

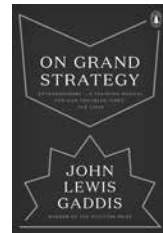
BOOK REVIEW

On Grand Strategy

John Lewis Gaddis

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VP NAIK

INTRODUCTION

Grand strategy, as both an art and a science, occupies a unique place at the intersection of history, philosophy and politics. Aligning ends, ways and means, and integrating military, economic and diplomatic instruments of power in pursuit of national objectives are the *raison d'être* of a successful grand strategy. In his book *On Grand Strategy*, Cold War historian and Pulitzer Prize winner (2012), John Lewis Gaddis distills decades of teachings and reflections on this theme into a sweeping intellectual narrative. Drawing on thinkers ranging from Sun Tzu to Tolstoy and Isaiah Berlin, and leaders like Xerxes to Franklin Roosevelt, Gaddis explores how successful strategists have been able to bridge the gap between aspirations and capabilities. He also brings out certain important facets of strategy like balancing ambition with restraint, ideals with reality, and vision with pragmatism, offering

Group Captain **VP Naik** VM is a Senior Fellow at the Centre for Aerospace Power and Strategic Studies, New Delhi. His research areas include Air Power and Modern Warfare.

the reader a *mélange* of ingredients for the prosecution of the successful strategy.

The central theme of the book revolves around the Greek poet Archilochus' phrase "*The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing*"¹ popularised by Isaiah Berlin in his 1953 essay "The Hedgehog and the Fox" where he has used the phrase to classify thinkers and leaders according to their world view and intellectual style. Hedgehogs, Berlin explained, relate everything to a single central vision, through which all that they say and do has significance.² Foxes, in contrast, pursue many ends, often unrelated, and even contradictory, connected, if at all, only in some *de facto* way.³ Isaiah Berlin's metaphor, when applied to strategy, helps explain why some leaders and strategists succeed through a unifying grand vision (hedgehogs), while others thrive through pragmatism and adaptability (foxes).

INTELLECTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF GRAND STRATEGY

Gaddis situates his conception of grand strategy in a deep historical and philosophical lineage. He draws from the classical strategist Sun Tzu who emphasised deception and adaptability; from Thucydides, whose Peloponnesian War revealed the tragic interplay among power, fear and honour; and from Clausewitz, whose notions of friction, violence, probability and reasoning (remarkable trinity) illuminate the unpredictable nature of conflict. Gaddis goes on to say that ends can be infinite but means can never be. If you seek ends beyond your means, then sooner or later, you will have to scale back your ends to fit your means.⁴ Unlike Clausewitz, Gaddis is less interested in the mechanics of warfare. His approach is more human-centred, concerned with moral and cognitive attributes that allow leaders to balance *infinite aspirations with finite resources*. Gaddis draws inspiration from a philosophical lineage to build on the intellectual foundations of grand strategy. He defines grand strategy as the *alignment of potentially unlimited*

1. John Lewis Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), p. 4.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

*aspirations with necessarily limited capabilities.*⁵ This definition reflects his belief that grand strategy is not merely planning or state policy: it is an intellectual discipline rooted in understanding the tension between what one wants to achieve and what one can actually achieve. The end product of grand strategy, having balanced the means and the ends, is a cogent plan. Gaddis writes that a plan needs to be informed by the past, linked to the present, for achieving some future goal.⁶

The book also talks about the dual nature of strategic thinking, wherein, Gaddis argues that strategists must be both visionaries and pragmatics (hedgehogs and foxes). Successful strategists like Lincoln, Elizabeth I or Franklin D Roosevelt, combine the hedgehog's moral clarity with the fox's flexibility and dexterity. This duality forms the intellectual heart of his approach to grand strategy and, therefore, a great strategist is a fox who knows how to be a hedgehog or a hedgehog who knows when to be a fox. Thus, Gaddis' foundation of grand strategy is dialectic, balancing between theory and reality, vision and constraint.

A key intellectual pillar for Gaddis is the moral dimension of strategy. The moral foundation separates Gaddis' approach from that of purely realist thinkers. For him, hubris, the refusal to recognise limits, is the greatest sin. The intellectual virtue of a strategist is humility, an awareness of uncertainty and the limits of human control. Therefore, grand strategy is not just about power but also about prudence, the ability to act with foresight, restraint and moral balance.

According to Gaddis, making grand strategy becomes a form of applied historical reasoning, where analogies and precedents shape judgement. He believes that a strategist's education must cultivate historical imagination. By studying how leaders in the past navigated complexity, strategists learn to anticipate future challenges. He goes on to say that a gap has opened between the study of history and the construction of theory, both of which are needed if ends are to be aligned with means.⁷

5. Ibid., p. 21.

6. Ibid., p. 24.

7. Ibid., p. 23.

STRUCTURE AND ARGUMENTS OF THE BOOK

The book unfolds as a series of thematic essays with each chapter juxtaposing historical figures and philosophical reflections to depict strategic behavioural patterns. The first few chapters explore classical and early modern examples. He contrasts Xerxes' overreach in Greece with Pericles' prudence during the Peloponnesian War. He then turns to Augustus, whose consolidation of Roman power exemplified a grand strategy of moderation and to Machiavelli, whose realism in *The Prince* brought out the tension between virtue and necessity. Subsequent chapters examine Elizabeth I's delicate balancing act, Philip II's moral rigidity, Napoleon's tragic hubris and Lincoln's and Roosevelt's uncanny ability to be foxes who knew when to become hedgehogs. The most compelling sections are on Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D Roosevelt. For Gaddis, both leaders mastered the art of reconciling ideals with constraints, matching the ends with means. Lincoln, as Gaddis puts it, somehow managed to be strong willed without being willful, righteous without being self-righteous, and moral without being moralistic.⁸ Both illustrate Gaddis' core proposition that strategic success lies in harmonising moral purpose with material possibility. Throughout the book, Gaddis interlaces literary and philosophical references ranging from St. Augustine to Tolstoy, aiming to elevate strategy beyond just policy-making. His writing is elegant, erudite and imbued with moral seriousness.

The interplay of scale, space and time runs through the entire book as a unifying theme of how successful strategists think. Gaddis defines grand strategy as the alignment of potentially unlimited aspirations with necessarily limited capabilities, and to enable this, strategists must think in different dimensions at once, particularly, scale, space and time. Scale sets the limits of ambition; space defines the context of action; and time determines the sequence and sustainability of effort. The art of grand strategy is harmonising all three. By quoting examples from classical history, Gaddis argues that failure in strategy almost always results from a mismatch between ambitions

8. Ibid., p. 250.

and resources, like Xerxes during the invasion of Greece (overreach of means), Napoleon and Hitler in overstressing empires, and Augustine as a model for realism and restraint. Unlike idealists, great strategists embrace constraints rather than fight them. Gaddis notes that Elizabeth I, Roosevelt and Lincoln succeeded because they understood what not to do. Strategists who ignore limits, like Xerxes, Philip II, Napoleon and Hitler, collapse under their own ambitions.

Critique

The book is deeply rooted in classical history covering a span of almost 2,500 years and brings out an interesting fact that the essence of grand strategy cannot be reduced to planning or prediction. It is a way of thinking, a habit of mind cultivated through the study of history and the humanities. Gaddis argues that grand strategy begins where calculation ends, in the realm of judgement. He has reiterated the same through examples from history which have become a part of the pedagogy at Yale's grand strategy programme, where students from various disciplines study canonical texts from Herodotus to Churchill, to cultivate strategic sensibility rather than just technical expertise. However, the literature referred to is heavily Western (Greek, Roman, Europe and US) with only scattered non-Western references (Sun Tzu). Therefore, readers from non-Western countries may find it laborious to keep up with the frequent references to Western classical history and would require to constantly refer to other books and publications to develop a better insight.

The book tends to oversimplify complex historical realities. Gaddis' portrayal of Napoleon and Hitler as archetypal hedgehogs overlooks the institutional and structural dimensions that shaped their downfall. Similarly, his admiration for Roosevelt's balancing act may appear as undue reverence, underplaying the moral ambiguities of war-time decision-making. In spite of the complexities posed by Gaddis' references to Western classical history, the book compels readers to think about the ethical and philosophical dimensions of strategy in ways that purely technical analyses rarely do.

Contemporary Strategic Discourse and Relevance for India

In the 21st century, where the strategic environment is defined by VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity), Gaddis' insights acquire renewed significance. A multi-polar global order, technological disruption, information warfare and trans-national multi-domain threats have blurred the boundaries between peace and conflict. Terms like No War, No Peace are increasingly being added to the lexicon of modern strategic thinkers and hybrid warfare has become omnipresent. In such a world, qualities like prudence, flexibility and moral clarity acquire even more significance. The US-China rivalry, Russia's resurgence and India's rise as a balancing power in the Indo-Pacific all point towards the need for decision-makers to move beyond short-term tactics to long-term coherence of purpose. From an Indian perspective, the book offers important lessons to navigate the turbulent waters in the modern geopolitical landscape.

- (a) **Focus on Ends-Means and Constraints:** Gaddis' central argument that grand strategy is about aligning potentially unlimited aspirations with limited capabilities speaks directly of the condition that India finds itself in. India has a large set of ambitions (like economic growth, regional leadership, global role, a permanent seat at the UN Security Council, etc.) but it also has a significant set of constraints like resources, access to high end technology, terrorism and poverty. The challenge lies in being able to bridge vision and capability. Developing capability, therefore, becomes more important than just giving out vision statements. India must learn to match means with ends to avoid overreaching.
- (b) **Emphasis on Moral Clarity and Pragmatism:** India must learn to be a hedgehog and transform into a fox when required. In view of India's democratic traditions, normative foreign policy claims (non-alignment and leader of the global south) and the need for pragmatic action (economics and alliances/partnerships), the dual emphasis on hedgehogs and foxes becomes even more significant.
- (c) **Emphasis on Scale, Space and Time:** India must give due emphasis to scale, space and time, matching ends with means, and then develop a

long-term horizon. Questions like what capabilities should India possess by 2047 to truly become a developed nation, how should India balance resources with ambition and what is stopping India from becoming a global power must be answered now rather than procrastinated for later. The scale of ambition versus means is very concrete. India wants regional power status, a global voice and a technological edge but still grapples with institutional coherence, budget constraints and internal disparities. The book's abstract framework may be useful but the realities of India's constraints cannot just be wished away.

- (d) **Relevance of Indian History:** Gaddis' insistence that strategy is historical before it is predictive reminds policy-makers that enduring wisdom often resides in the past. Gaddis also mentions that those who study history are better able to anticipate surprise, even if they cannot predict it. While this book talks of classical Western history and philosophy, it would augur well for Indian strategists to delve into the past and draw lessons on grand strategy. In an era wherein technology and data-analytics dominate decision-making, historical consciousness must become a part of the strategic discourse and academic rigour in universities, war colleges, government institutes and military training establishments.
- (e) **Indian Realpolitik:** India is in a state of flux, from a rapidly growing economy to an existence in a turbulent neighbourhood, from putting a human in space to alleviating poverty on the ground, and from economic sanctions to multilateralism: India has its hands full. The book offers big ideas but very few concrete prescriptions tailored for the Indian palate. India must draw its own conclusions from the book to carve out a long-term grand strategy that must be followed by successive governments. Continuity is essential for success and that has been a major failure of Indian politics.
- (f) **Furthering Indian Strategic Culture:** Indian strategic culture focussed on *dharma*, strategic autonomy and non-alignment must be fostered across all levels. The book gives a generic framework but does not deeply

engage with how institutional legacies, colonial past civil-military relations and democratic pluralism affect strategy formulation in India. Readers can, however, draw significant lessons from Western history for application in the Indian context. India's Vision 2047, *Atmanirbhar Bharat*, Neighbourhood First and Act East policies need the kind of temporal thinking that Gaddis emphasises. Writings of contemporary Indian authors on Indian strategic thought must be paired with Gaddis' thoughts on grand strategy to carve out a realistic, achievable and pragmatic vision for India.

CONCLUSION

John Lewis Gaddis' *On Grand Strategy* is an erudite and interesting discourse on the perennial challenges of leadership and power dynamics when crafting grand strategy. The book's significance lies not in offering prescriptions and ready-made solutions but in cultivating perspective. It offers a strong conceptual toolkit and emphasises important strategic dimensions (like ends and means; scale, time and space and moral clarity). The book, however, requires local adaptation. Without local adaptation, the book will remain an elegant but random set of intellectual ideas rather than a manual for India's strategic reality. For students of international relations, military studies and political philosophy, this book is indispensable reading. It restores the ethical and intellectual depth that grand strategy urgently requires, given the contemporary VUCA world. Gaddis stresses on the study of humanities (history, philosophy and literature) as essential ingredients of effective grand strategy. It is not just about articulating a vision and making grand plans, it is about developing capabilities that are capable of achieving that vision. One cannot just be a hedgehog or a fox, because hedgehogs make doctrines and foxes make strategy work in the real world. Both are required for the formation of a successful grand strategy.