

The keys that lock up the world: identifying  
American interests in the periphery.

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## The Keys that Lock Up the World: Identifying American Interests in the Periphery

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### **In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

The Keys that Lock Up the World | Michael C. Desch | Identifying American Interests in the Periphery | In the late 1980s the United States is again debating how it can best ensure its security in a world of competing nation-states. Scholars and policy-makers call for a broad reassessment of which areas of the world are crucial to the United States and which are not. In addition, many argue that U.S. overseas commitments must now be reconciled with shrinking national resources, and perhaps with a new international order in which great power status will be determined less by military force than by economic and technological prowess. Finally, domestic concern about the non-military elements of governmental responsibility is increasing. But because these debates are not new, it is appropriate to consider them in their larger theoretical and historical contexts. I do that by addressing one crucial question: How should great powers determine their strategic interests? This is one of the key debates falling under the more general rubric of grand strategy.'

In the broadest sense, a grand strategy is the means by which I gratefully acknowledge the advice, comments, and criticisms that I have received from Eliot Cohen, Michael Doyle, Alan Drimmer, Emily Goldman, Ted Hopf, Samuel Huntington, Ethan Kapstein, Chaim Kaufmann, John Mearsheimer, Benny Miller, Robert Pape, Robert Powell, Stephen Van Evera, the members of the Military Affairs Seminar (University of Chicago) and the National Security Seminar (Harvard University), and an anonymous reviewer. Michael C. Desch is a John M. Olin Post-Doctoral Fellow in National Security at the Center for International Affairs, Harvard University. He specializes in security studies and Latin American area studies.

1. Grand strategy encompasses a wide variety of important questions. While my study will draw on material that addresses all of these questions, it will focus primarily on the first question: What are a state's strategic interests and how should it rank them in importance? Other related questions include: Is one type of political regime better at mobilizing internal resources than another? What are the domestic constraints on the formulation of a rational and coherent grand strategy? See Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the Wars* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984). What is the relationship between a state's military power and its economic base? See Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976); Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987), pp. 514-535; and Kennedy, "Strategy versus Finance in Twentieth-Century Great Britain," *The International History Review*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (January 1981), pp. 44-61. How should states reconcile limited national resources with competing external interests? See e.g., Christopher Layne, *International Security*, Summer 1989 (Vol. 14, No. 1) 1989 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

86 Keys that Lock Up the World 187 which a state plans to use force or the threat of force to achieve political ends.

2 Despite the current preoccupation with economics and other nonmilitary factors, the preeminent political end a state pursues is its security, and the principal determinant of a great power's security is how it will fare militarily against other great powers. Walter Lippmann put it best: Only a great power can resist a great power. Only a great power can defeat a great power. And therefore the relationship of his nation with the other great powers is the paramount-not by any means the sole, but the paramount-concern of the [policy] maker.

4 It is major hegemonic wars that have most often decided the fate of competing great powers.<sup>4</sup> "Ending the Alliance," *The Journal of Contemporary Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Summer 1983), pp. 531; Jeffrey Record, "Jousting With Unreality: Reagan's Military Strategy," *International Security*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Winter 1983/84), pp. 3-18; Paul M. Kennedy, "The (Relative) Decline of America," *The Atlantic Monthly*, August 1987, pp. 29-38; Samuel P. Huntington, "Coping With the Lippmann Gap," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 66, No. 3 (America...

# The Keys that Lock Up the World

Michael C. Desch

Identifying American Interests  
in the Periphery

In the late 1980s the United States is again debating how it can best ensure its security in a world of competing nation-states. Scholars and policy-makers call for a broad reassessment of which areas of the world are crucial to the United States and which are not. In addition, many argue that U.S. overseas commitments must now be reconciled with shrinking national resources, and perhaps with a new international order in which great power status will be determined less by military force than by economic and technological prowess. Finally, domestic concern about the non-military elements of governmental responsibility is increasing. But because these debates are not new, it is appropriate to consider them in their larger theoretical and historical contexts. I do that by addressing one crucial question: How should great powers determine their strategic interests?

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*International Security*, Summer 1989 (Vol. 14, No. 2)

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