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How Byzantium, not Rome, can help preserve Pax Americana



Economic crisis, mounting national debt, excessive foreign commitments -- this is no way to run an empire. America needs serious strategic counseling. And fast. It has never been Rome, and to adopt its strategies no -- its ruthless expansion of empire, domination of foreign peoples, and bone-crushing brand of total war -- would only hasten America's decline. Better instead to look to the empire's eastern incarnation: Byzantium, which outlasted its Roman predecessor by eight centuries. It is the lessons of Byzantine grand strategy that America must rediscover today.

Fortunately, the Byzantines are far easier to learn from than the Romans, who left virtually no written legacy of their strategy and tactics, just textual fragments and one bookish compilation by Vegetius, who knew little about statecraft or war. The Byzantines, however, wrote it all down -- their techniques of persuasion, intelligence gathering, strategic thinking, tactical doctrines, and operational methods. All of this is laid out clearly in a series of surviving Byzantine military manuals and a major guidebook on statecraft.

I've spent the past two decades poring over these texts to compile a study of Byzantine grand strategy. The United States would do well to heed the following seven lessons if it wishes to remain a great power:

I Avoid war by every possible means, in all possible circumstances, but always act as if war might start at any time. Train intensively and be ready for battle at all times -- but do not be eager to fight. The highest purpose of combat readiness is to reduce the probability of having to fight.

II Gather intelligence on the enemy and his mentality, and monitor his actions continuously. Efforts to do so by all possible means might not be very productive, but they are seldom wasted.

III Campaign vigorously, both offensively and defensively, but avoid battles, especially large-scale battles, except in very favorable circumstances. Don't think like the Romans, who viewed persuasion as just an adjunct to force. Instead, employ force in the smallest possible doses to help persuade the persuadable and harm those not yet amenable to persuasion.

IV Replace the battle of attrition and occupation of countries with maneuver warfare -- lightning strikes and offensive raids to disrupt enemies, followed by rapid withdrawals. The object is not to destroy your enemies, because they can become tomorrow's allies. A multiplicity of enemies can be less of a threat than just one, so long as they can be persuaded to attack one another.

V Strive to end wars successfully by recruiting allies to change the balance of power. Diplomacy is even more important during war than peace. Reject, as the Byzantines did, the foolish aphorism that when the guns speak, diplomats fall silent. The most useful allies are those nearest to the enemy, for they know how best to fight his forces.

VI Subversion is the cheapest path to victory. So cheap, in fact, as compared with the costs and risks of battle, that it must always be attempted, even with the most seemingly irreconcilable enemies. Remember: Even religious fanatics can be bribed, as the Byzantines were some of the first to discover, because zealots can be quite creative in inventing religious justifications for betraying their own cause ("since the ultimate victory of Islam is inevitable anyway ...").

VII When diplomacy and subversion are not enough and fighting is unavoidable, use methods and tactics that exploit enemy weaknesses, avoid consuming combat forces, and patiently whittle down the enemy's strength. This might require much time. But there is no urgency because as soon as one enemy is no more, another will surely take his place. All is constantly changing as rulers and nations rise and fall. Only the empire is eternal -- if, that is, it does not exhaust itself.

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