difficulty of studying grand strategy as a middle way. It requires familiarity, if not mastery, of items in Gray’s taxonomy of grand strategic instruments—a list which includes wildly varied forms of power—and how they work. Total mastery requires not only a staggering array of various expertise, but also the grand strategic imagination to combine them effectively in thought or practice. The difficulty of this task—challenging for both Gray and the entire field—is the foremost factor inhibiting the development of the study of grand strategy.

Grand Strategy and Forms of Power

Although Gray rarely delved into the performativity of nonmilitary power, he remained aware vital differences existed among the plethora of instruments and orchestrating them simultaneously within a single conflict was a grave challenge.

To solve the question of how to coordinate various forms of power within a single grand strategic effort, Gray relied on two main starting points. The first was the role of geography. “The four geophysical environments for conflict—land, sea, air, and space—are distinctive as to technologies, tactics (and hence doctrines, i.e., how to fight), and operational art.”²⁷ By placing physical demands and requirements on humans and their technologies, geography defines how power actually performs in conflict. It is possible

25. Colin S. Gray, *Perspectives on Strategy* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), 89, 90.

26. Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders*; and Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

27. Gray, “Geography and Grand Strategy,” 316.

to speak broadly of military power only to a certain point. Eventually, geographic specificities dominate and distinguish land power from sea power, air power, space power, cyber power, and nuclear power. However, there is still merit in studying military power writ large, as it remains collectively unique compared to nonmilitary power.²⁸

Nonetheless, military power does lead to an orchestration problem. It is not merely a question of how a strategist coordinates various forms of military power—that is, joint warfare—but of interchangeability: how to employ military and nonmilitary forms of power. “Instead of the threat or use of force, the grand strategist may be tempted to wage political, psychological, subversive, diplomatic, economic, or cultural war. Of course, the military instrument is wielded to psychological and political effect, and subversive war naturally must have psychological and political purposes. *Strategic effect is generic.*”²⁹ Although all forms of power are unique—military forms more so than nonmilitary—their consequences, in principle, should all be reducible to a unified framework.

While Gray did not truly develop such a unified framework, he did propose some broad insights. With military issues, he suggested its uniqueness demanded primacy among instrumental grand strategic considerations. “Although all of the instruments of policy are important, when the issue of the day is one of military security, questions of military strategy will assume preeminent importance. The other tools of statecraft—diplomacy, propaganda, economic pressure, subversion, and so forth—must be regarded as supporting elements in a context that privileges military behavior.”³⁰ Prescribing nonmilitary instruments a supporting role does not deny their importance in the conduct of war, however, as they may ease or unnecessarily exacerbate military strategic tasks.

Gray recognized the primacy of consideration military power enjoys is limited to outright military conflict. Politics may conduct conflicts with and through any of the instruments at their command, and in particular cases military power may be temporarily excluded. “Just as there are wars wherein, for example, the maritime or the air element is dominant, so there are conflicts wherein economic, political, or subversive instruments of grand strategy are accorded the status of leading edge.”³¹

28. Colin S. Gray, *Fighting Talk: Forty Maxims on War, Peace, and Strategy* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2007), 66.

29. Gray, *Modern Strategy*, 162. Emphasis added.

30. Gray, *Fighting Talk*, 72.

31. Gray, *Modern Strategy*, 163.

While Gray's engagement with most nonmilitary forms of power ultimately ended with these observations, he discussed soft power in more detail. Joseph S. Nye Jr. originated the concept, defining it as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies."³² While the original definition has been corrupted over time and the term is now essentially synonymous with nonmilitary power, Gray engaged with Nye's original conception of soft power. Because soft power is uncontrollable, with a nature that is inherently attractive, rather than coercive or inducing, Gray questioned whether it could be considered a grand strategic instrument.³³ Despite its substantial theoretical and occasional real-world value, it is a form of power which exists beyond the scope of grand strategy, and perhaps policy as well. At times, soft power merely happens coincidentally, as an added benefit to the greater actions of a politician or grand strategist. In the context of the fungibility of power, it may sometimes achieve sufficient effect to replace partially or fully the need for some other instrument of power. But no sensible strategist would ever rely on its chance of occurring.

Gray's final insight concerning the interchangeability of power is that the limits of fungibility are manipulatable, and can sometimes be pushed further than expected:

*The substitutes need not even be close in character. Competent strategy will find alternative means and methods, different people to command, and uses for machines that their inventors and initial military operators had not intended, in order to adapt in near real time to the challenge of necessity. This is not to claim that all military, or grand strategic, assets are fully fungible; of course, they are not. But the strategist needs to be a creative person, selected in part for his ability to conceive of different routes to an objective.*³⁴

Ultimately, however, Gray left these questions for his successors to develop: how to comprehend generic strategic effect in a way that encompasses all forms of power (except soft power), within the full performative dimension.

Grand Strategy, War, and Complexity

Just as warfare occurs in war, with war the superior concept, so too does (military) strategy occur as part of grand strategy. As Gray points out, "War is a total relationship—political, legal, social, and military. Warfare

32. Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), x.

33. Colin S. Gray, *Hard Power and Soft Power: The Utility of Military Force as an Instrument of Policy in the 21st Century* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2011), 30.

34. Gray, *Strategy Bridge*, 155.

is the conduct of war, generally by military means. A narrow focus upon warfare proper, which is natural enough for armed forces, can obscure the need to function grand strategically, in doing which military behavior is only one dimension of the effort, albeit a vital one.”³⁵ The grand strategic perspective therefore takes a certain priority, notwithstanding that in war the military contest is inevitably the most important. Gray suggests this priority is not necessarily one of significance but of analytical progression. Analysis of a security challenge begins with grand strategy and incorporates (military) strategy only once it is politically determined force will be employed.³⁶

The military instrument cannot simply be unleashed on its own, without first understanding the adversarial challenge and its context. To do so would, at best, be an inefficient use of a polity’s resources. At worst, it could lead to defeat or catastrophe.³⁷ Gray’s discussions of grand strategic failures frequently looked to twentieth-century Germany and the twenty-first-century United States as examples.

The complexity of grand strategy and war is also reflected in the number of agents responsible for conceiving and coordinating any grand strategy. This challenge overshadows the task of coordinating combined arms and joint warfare because the armed services are closer in perspective to one another than to nonmilitary perspectives. Moreover, as Gray observes, the coordination is constant, as the continuous adversarial interaction of war always creates new challenges:

*For a state to function well enough grand strategically, most of its interconnected parts need to do at least a minimum of what they have to do at a tolerable level of competence as contributors to a single war effort—when the grand strategy key is turned. Moreover, someone, actually several people, processes, and enforcers, are required if a war effort is to be maintained in the face of surprises.*³⁸

Finally, Gray understood grand strategy often posed a danger to itself due to its sheer complexity, which could obscure crucial elements of military power and attendant strategy.³⁹ Gray repeatedly emphasized the importance of tracking the essential elements of war, even while maintaining awareness of, and being prepared to act within, the full complexity of grand strategy and war:

35. Colin S. Gray, *Irregular Enemies and the Essence of Strategy: Can the American Way of War Adapt?* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2006), 11.

36. Colin S. Gray, *Categorical Confusion? The Strategic Implications of Recognizing Challenges Either as Irregular or Traditional* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2012), 34.

37. Gray, *Fighting Talk*, 84.

38. Gray, *Strategy Bridge*, 129.

39. Gray, *Perspectives on Strategy*, 157–58.

*If one embraces grand strategy as well as its subordinate military strategy, the sheer complexity and diversity of agents, agencies, processes, and happenings, all influenced by enemies, friends, and neutrals, is apt to amount more to chaos than to order in any sense. Strategic theory acknowledges complexity, diversity, contingency, the unwelcome influence of the enemy's efforts, and so forth. But also it must insist upon the primary existential significance of an actual story arc to the course of strategic history.*⁴⁰

Grand Strategy and Policy

The variety of actors involved in grand strategic management—required both to master the full complexity of war and to direct the multiple instruments of grand strategy—led Gray to question how to differentiate policy and grand strategy. He realized his interpretation of grand strategy pushed it into a rarified conceptual atmosphere, making it at times closer to policy than to its foundational logic in strategy itself. Hence, he admitted in *Strategy and Politics*, “Statesmen and strategists, who might be regarded as behaving in a common category of responsibility, aspire to nudge their polity’s political and strategic situation along a path of adequate security. This text is closer in the spirit and focus to being a study of grand strategy than of strategy approached narrowly in a strictly military mode.”⁴¹

Gray struggled between diverging reality and theory. He admitted “[g]rand strategy undoubtedly is so close to policy that the two can seem indistinguishable. There is merit in Clausewitz’s rather more limited, highly apposite claim that ‘at the highest level the art of war turns into policy.’”⁴² Elsewhere, Gray tested himself more thoroughly against this line of thought that the highest levels of strategy become policy:

[E]ven though there is an obvious difference between a policy goal and a strategy to secure it, the intimacy of the connection between them is such that one could argue that insistence upon the distinction does more harm to understanding than it does good. On balance, and it is only on balance, this discussion maintains that the distinction between a policy objective and plans and actions for its intended achievement is valid, necessary, and sustainable under critical fire. However, we admit that policy and its

40. Gray, *Strategy Bridge*, 176.

41. Colin S. Gray, *Strategy and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 8.

42. Gray, *Fighting Talk*, 84.

*execution should be so closely interwoven and continuously in dialogue that some apparent fusion of, and confusion between, the two is always likely.*⁴³

Because Gray's conclusion acknowledges both the inherent messiness of warfare in practice while maintaining the necessity of conceptual clarity in theory, it may prove dissatisfying to some scholars.

Conclusion: Grand Strategy as Agential Context

Gray's interpretation of grand strategy contains much potential conceptual depth yet to be explored but which may further develop grand strategy as an idea. He constantly reaffirmed "grand strategy [was] an essential level of behaviour in the general theory [of strategy]."⁴⁴ However, in order to encapsulate the meaning of Gray's grand strategic thought within his own thinking, one can rely on another word he used incessantly: context.

Gray always emphasized the importance of context, which could be understood as cultural, geographical, political, ethical, and so forth, with as many potential specific contexts as there are dimensions of strategy. As a context, grand strategy is unique. Unlike every other context or dimension of strategy, grand strategy can be considered an *agential* context. That is, the military agency inherent in strategy is situated within a broader context of grand strategy defined by simultaneous and complementary agencies of nonmilitary power.

*Military strategies must be nested in a more inclusive framework, if only to lighten the burden of support for policy they are required to bear. A security community cannot design and execute a strictly military strategy. No matter the character of a conflict, be it a total war for survival or a contest for limited stakes, even if military activity by far is the most prominent of official behaviours, there must still be political-diplomatic, social-cultural, and economic, inter alia, aspects to the war.*⁴⁵

Within a particular perspective on strategy which emphasizes strategic agency in war against a specific adversary, grand strategy is the master context. It encompasses all activity instrumentally relevant to defeating the enemy. Regardless of how deeply Gray, at any particular point in his career, delved into considerations and discussions of grand strategy, its contextual pressure on the practice of strategy is the single most

43. Gray, *Strategy Bridge*, 113.

44. Gray, *Strategy Bridge*, 28.

45. Gray, *Strategy Bridge*.

consistent overarching theme in his grand strategic thought. As a repetitive drumbeat throughout his writing, this theme was a constant reminder to his readers that, though military power generally—and rightly—holds priority in war, it hardly ever produced the desired strategic effects and ultimate political consequences alone. “No matter how military the behaviour, and regardless of its geographical focus, all strategy is grand strategy.”⁴⁶ Gray’s understanding of grand strategy differs substantially from mainstream interpretations. While his assertions about the importance of understanding agential context—particularly the instrumental agencies surrounding military power—may be regarded as common sense, they are generally neglected in strategic practice.

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46. Gray, *Strategy Bridge*, 115.

