

Optimizing Grand Strategy:

A Nuanced Proposition for the United States

Alex Bierman

Alex Bierman is a first-year Security Policy Studies M.A. candidate at the George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs, concentrating in Asian Regional Security and Cyber Security. He received his B.A. in International Affairs and Asian Studies from the George Washington University in the spring of 2017. Alex has been able to apply his passion for research and writing across a variety of internships in the non-profit, think tank, and government sectors. Upon graduation, he hopes to begin a career in which he can leverage his academic expertise and knowledge of Chinese.

ABSTRACT

Unlike many debates in Washington, there is wide ideological and political diversity among the supporters of either side of the U.S. grand strategy debate. The two main schools, “deep engagement” and “offshore balancing,” take opposing views as to the direction of future U.S. grand strategy. This paper presents an overview of both arguments and contends that neither is appropriate given the current threat environment. Instead, the best solution for the future of U.S. grand strategy takes aspects from both sides of the debate to create a nuanced and balanced proposition that can pragmatically address the range of threats the U.S. faces. The proposed U.S. grand strategy addresses the shortfalls of both schools, while incorporating their points of strength. To implement this strategy, two policies are recommended: (1) reinforce traditional allies and partnerships; (2) refrain from dictating or becoming too involved in the internal affairs of ally and partner countries.

THE FUTURE OF U.S. GRAND STRATEGY

The grand strategy of the United States is “a set of ideas for deploying a nation’s resources to achieve its interests over the long run.”¹ Therefore, by definition, what the U.S. grand strategy entails is inherently dependent on what the nation deems to be in its interests. Currently, there are two main schools of thought vis-à-vis grand strategy direction: “deep engagement” and “offshore balancing.” Continuing a grand strategy of deep engagement, in which the U.S. acts as a benign superpower leading the international liberal world order, creates the safest possible world. Proponents like G. John Ikenberry argue that despite

the economic costs and political restraints associated with working through international structures to achieve strategic goals, supporters of engagement argue that this approach is a positive-sum game that actually disproportionately benefits the United States.

On the other side, scholars such as John Mearsheimer have argued for a more restrained approach to U.S. grand strategy. Proponents of offshore balancing argue that engagement is an outdated, Cold War-era strategy that has not changed sufficiently to meet today's most pressing challenges. A more restrained approach, they argue, would grant the U.S. more freedom to address domestic issues, prevent participation in unwanted military conflicts, and improve U.S. global image. The two key tenets of offshore balancing are "minimizing the risk of U.S. involvement in a future great power war, and enhancing America's relative power in the international system."²

Opposing scholars on both sides of the debate paint the other theory as utterly ineffective and detrimental to U.S. dominance, but these critiques are hyperboles. In fact, theoretical components of both engagement and offshore balancing can be amalgamated to create a pragmatic U.S. grand strategy that both addresses historical considerations and the modern-day international system. Although the core tenet of engagement, featuring the U.S. as the guarantor and primary promoter of the liberal order should be upheld, and aspects of offshore balancing, such as limited military engagement and a focus on key regions in the world, should also be adopted. To find an appropriate equilibrium between the two theories, a thorough understanding of both positions is required. The best solution for the future of U.S. grand strategy lies somewhere in a gray middle area between the black and white debate of deep engagement versus offshore balancing. To guide this new strategy, policymakers should reinforce traditional alliances and partnerships. However, Washington should refrain from dictating the internal affairs of its partners and allies and focus instead on the broader foreign policy relationship.

THE GREAT DEBATE

THE CASE FOR CONTINUED ENGAGEMENT:

U.S. grand strategy has largely been unchanged since the end of WWII. Its core features a globally engaged United States that is willing to trade far higher expenditures than any other nation in return for a greater influence on the international system's direction.³ The United States ensures its interests, which include managing the international security environment, promoting economic globalization, and sustaining international cooperation,⁴ are met as the primary funder of the international system.⁵

Each president since Truman has seen the role of the United States as a protector and champion of the post-war international system that it helped establish. The end of WWII threw the world into a geopolitical, economic, and ideological great power conflict between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. The western liberal world order featured a heavily interventionist U.S. government whose goal was to tie together a global network of nations with similar values as a bulwark against Communism. Once the U.S. government deemed the spread of Communism a legitimate threat to national security, it sought to intervene in strategically important nations around the world such as Korea in 1950, Vietnam in the 1960s, and Chile in 1973. In order to complement this use of political and military intervention, despite the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States' strategy of engagement to promote its interests did not fundamentally change. While interventions in Iraq during the First Gulf War, Kosovo, and Bosnia were justified primarily on humanitarian grounds rather than for their direct threat to national security, the underlying interest was in the perpetuation of U.S. national priorities.⁶ Indeed, in the case of the First Gulf War, President George H.W. Bush justified the intervention on behalf of Kuwait on the basis of national security. Instead of facing a threat of communist expansion, however, the threat was to the "new world order."⁷ Increased international engagement does not equate to an abandonment of nationalist priorities. Instead, the U.S. government pursued its interests in maintaining the international order it had created through international intervention.⁸

Proponents of a globally engaged United States argue that the community of liberal values-espousing nations was not a temporary alliance to defend against the U.S.S.R. A world of liberal democratic states would actually be more inclined to work together and be less susceptible to violence.⁹ Therefore, the end of the Cold War should not necessitate reduced U.S. engagement in the international system. Though it is true the United States bears the heaviest military, economic, and political burden in the international system it created, it has also received disproportionate benefits in return.¹⁰ A change from the past 70 years of U.S. strategy could potentially bring far more harm than potential benefits. G. John Ikenberry, a prominent ideological proponent of continued U.S. global engagement, argues that the building of the liberal international order as a vehicle through which to promote U.S. interests was the greatest American accomplishment of the 20th century.¹¹ This international system is unparalleled in history in terms of the amount of prosperity it brought to its members. Decolonization catalyzed the growth of UN membership from 51 in 1945 to 193 today, billions of people have been lifted out of extreme poverty, and the global economy has more than tripled in size just since the end of the Cold War.¹² Despite its imperfections, this post-war world order saw more wealth creation, stronger human rights protections, and less inter-

state violence than in any previous era. Global prosperity and increased human rights protections facilitate freer markets and international trade, both of which align with U.S. national interests.¹³

The global benefits of an engaged United States are most evident in terms of security and relative inter-state peace. During the Cold War, the preponderance of U.S. military strength and the utilization of both multilateral security partnerships, such as NATO, and bilateral agreements with South Korea and Japan deterred many instances of inter-state war. Placing allied countries under the United States' nuclear umbrella guaranteed retaliation in the case of an attack. Continuing U.S. military and economic support for these alliances after the end of the Cold War assured allies that the security guarantees were not just relationships of convenience and increased trust in the United States as a negotiating partner as a result. Invoking NATO's Article Five – which explains the principle of collective defense – for the first time in the 2001 Afghanistan War showed the international community that the post-Cold War order would still feature U.S. global engagement.¹⁴ Furthermore, NATO's expansion in 1999, 2004, 2009, and 2017 did more to bolster Pax Americana, which has been the most successful of any world order in preventing deadly conflicts.¹⁵ Not only does U.S. involvement diminish regional competition between possible adversaries, the disproportionality of U.S. military strength better hedges against the emerging hegemons.¹⁶ For example, had (West) Germany not joined NATO in 1955, it could have potentially sought to acquire nuclear weapons and destabilize the region as a consequence.¹⁷ The same destabilizing result could have occurred in East Asia had the U.S. policy of non-proliferation not placed Japan and South Korea under its nuclear umbrella.¹⁸ The recent military buildup by China's People's Liberation Army could be viewed as evidence against U.S. capability to limit competition. The presence of the U.S. in the region, however, impedes Chinese regional hegemony,¹⁹ through support of other regional powers and coalitions like Japan and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

A grand strategy of engagement allows the United States to sustain its position at the top of an open economic system. Wanting to maintain their political and security ties with the U.S. has partially been a driving force behind the economic concessions made by more than 60 U.S. allies.²⁰ For example, the United States has the largest percentage of voting power in the International Monetary Fund because of its outsized monetary contribution. With more than ten percent more voting power than the next country, the United States ensures the advancement of its interests in the global economy.²¹ Furthermore, the U.S. government has historically been able to use its security guarantees to persuade cooperation from European and Asian allies. The 1985 Plaza Accord, which resulted in the depreciation of the US dollar and the appreciation of Western European currencies and the Japanese Yen, helped ameliorate the

effects of America's trade deficit by making U.S. exports more competitive. Indeed, the fact that Japan was willing to accept this deal, which resulted in a serious recession that it has yet to recover from,²² demonstrates how U.S. engagement in international security and economic affairs grants it leverage that it may not have otherwise.²³ Global economic and trade freedom is also inextricably linked to the expansive presence of U.S. naval forces. Securing critical sea lanes, such as the Taiwan Strait, allows for the free flow of goods, which is a key feature of the modern globalized economy.²⁴ Engagement grants the U.S. government the opportunity to foster international cooperation on issues like combating transnational organized crime, climate change, terrorism, and public health more easily as well. Exemplary of the spillover effects of security agreements is the robust information sharing agreement between the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Known as the Five Eyes, this multilateral intelligence sharing agreement is one of the world's most ironclad.²⁵

Some opponents of a continued U.S. grand strategy of engagement point to the strategy's costly failures, namely the Iraq War. They argue that continued engagement condemns the United States to similar military quagmires in the future. In their opinion, the Iraq War stands as a classic example of superpower overstretch where a lack of domestic support and multilateral assistance blends together to create a military catastrophe.²⁶ Proponents of engagement are quick to point out, however, that the Iraq War was an exception, and one that was not inevitable given U.S. grand strategy. In fact, many advocates of global engagement actually opposed the war.²⁷ Furthermore, a grand strategy of engagement does not prohibit readjustment. Current U.S. policymakers have learned from the mistakes of Iraq, making a similar mission of nation-building and democratization in the near term without the requisite political will highly unlikely. Moreover, opponents to U.S. engagement around the globe did not emerge after the Iraq War. It was rather the United States' victory in the Cold War that catalyzed the debate of how the United States should go about seeking peace and prosperity, whether through projection or restraint of power.²⁸ The proponents of continued engagement met opposition from a politically diverse set of individuals who agreed that restraint, not projection, would better serve the U.S. in the long term.

THE MERITS OF OFFSHORE BALANCING:

Renewed calls for a U.S. grand strategy based on offshore balancing are a reaction against deep engagement due to changes in the international system. Offshore balancing strategy is built upon the premise of restraint, rather than the promotion of liberal values to change the international system. Specifically, the original conceiver of offshore balancing, Christopher Layne, argued for

the United States to disengage from its alliance commitments in Europe and East Asia. Doing so, Layne contends, would position the United States to become more powerful and secure in the post-Cold War era.²⁹ Adopting a retrenchment approach to grand strategy would mean limiting international involvement, military and otherwise, to protecting a limited set of interests directly related to credible threats to national security.³⁰ These interests can include balancing against an aggressive rising power, combating violent extremism and foreign terrorist fighters, and limiting nuclear proliferation.³¹ According to this theory, the U.S. government would only spend economic, political, and human resources on the most consequential international threats, unlike the zealous military operations of the 1990s that were more focused on global stability than direct U.S. interests. Offshore balancing aims to reduce U.S. commitments around the world, but does not argue for isolation. It is not even a return to the policies of the 1920s, which, despite international trade and investment, avoided overseas commitments.³² The goal of offshore balancing is to preserve U.S. dominance in the Western Hemisphere, and counter potential emerging hegemonies in regions where a reduction of U.S. influence and power would directly harm national security.³³

Scholars John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt are two primary critics of the U.S. continuing a grand strategy of deep engagement. They point to multiple instances over the past several decades where this strategy has directly resulted in the degradation of U.S. global power. In fact, they describe multiple instances where the global scope of U.S. grand strategy has fared poorly over this time. U.S. policy of nuclear proliferation has been challenged by the expansion of India, Pakistan, and North Korea's nuclear arsenals. U.S. global hegemony has been challenged by the emergence of Russia and China as increasingly aggressive revisionist powers. The military failures in Iraq and Afghanistan display the limits of American military might. Based on these facts, it stands to reason that the United States needs to update its grand strategy.

Offshore balancing, a theory based on realist principles, is the proposed solution.³⁴ A tenet of offensive structural realist theory, pioneered by Mearsheimer, is that no nation can be a global hegemon without the impossibility of obtaining nuclear superiority. Instead, the most a super power can aspire to is to become a regional hegemon.³⁵ Offshore balancing theory recognizes a superpower has interests beyond its national borders, but argues that those goals should be limited and feasible. Maintaining U.S. global preeminence does not require a deeply engaged U.S. grand strategy, but instead a focus on preserving the balance of power in the three most important global regions: Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Persian Gulf.³⁶

Specifics of a Mearsheimerian grand strategy of offshore balancing include a mixture of continuation of the status quo and controversial suggestions. Though the United States should be primarily concerned with its own regional

hegemony, it should also be worried about the possibly subversive nature of China's rise in the Asian Pacific region. Given the geographic distance between them, it is unlikely that U.S. allies in the region would be able to effectively form a balancing coalition against China, which increases the likelihood of the U.S. having to use its resources to offshore balance.³⁷ This is not the case for Europe. The U.S. should not keep military forces in Europe because no country can completely dominate the continent, as a thousand years of war has displayed. Aspiring regional hegemony from the Hapsburgs to Napoleon to Hitler have all failed to effectively maintain domination of Europe. Europe has a rich history of balancing coalitions that were able to overcome historical animosities in order to respond to perceived threats. For example, England and France were military enemies during the Hundred Years War (1337-1453).³⁸ However, they both allied against the Hapsburgs during the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) in order to block a European regional hegemon from forming before resuming hostilities a century later.³⁹ A U.S. withdrawal would arguably force Europeans to care for their own security and would likely create a stable, bipolar NATO vs. Russia balance, particularly because each side possesses nuclear weapons. In the Persian Gulf and the Middle East more broadly, a more off-handed approach is necessary to allow regional powers to deal with their own problems. Although a rivalry for regional hegemony is apparent between Saudi Arabia and Iran,⁴⁰ and as long as neither state acquires nuclear weapons, the offshore balancer's approach would argue that such a rivalry has no dire consequences to U.S. national security.⁴¹

A key feature of an offshore balancing U.S. grand strategy is passing the buck of security to regional powers until U.S. assistance is truly needed to contain a rising hegemon. This feature serves U.S. political interests by potentially saving the United States from being dragged into a regional conflict it has no significant interest in.⁴² Global issues, ranging from genocide to inter-state conflict, should be left to regional actors, as they do not directly affect U.S. national security from a realist perspective. Regional powers should instead attempt to address these issues, including the containment of an emerging hegemon, since they have a more vested interest in the immediacy of the threats. Additionally, passing the buck grants the U.S. economic gains. By limiting its involvement in various conflicts, the U.S. would have greater economic freedom to ameliorate domestic problems, such as health care, education, and income inequality. For example, in the case of the Iraq War, the estimated total economic cost to the United States before interest was \$2 trillion.⁴³ By comparison, the highest estimated costs of implementing a single-payer health care system is \$2.8 trillion.⁴⁴ In light of the 2008 global economic crisis, it is no longer strategically viable for the U.S. government to bear such a disproportionate burden of defense spending for its allies.⁴⁵

Proponents of offshore balancing describe it as a grand strategy that is

more realistic and pragmatic. They argue that defenders of a deeply engaged U.S. exaggerate Washington's ability to mitigate transnational security issues. In fact, the threat that issues like terrorism actually pose to U.S. national security is negligible compared to that of a full conventional war with an adversarial rising hegemon.

Offshore balancers also believe the success of the liberal world order has been exaggerated. The liberal capitalist economy has created amounts of global wealth unseen before in human history; income inequality within countries has also greatly increased since the end of the Cold War.⁴⁶ Although interstate warfare has decreased under the new world order, intra-state conflicts in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere have increased.⁴⁷ This adds to the claim that such dramatic changes to global security needs necessitate a new grand strategy. It is naïve of liberal interventionists to believe the U.S. government is capable of solving any and all regional conflicts. In fact, democracy promotion in regions where it is alien actually works against U.S. national interest by creating a wave of anti-American sentiment.⁴⁸ These anti-liberal and anti-American sentiments are not limited to U.S. adversaries either, as both Egyptian and Turkish leaders have publicly stated Western notions of human rights are inapplicable.⁴⁹ These sentiments have materialized in response to a perception that the United States acts as the "world's police," and is likely contributing to increased radicalization, terrorist group recruitment, Russian and Chinese military modernization, North Korea's nuclearization, and Iran's desire for nuclear technology.⁵⁰

Some opponents criticize offshore balancing because it apparently abandons more than 70 years of promoting the liberal order. This, however, is not the case. In order to effectively promote anything, one needs to have credibility and integrity. The way the U.S. government has gone about haphazardly forcing democracy on unwilling countries hardly displays a genuine commitment to universal values, such as sovereignty. Furthermore, the question is raised as to how many military commitments the United States will have to make to maintain the international world order's credibility. Indeed, such a commitment would likely result in a classic case of super power overstretch and eventual suicide.⁵¹ The restraint associated with offshore balancing in fact works to maintain U.S. credibility, integrity, and global preeminence.

A NUANCED APPROACH TO U.S. GRAND STRATEGY

The new U.S. grand strategy must consider the changes of the international system over the past 70 years. It must also be pragmatic and take domestic opinion into account. A continued grand strategy of deep engagement simply does not fit the needs of the international system anymore. Seventy years of promoting the liberal world order has provoked staunch reactions against it.

On the other hand, a dramatic shift in grand strategy to offshore balancing lacks the practical consideration of ramifications that go beyond saving U.S. resources. A nuanced approach to crafting a U.S. grand strategy of integrity and credibility is needed. The proposed approach considers history and domestic opinion, while ensuring a dominant position for the United States as a stalwart defender of the liberal democratic order.

The issue with continued engagement that mirrors the past 70, or even 30, years is that the international order has drastically changed. Although proponents highlight the flexibility of a deep engagement grand strategy, this approach does not go far enough. Gone are the days of unrivaled U.S. unipolarity, and policymakers need to recognize that powers, ranging from Russia to China to Iran, all have the increasing capacity to constrain U.S. action. Proponents of deep engagement focus, rightfully, on the good the liberal order has brought, but do not acknowledge the historical pains it has caused. Despite preventing an all-out nuclear war with the Soviet Union, this grand strategy caused a great deal of suffering and grievances around the world. Propping up multiple anti-communist regimes in the third world during the Cold War with little to no consideration for regional or domestic implications has deteriorated the image of the values-based U.S. democracy.⁵² Additionally, while the disastrous war in Iraq and ongoing war in Afghanistan may be historical outliers, these military blunders are fresh in the American people's minds. To maintain the United States' global legitimacy as the leader of the free world, U.S. grand strategy must enjoy popular domestic support.

The primary issue with offshore balancing is that it focuses too much on short-term gains for the United States and too little on its negative strategic implications. There is an immense gap between offshore balance theory and praxis. Offshore balancing would have brought about the outcomes previously described only if it had been implemented at the end of the Cold War. Leaving NATO in the hands of the Europeans fails to consider a lack of political will European countries have in rebuilding their militaries, as well as recent NATO expansions.⁵³ Furthermore, Iran is a real contender for regional hegemony, possessing proxy forces in both Lebanon and Yemen, making a pivot to backing Iran against the United States' historical ally Saudi Arabia unwise.

This paper proposes a U.S. grand strategy that addresses shortfalls on both sides of the argument, while incorporating their points of strength. The idea that the world is safer when the United States is at its strongest is indisputable. This proposed hybrid grand strategy does not intend to remove the U.S. role as a leader in multilateral institutions and organizations. Nevertheless, military intervention should be limited, as the offshore balancers argue, to regions where the U.S. has a direct national interest. A limited U.S. war, such as the ongoing Afghanistan War, offers no long-term solutions to the country's stability according to Mearsheimer and Walt.⁵⁴ However, in contrast to

offshore balancing theory, this strategy does plan to keep U.S. troops stationed abroad in Asia and Europe to reassure allies of U.S. commitments to their security. Reassuring allies prevents regional buildup of military power while maintaining U.S. dominance.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To implement this nuanced U.S. grand strategy, two pragmatic policy changes are recommended. With the release in December 2017 of the Trump administration's first National Security Strategy (NSS), the world now knows the intended direction of U.S. strategy. Mearsheimer and Walt are correct to assert that U.S. national interests are most intimately tied with Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Persian Gulf. The foreign policy-related aspects of the 2017 NSS are in line, for the most part, with these regions.⁵⁵ The first policy recommendation is addressed to Congress and the Trump administration. The United States should not seek new partners, but rather shore up traditional ones. Changing allegiances out of convenience would only further deteriorate the United States' image abroad. While sustained support of illiberal regimes, namely in the Middle East, has caused image issues for the United States, no viable alternative U.S. partner arguably exists. If a government more in line with U.S. values arises in the future, perhaps a partnership could be agreed upon, but for now, this is not the case. Beyond the integrity aspect of not turning one's back on one's partners, the practical side of supporting traditional partners is that it ensures relative security. Reneging on promises to protect Taiwan or Israel could cause regional instability or even an arms race. Though there is no historical antecedent, as no other great power has had such far-reaching security commitments, the potential security risks of pulling out of regions like Asia or the Middle East far outweigh possible benefits. The vast majority of U.S. partners and military allies are democracies. Promoting democracy not through nation building, but rather through assistance is a more sustainable method of leading the liberal world order.

The final policy recommendation to the Trump administration is to take an offhanded approach to the internal affairs of partners and adversaries alike. Some U.S. partners, notably Saudi Arabia, are not democracies. While on principle the United States promotes liberal ideals, imposing Western values against the will of foreign populations will likely prove unproductive. The U.S. government should thus refrain from attempts to leverage its relationship with these states to impose its views on governance. Instead, the United States should adopt an offhanded approach where it lauds internal or grassroots advancements towards a more liberal society, like the recent legal change permitting Saudi women the right to drive. The U.S. government should only become involved in the internal affairs of another country if expressly asked to.

The United States still deals with the effects of internal interventions in other countries during the Cold War, not to mention those in the decades since.⁵⁶ The U.S. government instead, should focus more on the broader foreign policy, rather than internal domestic issues.

CONCLUSIONS

A reassessment of U.S. grand strategy is necessary given the changing of structure of the international system and the threats the United States faces. The proposed new strategy takes a practical approach, preserving convenient and beneficial tenets of deep engagement while adopting certain restrained aspects featured in the offshore balancing proposal. Continued deep engagement reaffirms the U.S. role as the leader of the liberal world order. This system has created incredible global improvements to health and prosperity. Yet, deep engagement is also incredibly costly and increasingly difficult to maintain today due to the rise of revisionist powers and non-state actors. Offshore balancing allows the United States to refocus on a handful of issues that it deems most vital to its national security. By contrast, offshore balancing fails to take into account existing relationships and the strategic implications of abandoning them. Therefore, a nuanced approach that draws from both sides of the deep engagement vs. offshore balancing grand strategy debate. A continued U.S. position as the leader of the international liberal world order is important, but it is also necessary to take into account both historical and regional political developments. Limited future military interventions while shoring up traditional allies and refraining from becoming involved in other countries' domestic affairs will prove to be a sustainable U.S. grand strategy for the foreseeable future.

ENDNOTES

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