

Prioritisation Matters: The Case for Grand Strategy

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Marina Henke is Professor of International Relations at the Hertie School and Director of the Centre for International Security in Berlin. Her research focuses on grand strategy, nuclear security, and European security and defence policy. She earned a PhD in Politics and Public Policy from Princeton University, a dual Master of Science in Development Studies and International Political Economy from Sciences Po and the London School of Economics and Political Science, and a Bachelor of Arts in Economics, Politics, and Latin American Studies from Sciences Po. In 2025, Henke published *Best Practices in Grand Strategy Design*, which presents a five-step framework for developing, implementing, and sustaining effective grand strategy.

Jolina: Thank you for joining us today, Marina. Xerxes and I were lucky enough to take your class on grand strategy last year, and are both very happy to see you again. To kick off the interview, we'd like to know what, in your view, most states consistently get wrong in their Grand strategy?

Marina: Thank you for inviting me! The most common mistake is failing to prioritise the grand strategic goals that you want to pursue as a government. If they are defined, they are often a list of objectives such as national security, wealth generation for their population, and economic growth, all supposed to happen at the same time, which does not work out.

Jolina: Previously, you criticised Germany's 2023 National Security Strategy. Do you see the current government thinking and acting more strategically?

Marina: Yes! The German National Security Strategy of 2023 included an endless list of objectives, including friendship with France and the United States, the survival of the European Union, and more. The first and most important thing to understand about strategy is that no one can have it all, as strategy is about prioritising. Governments must set at most three very specific goals.

The German defence strategy that just got published does a very good job in that respect. The document is very short because there is a classified version, which makes sense. However, the public version is very precise and clearly lists priorities: territorial defence and Russia as the main enemy, which is nice to see after the previous vague strategy.

Jolina: Let us shift our focus from Germany to democracies more broadly. Grand strategy obviously demands a long-term horizon, as it is about long-term goals. However, democratic governments run on short electoral cycles and require public support. Do autocracies have an advantage since they can work more long-term oriented?

Marina: This question is often posed because the argument is that autocracies can pursue grand strategy since they don't face elections, whereas democracies are constrained by election cycles and the need to manage diverse interest groups. First, I think that four years or more is plenty. A lot can be achieved in four years, and often, people or governments with a good grand strategy actually stay in power. Examples include Angela Merkel, who was in power for 16 years; American presidents who usually get a second term; and the Tory Party, which remained in power for a long time in the United Kingdom. The notion that terms in democracies are too short is a misconception, but another, more crucial advantage is that democracies have real feedback loops.

The problem is that any grand strategy can go off the rails; that's perfectly normal. The big advantage of democracies, which was obvious in the United States during the Cold War, is that when difficulties arise and people are familiar with the different assumptions or underlying principles, they can alert the government that certain things are not working. The implementation of a grand strategy and the crucial updating process can function much

better in democracies. Thus, in the long run, democracies usually have a more robust grand strategy than autocracies, as supported by extensive research.

Jolina: As you mentioned, in democracies, staying in power entails being re-elected. Besides voting once every couple of years, what role can the public play in influencing grand strategy?

Marina: A population that is aware of the benefits of grand strategy is the first condition for the development of a good grand strategy, because otherwise, politicians have little incentive to articulate one. I think the public should be pushing governments much more for grand strategy, for two reasons. First, it allows for transparency and second, it creates accountability. If a government doesn't state what it wants to achieve in five years, it can always change its direction or agenda. This has happened in the past. After missing benchmarks, governments claim they wanted to achieve another objective, adding reasons for not meeting them. But if governments are pushed to put clear, prioritised goals on paper and make them public, the public can hold them accountable.

Xerxes: What reasons for why politicians might not want to publish a good grand strategy do you see?

Marina: Often, politicians avoid grand strategy to avoid being held accountable, even though the public would benefit from it. Politicians might struggle to pin down exactly what they want to achieve because they fear they won't reach their goals. If the public understands the importance and benefits of grand strategy, they need to ask for it. However, in Germany and Europe, the public didn't fully understand what grand strategy was for a long time, so they never asked for it. Journalists were also not asking for it. Even people working in academia and in think tanks for a very long time didn't ask for it because no one fully understood grand strategy. In people's minds, the term grand strategy was often associated with grand in the sense of majestic or imperial. This led them to believe they could not ask for a grand strategy because it means going to war and establishing new empires. Yet this is a misnomer; "grand" here is a synonym for "overarching," an all-encompassing strategy.

Xerxes: You've mentioned the role of think tanks in pushing for grand strategy. Do you think that this culture needs to be adopted more in Germany?

Marina: To answer this, it is worth looking at Germany prior to the Russian invasion. In 2022, the structure that Germany had created for itself, which I would still refer to as a grand strategy, collapsed. The successive governments in Germany, whether we talk about Kohl, Schroeder, or Merkel, have always had a grand strategy. It's just that none of them made it very transparent, and they never talked about it openly.

The strategic objective was to generate wealth for Germany. The logic of action was to import cheap energy from Russia to keep production costs low, to focus on globalisation, and to find export markets. China was a

critical export market in this regard, but Germany also focused on other markets. There was a certain grand strategic logic behind choosing and maintaining this path.

Thus, security became an afterthought, reduced to trying to stay in NATO by doing the bare minimum to avoid getting kicked out. With the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this strategy collapsed in multiple aspects. First, we could no longer, and we should no longer, access Russian natural gas. Then, the relationship between Russia and China became much more overt, and China changed its trading strategy. Third, the United States became much more unpredictable as an ally.

Now the process of a grand strategic rethink has been set off, and think tanks are pushing for it. There is the realisation that if there had been a more transparent discussion of German grand strategy before 2022, we might not have ended up in this massive dilemma.

The intellectual infrastructure in Germany, meaning you, me, and many others, needs to be more critical and question the grand strategic assumptions the government is working with.

Xerxes: We've talked about national grand strategies, but you've also argued that Europe needs its own grand strategy. What do you think Europe's priorities should be in the situation that we find ourselves in now that the US is sort of leaving Europe, while Energy is only becoming more expensive? Should the EU get more involved in security?

Marina: I'm convinced that any entity, and even individuals, should have a grand strategy. And again, I fully realise that using the term grand strategy in this sense sometimes sounds a little bombastic, but on a personal level, it should just be an idea of where you want to go. What are your overarching goals? What stands in the way? What kind of obstacles am I facing, and how can I overcome these obstacles? Goals need to be realistic, and one should always consider the tools at one's disposal. Having said this, we must be very realistic when looking at the European Union. The EU doesn't have a military, and it will probably stay that way for quite a while. One needs to understand what the EU can achieve, given its limits on sovereignty, institutional capabilities and so forth.

And so, it's up to you and me to ask whether the EU should have as a grand strategic goal to contribute to security in Europe, although it's not its primary responsibility. Certain competencies are just not at the EU level. It might make more sense to focus on domains where the EU has strong competencies and tools, such as European cohesion and economic development, given the great potential of the tools already in place. Thus, right now, implementing the Draghi proposal and completing the single market, while also considering how we can keep the 27 member states together, should be the EU's focus.

Of course, the EU can lend a hand to the security environment, but the EU per se, von der Leyen, the Commission, and the Parliament cannot force European member states to spend more on defence. That's why, even if we

wanted the EU to be more involved right now, the legal contract doesn't allow it to pursue this as a grand strategic goal. It can be Germany's grand strategic goal to make the EU a real security actor, but the EU per se cannot force it. It doesn't have the powers. That is another common mistake in grand strategy development: assuming certain tools and powers are at your disposal when they actually do not exist.

Xerxes: Thank you very much for taking the time to talk to us today. We hope to raise a little more awareness of grand strategy and your important work through this publication.

Marina: Thank you.

