

Theory, Counterfactuals, and the US Grand Strategy Debate:

Can the Goldilocks Option Hold?

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Note to Future of American Grand Strategy Conferees: This is drawn from a now very large paper with colleagues Steve Brooks and Ben Valentino. Final form is in flux, so until we figure this all out please do not cite or circulate without seeking advance permission.

Abstract: In this essay drawn from a larger paper coauthored with Stephen Brooks and Benjamin Valentino, I examine the theoretical foundations of the three main grand strategies advocated by scholars of international security: deep engagement, offshore balancing, and restraint. I find that two are clearly grounded in accessible middle range theories that have obvious implications for their policy prescriptions. In contrast, the theoretical foundations of offshore balancing remain a work in progress and would appear to require a considerably more complicated set of considerations to apply. If we assess grand strategic options by the coherence of the theories that must inform their estimates of net benefits, then America lacks a “Goldilocks option” lying comfortably between deep engagement and restraint.

The grand strategy debate hinges on a simple question: How can America get the most security and prosperity for the lowest price in blood and treasure? Unfortunately, in strategy as in war the simplest things quickly become horribly complex. To answer this question, proponents of each competing strategy must draw on a wide range of assumptions, theories and evidence about the way the world works – much of it fragmentary, underspecified and open to reasonable disagreement. The scholar’s refrain “more research needs to be done” applies in spades, but, ultimately, choices—to retain NATO, reform it, or leave it; to help defend South Korea from a North Korean invasion or trust it to defend itself; to sustain or abandon the alliance with Japan; to spend more or less on defense— will have to be made under deep uncertainty.

One piece of this puzzle that can be analyzed right now is theory. I realize that this exercise invites caricature—debating the finer points of IR theory while Rome figuratively burns. But differences among alternative grand strategies are chiefly the result of contrasting estimates of what would happen to the United States’ security and prosperity if it withdrew from some or all key regions. To produce useful estimates of this kind, theory is crucial because, unless Washington actually pulls back and we get to observe the results, much of the dispute is about counterfactuals. Any choice—and I hardly need point out that no choice is a choice—is a bet on how good the theories are that underlie these estimates, and whether they hang together. If I advise you to choose a seemingly risky option because two theories yield a prediction that it will leave you better off—but on reflection you determine that the two theories cannot be simultaneously true, then you’d be well advised not to make that choice.

Each of the competing strategies scholars urge upon the US government depends on its middle-range theoretical underpinnings. These include how each strategy views the threat of great power war, the importance and vulnerability of US links to the global economy, the causes and risks of nuclear proliferation and the indirect economic benefits that the United States gains from its position of global military and political leadership. I shall argue that while the policy prescriptions of deep engagement and restraint flow logically from these theoretical foundations, it is more difficult to discern a consistent set of theories and beliefs that would lead to the particular set of policies endorsed by proponents of offshore balancing.

I narrow the focus to restraint, offshore balancing and deep engagement for two reasons. First, in this paper I am interested in scholars' normative recommendations—what scholars of international security say the US should do, not their explanations for what it actually does. That takes extreme grand strategies—*isolationism* and “*liberal hegemony*”—off the table. Restraint as advocated in scholarship is not *isolationism*. Deep engagement as advocated in scholarship is not “*liberal hegemony*,” which John Mearsheimer defines as an effort “to turn as many countries as possible into liberal democracies...”¹ Second, even though scholars do push other grand strategies—*liberal internationalism a la Ikenberry* and *conservative internationalism a la Henry Nau*—the three discussed here capture the bulk of the debate, at least among security scholars. After all, the dominant normative preference in this expert community is for restraint or offshore balancing, which contend that deep engagement's level of ambition to shape the international environment does not pay. It follows that anything more ambitious is clearly misguided, and thus that conservative and liberal internationalists should also care about three-way debate discussed here.

STRATEGIES AND THEORIES

Proponents of deep engagement advocate retaining America's current overseas alliances, with a forward troop presence in Europe and Asia calculated to deter conflicts between great powers that these scholars warn would severely damage America's security or prosperity. To provide the stability the U.S. needs to survive and thrive, they argue that the U.S. must maintain a robust, global leadership role in economic and security affairs and in major international institutions like the UN, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization designed to facilitate cooperation between states. In contrast, advocates of restraint argue for a global retrenchment of American security commitments. They propose dismantling all of America's major military alliances and overseas bases, dramatically reducing defense expenditures and relinquishing the United States' global leadership role in an effort to disentangle it from foreign conflicts and threats that they believe do not fundamentally jeopardize its interests. Offshore balancing seeks a middle path between the other two strategies. Proponents of this strategy call for maintaining a strong U.S. military presence in Asia to balance a rising China. They support drawing down forward U.S. military deployments in Europe and the Middle East, however, and favor moderate cuts to the defense budget, while maintaining America's ability to intervene globally, if necessary.

¹ Mearsheimer, 2018, 1.

Before turning to this paper's main task, two shibboleths that plague the academic debate need to be addressed: that restraint and offshore balancing are the same or nearly the same; and that each grand strategy needs to be tied to a single grand theoretical "anchor."

i. Offshore balancing and restraint are distinct grand strategies

Given their radically different responses to the primary national security challenge of our age—the rise of China—it ought to be clear that restraint and offshore balancing are not, as is often wrongly asserted, "close cousins."² The confusion stems from the fact that both seem to define vital national interests—those worth putting significant numbers of US forces ashore in far off lands—in the same way: to prevent a rival from attaining hegemony in Europe, Asia or the Persian Gulf. Yet this masks fundamental differences concerning the essential definition of what "regional hegemony" is, how likely it is, how it might affect US security, and, indeed, how international politics works at its most basic level. And once these differences are in view, a host of others emerge that sum to a systematically greater estimate on the part of offshore balancing of the net value added of US commitments in Asia and elsewhere

Restraint defines "regional hegemony" as exclusively the result of serial territorial conquest. For restraint proponents, more capacious definitions of regional hegemony that amount to dominance or preponderant influence just open the door to endless escalating commitments in search of notional threats. Eugene Gholz, Daryl Press and Harvey Sapolsky set forth the "three stringent conditions [that] must be satisfied" before a threat can be said to jeopardize America's vital interests: an aggressor must develop the conventional military capability to physically conquer its neighbors rapidly; the conquest must threaten to aggregate enough power to enable the conqueror either to attack US territory across the ocean or to blockade the US and deny it access to the global economy; and, it follows logically, the conqueror must "solve the 'nuclear problem'....a challenger would have to overcome the nuclear capabilities of other great powers" it seeks to conquer.³ Simply put, this is not a scenario the US need worry about.

Because proponents of restraint see the only things worth fighting abroad for as exceedingly unlikely, when they say "come home, America," they mean it: no allies or troops in Asia or Europe and, importantly, no promise to come back to either region if former allies get into trouble.⁴ Everything about the strategy—including its very name—reflects the overarching

² Friedman and Thrall "National Interests, Grand Strategy, and the Case for Restraint," in Thrall and Friedman, eds., *US Grand Strategy in the 21st century: The Case for Restraint* (Routledge: 2018), p. 5

³ GPS Pp 46-7.

⁴As GPS note, since "no aggressor can conquer America's allies and consolidate global industrial might, so the United States does not need to balance against emerging powers.... The fact that no country can possibly unite the industrial forces of Eurasia eliminates America's traditional concern about the outcome of foreign wars;" GPS, p. 35, 45; see also 18, 20. It should be noted that although Posen favors ending all current US alliances and not making any promise to come back, he does argue that America should "preserve its access to Eurasia;" Posen, *Restraint*, 95; see also pp. 166, 173. He argues that "most of this insurance is military; the United States should retain capabilities that permit reengagement if necessary" (p. 130) but that it would also be useful to create some form of security partnership with at least some former American allies in Eurasia (pp. 90-91, 95, 100).

judgment that the chief problem facing the United States today is its own lack of restraint.⁵ If deep engagement can be seen as taking out insurance against danger that might come from abroad and harm core U.S. interests, restraint is insurance against what its advocates see as the far more likely danger of getting drawn unnecessarily into foreign wars.⁶ The best such insurance is to make going back onshore extremely difficult by telegraphing to the world that it should not look to America if it gets in trouble and creating a force posture that allows the United States to command the commons (crucial, according to the strategy, to ward off threats to U.S. access to global commerce) but has a much smaller Army and thus lacks the short-term capacity for expeditionary operations along the lines of Iraq or Afghanistan.⁷

Offshore balancing refuses to make such a clean break from the security affairs of Eurasia. The fundamental reason is a dramatically different conception of what counts as a vital interest. Offshore balancing rejects the “stringent conditions” restraint sets for determining when the US must commit blood and treasure to Eurasia. To constitute such a threat for offshore balancing, a rival great power does not need to physically conquer and subjugate neighbors, nor does it need to aggregate enough power to threaten US sovereignty, nor certainly must it overcome the deterrent power of nuclear weapons. As John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt stress, all it needs to do is have the wherewithal to attain a dominance in its region such that it no longer has to “worry about its neighbors” and thus is in a position to “roam into the Western Hemisphere.”⁸

ii. Grand strategies rest on sets of middle-range theories, not single grand theories

A second reason scholars are hoodwinked into lumping restraint and offshore balancing together is the old idea that each grand strategy must have a singular grand theoretical anchor. Given that both these strategies claim to be “realist,” the assumption goes, they must be basically the same. But this approach fails to capture the contrasting conceptual foundations in play. Aside from their shared “grandness,” there is no good reason to think that grand strategies and grand theories should be neatly anchored to each other. Grand strategy is at once too complex—embracing propositions about different regional dynamics, the global economy, institutionalized cooperation, nuclear weapons, etc. — and too specific to the geographical position, interests, and history of the United States itself to be shoehorned into any one grand theory. What really drives the three strategies is a collection of middle-range theories that that may or may not sit easily in any theoretical school.

⁵ The first sentence of Posen’s *Restraint* identifies the problem: “The United States has grown incapable of moderating its ambitions in international politics.” (xi). As Thrall and Friedman stress “The grand strategy of restraint takes its name from the idea that sound U.S. foreign policy requires restraint against the many temptations to use force that great power affords.” (p. 5)

⁶ As GPS (p. 13) emphasize in this regard, “insurance is intended to mitigate the costs of unlikely events, but military engagement abroad accomplishes the reverse: it magnifies the costs and risks of faraway wars by making America directly involved in them.”

⁷ Especially useful analyses of what a restraint force posture would look like are Posen, *Restraint*, ch. 3; and Benjamin Friedman and Justin Logan, “Why the U.S. Military Budget is ‘Foolish and Sensible’” *Orbis*, Vol. 56, No. 2 (Spring 2012), pp. 177-191.

⁸ Mearsheimer and Walt, FA 73.

What kinds of middle-range theories are needed? Surprisingly, this is not an issue the grand strategy literature has addressed. Although the requisite theoretical foundations vary according to each strategy's specific recommendations, any grand strategy worth its salt needs middle-range theories about three key issues:

First, in order to model how regional dynamics would play out if the United States were no longer engaged, each strategy needs a basic, applied middle-range theoretical understanding of security competition, especially concerning how and how effectively states balance threats. This demands a theoretically-grounded take on the meaning of the "nuclear revolution" and the implications of proliferation. No one disputes that nuclear weapons exert powerful effects on international politics, yet assessments of their implications vary widely. Scholars debate whether their spread makes the world and the United States dramatically more or less secure, and those debates cannot be fully resolved empirically.

Second, U.S. leadership has played an important role in creating and sustaining international cooperation over the past 75 years, often within the context of international institutions. Any grand strategy thus needs a theory of how inter-state cooperation works now and especially how it would work if Washington dramatically scaled back its global commitments.

Third, a debate about how engaged in the world America needs to be hinges crucially on assessments of interdependence: a theory or some coherent set of propositions about how things that happen abroad affect the United States at home.⁹ Scholars conventionally divide interdependence into three areas: environment, security and economics. The latter two elements of interdependence figure importantly in understanding the differences among the three strategies under scrutiny here, and in predictable ways: those who favor the lowest level of effort to shape the international system assess America's security and economic interdependence as being much lower than do proponents of deep engagement.¹⁰

Across these key issues, what middle-range theories undergird restraint, offshore balancing, and deep engagement? No current treatment has systematically outlined these middle-range theoretical foundations so that they can be easily compared and evaluated. That is the task I now undertake.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF RESTRAINT

⁹ In using the term "interdependence" we do not mean to invoke Keohane and Nye's particular theory of "complex interdependence"; we are employing the term here in its generic form simply to capture the nature and density of linkages that America has with the rest of the world; Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, *Power and Interdependence* (New York: Harper Collins, 1989).

¹⁰ Curiously, in view of increased global concerns about climate change, since the publication of Robert Art's landmark study *A Grand Strategy for America* in 2003, attention to the environment has waned in the academic grand strategy debate.

Restraint's understanding of regional security dynamics rests on three middle-range "theoretical foundations:"¹¹ "*offense-defense theory*" (defense now tends to dominate in great power security relations, making conquest more difficult);¹² "*nuclear optimism*" (nuclear weapons reliably deter conquest without generating much in the way of negative externalities, such as nuclear leakage, accidents, or inadvertent escalation);¹³ and "*efficient balancing theory*" (rationally-led states in anarchy reliably respond to threats from other states).¹⁴ Anyone with basic international relations courses under her belt can quickly reason from these three middle-range theories to a sanguine assessment of the security consequences of American retrenchment. Given defense dominance, efficient balancing, and nuclear optimism, the only thing that could conceivably threaten the US homeland—already protected by two vast oceans and weak, friendly neighbors—would be an almost unimaginably powerful Eurasian hegemon, and the same three theories all but rule out the possibility of the kind of serial conquest such hegemony would require.

Restraint recognizes that important transborder issues may emerge that affect US interests even if they do not constitute direct threats to the US homeland or American access to the global commons. When reasoning through how inter-state cooperation on such matters would work without Uncle Sam steering the global institutional ship, restraint proponents (less formally but nonetheless explicitly) invoke what is in effect a middle-range theory of "*Interest-driven cooperation*." As Benjamin Friedman, Brendan Green and Justin Logan summarize: "when states perceive a need, new cooperative efforts typically form."¹⁵ It follows that

¹¹ Gholz, Press, and Sapolsky admirably make a clear case for these three theories as being foundational for restraint; see "Come Home, America," pp. 13-14.

¹² Some proponents of restraint explicitly emphasize the significance of offense-defense theory; most notably, see Gholz, Press, and Sapolsky, "Come Home, America," pp. 13-14, 31-32. Other proponents draw on the theory implicitly, emphasizing how variations in military technology and geography alter how secure states feel; see, for example, Posen, *Restraint*, p. 19, 70-71, 94-95; Friedman, Green, and Logan, "Debating American Engagement," p. 184; and Thrall and Friedman, "National Interests, Grand Strategy, and the Case for Restraint."

¹³ Proponents of restraint generally come close to being "pure" nuclear optimists and either do not mention or barely discuss the potential downsides of nuclear weapons; see, for example, Gholz, Press, and Sapolsky, "Come Home, America," p. 40, which notes that "the only proliferation danger lies in transition." In contrast, while his *Restraint* reflects nuclear optimism, Posen emphasizes that "nuclear weapons have...created one peculiar risk. Should a nuclear device fall into the hands of a nonstate group, deterrence logic might not hold, because targeted states have nothing to retaliate against;" Posen, *Restraint*, pp. 19-20. As a result, Posen focuses to a greater extent than other proponents of restraint on the dangers nuclear proliferation. That being said, Posen ultimately argues that "it does not matter much whether the United States faces a world of few or many nuclear powers" and also that "it is unlikely that the emergence of new nuclear powers can be prevented. The present U.S. effort to do so...is costly and risky, and ultimately futile"; Posen, *Restraint*, 75, 73.

¹⁴ "when faced with external threats to their security, states tend to balance against the emerging threat, either internally by converting latent military power into deployed forces, or externally by searching for allies." Gholz, Press, and Sapolsky, "Come Home, America," p. 13. Barriers to balancing that make counterbalancing coalitions harder and thus less likely are typically unmentioned by proponents of restraint (see, eg. Thrall and Friedman; Layne "From Preponderance," etc.) The notable exception in this regard is Posen, who emphasizes that "balancers' face many obstacles to success. Cooperation is difficult, and the more capable the target the greater the risk to those in opposition. If it takes too many independent actors to balance the power of one, the process becomes difficult indeed;" *Restraint*, p. 28; see also, p. 129.

¹⁵ Friedman, Green, and Logan, "Debating American Engagement," p. 191.

institutions and hegemonic leadership are largely unnecessary for Washington to secure the cooperation it truly needs.¹⁶

Restraint's theory of how events abroad affect the United States is best called *manageable interdependence*. The strategy is premised on the claim that US security interdependence is almost always a matter of choice rather than an exogenous feature of the strategic environment. Restraint sees the United States' security as being intertwined with the rest of the world's mainly because Washington chooses to sustain alliance commitments. Were it to sever those commitments and eliminate the military forces required to meet them, insecurity and conflict might increase abroad, but it would do little harm to the United States at home. Even in the extreme case of a nuclear war abroad, restraint sees little reason to worry, provided that the U.S. had jettisoned all of its alliances and American territory (or US troops) was not a target. As Friedman and Thrall stress, "most of what happens in the rest of the world is basically irrelevant to U.S national security."¹⁷

On economic interdependence, restraint argues that the global economy "rapidly adjusts to shocks through a variety of mechanisms" and this that concerns in Washington about the disruptive effects of wars abroad is overblown.¹⁸ Moreover, the strategy is premised on the assessment that the US economy is not particularly vulnerable to such shocks: "it would take an unusual series of capitulations, conquests, or just plain market closures to close down enough trade to affect greatly the U.S. economy," which "is insulated geographically from major disruptions abroad....[T]he United States can go it alone if necessary; others are not so well placed."¹⁹ The risks of being entangled in foreign wars, in other words, outweigh the benefits of preventing them.

Again, a good student in IR 101 would be able to explain how these propositions yield the conclusion that expensive US leadership and security commitments are not required to keep the global economy humming and to protect what America requires from it to advance its prosperity.

¹⁶As Thrall and Friedman stress, "It is true that the United States played the leading role in establishing the liberal institutions that make globalization possible. It does not follow, restrainers argue, that the United States must play the role of hegemon to maintain them." "National Interests, . . ." 6. For arguments that hegemonic stability theory has no insights of value and that rational cooperation without hegemonic leadership is likely to obtain, see Posen, Restraint, pp. 62-3; Gholz, "Restraint and Oil Security;" and Gholz, Press, and Sapolsky, "Come Home, America," p. 44.

¹⁷ "National Interests, . . ." 5.

¹⁸ Gholz and Press "The Effect of Wars on Neutral Countries," p. 455. They further note (p. 3, 57) that "the economy—especially in this era of increased globalization—is inherently flexible and resilient....[D]isruptions will generally not create costly global reverberations because....states and other economic actors are always adjusting to mitigate new costs and to exploit new opportunities. The sinews of the international economy do not propagate disruptions around the world. They dampen them instead." See also GPS (p.9), which emphasizes that "the bulk of America's economic interactions with the world are decentralized, market-based trade and investment decisions that are affected only indirectly by government policy." See also H. M. Sapolsky, B.H. Friedman, E. Gholz. And D. G. Press, "Restraining Order: For Strategic Modesty, *World Affairs* 17 (2): 84-94.

¹⁹ Posen, Restraint, pp. 63, 18. See also GPS, pp. 9, 34; 43-44

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF DEEP ENGAGEMENT

The same exercise of reasoning from middle-range theory and assessments of the strategic environment to grand strategic recommendation is also easy to perform for deep engagement. Again, three middle-range theories explain the strategy's gloomy forecast of regional dynamics absent U.S. security provision. "*Inefficient balancing*:" on the one hand, the theory of collective goods predicts profound impediments to efforts to contain aspiring regional hegemonies; on the other hand, states frequently build suboptimal military postures that trigger security dilemmas.²⁰ "*Offshore security provision*:" middle-range theoretical propositions from both offensive and defensive realism explain why additional security provided from the outside by a distant United States is likely to make core regions more secure than they would be if security were provided solely by the local actors themselves.²¹ "*Nuclear Pessimism*:" Nuclear weapons do not solve many important security problems and their spread generates major negative externalities – most notably, a greater risk of accidents, preventive war, leakage, and inadvertent escalation.²²

When estimating how inter-state cooperation it would work if Washington dramatically scaled back its global commitments, deep engagement invokes "*hegemonic stability theory*:"²³ Market failures in the provision of needed cooperation are a recurring problem of politics under anarchy, but are less likely to occur with the presence of a leading state with leverage. In particular, the global economy is more likely to be stable – and, more generally, interstate cooperation is more likely to emerge – when there is an engaged leader.²⁴

Deep engagement explicitly develops propositions that add up to *high interdependence*: "America's security and economic well-being are inseparable from what happens abroad."²⁵ It posits an America far less insulated than it once was from negative disruptions in the global economy, which, in turn, is far more vulnerable to disruption from war and insecurity than it was in the past.²⁶ And non-economic linkages with the rest of the world are similarly seen as

²⁰ Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad*, 135-139, 198; and Art, *A Grand Strategy for America*, p. 122.

²¹ Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad*, chapters 6 and 7. See also Art, *A Grand Strategy for America*, pp. 139-141.

²² Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad*, 105-110; and Art, *A Grand Strategy for America*, pp. 48-55.

²³ Hegemonic stability theory was initially formulated in deterministic terms, and the theory was rightly criticized on these grounds. But as Brooks and Wohlforth show, the key conclusion of these critiques (that cooperation was *possible* in the global economy absent hegemonic leadership) does not in any way impugn a probabilistic version of the theory (which posits that an economically open, strongly institutionalized order is *more likely* to emerge and be maintained when a hegemonic state works toward those ends); see Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad*, pp. 156-161.

²⁴ Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad*, chapter 9, esp. pp. 171-181

²⁵ Art, "A Grand Strategy for America," p. 197.

²⁶ Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad*, pp. 184-189.

being much stronger as well.²⁷ Thus, deep engagement forecasts various major security and environmental externalities if a nuclear war occurred in another region – even if America itself (or its troops) were not targeted.

Again, the connections between these underlying middle range theories and deep engagement's dire forecast of a world after America's exit are self-evident. More insecurity, heightened arms racing and security competition, nuclear proliferation—all risking wars that, even without direct intervention by the United States, would massively disrupt global commerce and finance in ways that hit the US hard—as well as reduced cooperation on key security, economic, and other global challenges.

It is also important to note what is missing from this grim picture: the threat of regional hegemony, the *idée fixe* of the other two grand strategies. To be sure, deep engagement's middle-range theory of inefficient balancing yields a greater estimated likelihood that a US withdrawal would clear the path to a regional hegemony that might threaten US interests. But other middle-range theoretical foundations applied to a strategic setting characterized by deep interdependence also explain why deep engagement calls for staying onshore in Europe and Asia even when a regional hegemon is not on the horizon.

(LOOKING FOR THE) THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF OFFSHORE BALANCING

Parsing offshore balancing's theoretical foundations is a completely different experience. While restraint and deep engagement have a clearly identified set of middle-range theories that can be easily contrasted to each other, offshore balancing does not. On each of the three key issues for which any good grand strategy must supply arguments grounded in middle-range theories, offshore balancing is much harder to nail down.

We begin with offshore balancing's most glaring theoretical shortcoming: its underdeveloped understanding of regional security dynamics and how they relate to America's interests. It is difficult to identify the theoretical basis for offshore balancing's most significant departure from restraint: sustaining a major U.S. security commitment to Asia. Justifying such an engaged American approach to Asia requires a theoretical model of when regional hegemony becomes a critical threat to US security that offshore balancing has not yet developed. After discussing this significant theoretical shortcoming in detail, we then quickly discuss offshore balancing's missing theoretical foundations regarding the workings of the global economy and the dynamics of inter-state cooperation.

i. When the U.S. Should Stay in a Region

What are the middle-range theories that undergird offshore balancing's claim that US onshore commitments are required to prevent dangerous regional hegemony in Asia but not Europe? The answer is unclear because the strategy's proponents are vague on exactly how the potential to become a regional hegemon is made real. While restraint is clear that translating latent capabilities into actual hegemonic dominance in Eurasia requires the serial conquest of putative balancers, offshore balancing is ambiguous. Core works on the strategy

²⁷ Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad*, pp. 196–198.

refer to the US position in the Americas as an example of regional hegemony, something it achieved without conquering most of North America or taking an inch of South American territory. Could China achieve such a position merely by somehow cowing or subduing, rather than physically conquering Japan, South Korea and others? In other words, if the US adopts restraint and pulls out of Asia, does offshore balancing predict that Chinese regional hegemony would emerge not from a war of conquest but from subtler forms of domination? This seems a reasonable inference from the recommendation that the US needs to stay onshore to help those countries contain Beijing now, and it appears to be what Mearsheimer and Walt have in mind when discussing US vital interests:

In Europe and Northeast Asia, the chief concern is the rise of a regional hegemon that would dominate its region, much as the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere. Such a state would have abundant economic clout, the ability to develop sophisticated weaponry, the potential to project power around the globe, and perhaps even the wherewithal to outspend the United States in an arms race. Such a state might even ally with countries in the Western Hemisphere and interfere close to U.S. soil. Thus, the United States' principal aim in Europe and Northeast Asia should be to maintain the regional balance of power so that the most powerful state in each region—for now, Russia and China, respectively—remains too worried about its neighbors to roam into the Western Hemisphere.²⁸

Yet at times, the strategy appears premised on the assumption that war is necessary to achieve hegemony, as when Walt explains:

.....If local actors cannot contain a potential hegemon on their own, however, the United States must deploy enough military force to the region to shift the local balance in its favor. American forces might be needed before war broke out, if the local actors could not uphold the balance by themselves....In essence, this strategy aims to keep U.S. forces 'offshore' for as long as possible while recognizing that sometimes the United States will have to come onshore even before a conflict starts.²⁹

If war is necessary to achieve hegemony as offshore balancing defines it (and if war does, in fact, have “stopping power”) then what construal of balance of power theory, offense-defense theory, nuclear deterrence theory, or any other theory that offshore balancing might conceivably draw upon leads to the prediction that wealthy, non-contiguous, and technologically-advanced balancers like South Korea and Japan cannot deter China without US help? The answer is not evident in offshore balancing writings.

The significance of this lacuna cannot be exaggerated. Advocates of offshore balancing admonish the United States to be extremely reluctant to commit onshore, and thus that it should always seek to pass the balancing buck to local actors: “In the event a potential hegemon comes on the scene in one of those regions,” Mearsheimer stresses, “Washington should rely on local forces to counter it and only come onshore to join the fight when it appears that they

²⁸ FA, 72-3

²⁹ Hell, 262-3.

cannot do the job themselves. Once the potential hegemon is checked, American troops should go back over the horizon.”³⁰ Under offshore balancing, “the United States would encourage other countries to take the lead in checking rising powers, intervening itself only when necessary.”³¹ What factors explain why Asian states cannot take the lead against China? We have no evidence to go on because the US never stepped back to give them a chance to show their stuff. Hence, the critical need for clearly articulated middle range theories—notable by their absence in the corpus of offshore balancing advocacy.

Offshore balancing clearly calls for America to come home from Europe and to stay in Asia. But if the US had followed this strategy in the immediate post-Cold War period, would it have endorsed a US withdrawal from Asia? It would seem so, given how weak China was compared to Japan (less than one quarter Japan’s GDP) and others in the early 1990s (and how much weaker it was vis-à-vis its region than Russia was in Europe).³² Again, proponents of offshore balancing do not provide a clear answer. Walt notes that a United States that had adopted offshore balancing after the Cold War ended would have been “better prepared to deal with a rising China. Instead of being distracted by conflicts in Central Asia and Iraq, US leaders would have devoted more time and attention to managing relations with Beijing and reinforcing America’s Asian allies.”³³ That presumes that America would have had allies and an associated onshore military presence in the region twenty years ago, when China was much weaker and so suggests an even lower threshold for onshore commitments. And that then makes a puzzle out of the strategy’s recommendation to leave Europe now, given that Russia has a demonstrated capacity and willingness to change the territorial status quo there in places like Ukraine and Georgia.

Had the US in fact disengaged from Asia in the 1990s, the strategy’s architects would presumably be counseling re-engagement now. But what logic would guide this critical decision? The indicators proponents of offshore balancing offer for staying engaged in Asia today—chiefly, China’s huge GDP and population—hardly seem to meet the strategy’s admonition to wait until it is absolutely clear that an onshore US presence is needed. Indeed, when Mearsheimer and Walt discuss the triggers for going ashore, they usually suggest the US can safely wait until the war of regional hegemony is well underway. They note that if the US “is forced to fight another great power, better to arrive late and let other countries bear the brunt of the costs. As the last major power to enter both world wars, the United States emerged stronger from each for having waited.”³⁴ Again, if war is required for regional hegemony, it is unclear why balancers like Japan and South Korea can’t deter China, especially with the nuclear arms each state could probably build in a matter months, if needed. If war is not required, what are the criteria that determine when to come back ashore?

³⁰ Imperial by design 31.

³¹ FA OSB article, p. 70

³² In his 2001 *Tragedy*, chap 1, Mearsheimer demonstrates that offshore balancing is the optimal strategy for the United States in terms of offensive realism, and thus derives the prediction that it will withdraw from Asia.

³³ Hell 268.

³⁴ Mearsheimer and Walt FA p. 78

Without clear middle-range theories that identify the conditions under which going ashore is necessary, readers are forced to rely on inferences from offshore balancing's specific policy recommendations to attempt to reason back to the conceptual priors that could justify these policies. Because the strategy's proponents have never clarified whether or when America should have come home from Asia after the USSR's demise, nor specified the conditions under which it would have prescribed a US return, these inferences remain elusive. Since preventing regional hegemony is the linchpin of offshore balancing, the absence of a theory that would allow us to identify when the risks of regional hegemony outweigh the benefits of remaining offshore is a particularly damaging omission.

ii. How to Go Back Onshore

Profound imprecision on the question of exactly when to exit a region and when to enter also means that the strategy never addresses the question of *how* to return to a region the US has left. Some of these questions are of a practical nature—concerning bases and infrastructure, the interdependence between commitments in multiple regions (e.g., would a light footprint work in the Middle East without the European infrastructure the US currently uses to supply its forces there?). More importantly, proponents of offshore balancing leave unanswered a larger conceptual question, one that scholars often fail to consider given the taken-for-granted quality of America's current overseas posture: what conditions are necessary to facilitate a major onshore presence by a distant offshore superpower?

The United States' engaged presence in Eurasia is the result of the confluence of two major and unique events, World War II and the Cold War. Those gigantic clashes opened the door for America's close partnerships in Europe and East Asia. American troops would not have been welcomed or allowed to stay in the absence of those existential threats to the security of Western European and East Asian states. If offshore balancing is to be understood as suggesting that the US only needs to go onshore when stimuli of that nature are in play—a global war killing 3% of the world's population (70 million in 1940, 240 million today) and a hostile superpower with 70 armored divisions in the heart of Europe—then it cannot call for America to stay in Asia today.

Meaningful alliances that effectively contain and deter powerful adversaries are not easy to fashion. Coordinating military plans and postures and especially facilitating access by one great power's military to another's territory is challenging—witness all the problems that beset Franco-British cooperation in the preludes to World Wars I and II. Offshore balancing's call for the US to sustain its presence in Asia means that it must grapple with how it would open the door to getting back in Asia today if it had closed it in the 1990s. And its reassuring promise to step back into Europe in the (unlikely) event that a combination of Russian resurgence and European balancing failure allows Moscow to dominate the region (and thus be free to "roam" into the western hemisphere) means that it needs to answer the same question about that region. That demands conceptual work by offshore balancers to explain why sovereign states would open up to such a major onshore presence in the absence of unambiguous, existential threats, and why they would trust an America that has recently abandoned them—work that, again, is conspicuous by its absence.

The models that proponents of restraint and deep engagement use to forecast security dynamics in a world without a forward U.S. security presence feature contrasting middle range theories of the effects of nuclear weapons. How do nuclear weapons fit into offshore balancing? On the one hand, it would seem that offshore balancers are nuclear optimists. Mearsheimer is well-known for asserting that nuclear weapons have the potential to solve essentially all of the security problems for countries like Ukraine.³⁵ And when elucidating offshore balancing, proponents sometimes sound like committed nuclear optimists. Walt, for example, emphasizes that the negative consequences of nuclear proliferation may not be severe in light of the fact “ten countries have crossed the nuclear threshold since 1945, yet the world was not turned upside down every time some new member joined the nuclear club.”³⁶

Yet consistent nuclear optimism would imply that nuclear weapons should be a reliable bulwark against regional hegemony not just in Europe (where offshore balancing calls for a U.S. withdrawal), but in Asia as well (where it counsels staying put). In addition, offshore balancers sometimes stress the value of America’s nuclear umbrella in Asia and, indeed, pitch their strategy as being more likely to stem proliferation there than America’s current approach, suggesting a view of proliferation risks closer to deep engagement’s.³⁷

iii. Interdependence and Inter-State Cooperation

The same ambiguity plagues offshore balancing’s stance on the second theoretical issue all grand strategies must address: the nature of interdependence. Compared with restraint, offshore balancing’s decidedly more engaged stance suggests a much higher estimate of American security interdependence. Yet the origin and extent of this interdependence is never explained. Offshore balancing predicts threats to US national interests from a “regional hegemony” far short of the menacing Eurasian territorial empire that features in restraint, yet its proponents do not explain exactly how such a power would threaten US security. Nor do they explain why it would not be possible to insulate the United States from these threats while staying in this hemisphere.

Concerning economic interdependence, one searches the writings of offshore balancing proponents in vain for any sustained statements about the workings of the global economy and how it connects to American foreign policy. In particular, offshore balancing says little about the American economy’s sensitivity to the insecurity and instability of other significant economic powers and regions. Walt warns that “when rivals abound and war looms on the horizon, states and private investors will worry more about foreign exposure and be less inclined to put their wealth at risk,” suggesting some economic costs to a more war-prone post-American world. Yet, at times offshore balancing sounds very similar to restraint on the global economy: “Because all countries have a shared interest in such [economic] activity,” Mearsheimer and Walt stress, “Washington does not need to play global policeman in order to

³⁵ Mearsheimer FA article, etc.

³⁶ Walt, Hell, 280-81.

³⁷ FA OSB article, p. 79; Hell 280-81

remain economically engaged with others.”³⁸ In the end, it remains unclear whether offshore balancing regards globalization as largely self-adjusting, as restraint does, or whether, like deep engagement, it acknowledges the dangers of market-failures and the need for significant active management by the United States.

A similar silence exists regarding offshore balancing’s understanding of the final issue all grand strategies must address: the requisites of inter-state cooperation. Deep engagement and restraint take clear positions on whether American leadership has significant value for sustaining cooperation: deep engagement says yes, restraint say no. Offshore balancing, in contrast, leaves us guessing.

CONCLUSION

Three grand strategies—restraint, offshore balancing and deep engagement—loom largest in debates among scholars of international security. Because they agree on how to operationalize U.S. interests, they can be directly compared in ways scholars have yet to undertake. Although profound uncertainty remains, an initial comparison revealed that, as formulated in recent years, offshore balancing lacks coherent theoretical underpinnings that explain its estimates of the costs and benefits of U.S. engagement abroad. Although offshore balancing’s proponents may yet supply the strategy’s many missing pieces, were we to accord well considered theoretical foundations pride of place in assessing America’s grand strategic choice, then the decision is much harder than it is often thought to be: either to devote the resources and commitments needed to sustain a credible, engaged posture, though one more circumspect than the post 9/11 norm, or decisively sever the ties that connect U.S. security with that of other regions.

The implication is that the grand strategic choice is starker than generally assumed. When faced with three ordinal options, it is always tempting to select the middle one, hoping to obtain at least some of the benefits of each of the more extreme options, while guarding against the risk of putting all one’s eggs in a single basket.³⁹ The middle choice is frequently also the most appealing politically, since it allows proponents of all three options to get at least some of what they want. In the case of the grand strategy debate, however, it is precisely offshore balancing’s Goldilocks status—its effort to have its cake and eat it—that gets it into trouble. Under almost any range of reasonable assumptions about how the world works, it’s hard to balance the accounting for offshore balancing.

Few outside of academe (and, for all I know, few inside it as well) are likely to assign theoretical consistency pride of place. The old saw about the professor admonishing students that “the thing may answer very well in practice, but it is not sound in theory” comes to mind.

³⁸ FA OSB article 78-9.

³⁹ Rodway, P., Schepman, A., and Lambert, J. (2012). Preferring the One in the Middle: Further Evidence for the Centre-stage Effect. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 26 (2), 215-222, Raghurir, P. & Valenzuela. (2006). Centre-of-inattention: Position biases in decision-making. *Organisational Behaviour and Human Decision Processes*, 99, 66-80.

Reminding these skeptics that in the case of grand strategy there *is* no practice and so theory is especially important is unlikely to persuade.

And even were we to set those concerns aside and focus on the choice between deep engagement and restraint, that choice remains hard not only because the alternatives are so stark but because it hinges on a number of judgments that remain elusive. For one thing, both of those strategies still have inconsistencies. To take one example, both seem to rest on inconsistent theories of state decision-making. At first glance, restraint seems to assume that international actors are highly rational, responding to hegemonic threats, taming nuclear weapons in service of security, responding to global economic disruptions, and so on. Deep engagement, in contrast, seems to assume systematic departures from optimal decision as the norm in international affairs, with states over or under reacting to threats, likely to misuse nuclear weapons, and prone to panic or run for the hills when the global economy undergoes a shock. Yet when it comes to the behavior of the United States, each suddenly switches theoretical gears. Restrainers assert that Washington is perennially prone to overreaction and being suckered into needless wars. Deep engagers, meanwhile, seem to believe the US government is capable of learning from its past mistakes – most notably, regarding Iraq – and wisely helping regional actors solve their problems without itself overreacting and stumbling into endless wars.

I am not naïve enough to think that offshore balancing is truly off the table. Its proponents are likely to find fixes and its Goldilocks appeal likely dwarfs the concerns raised here even if they remain unchallenged. And even if the choice is narrowed to the binary one between deep engagement and restraint, it still hinges on estimates that face deep unknowns. How common are major wars, can they be deterred and, if so, how? In assessing whether it makes sense to pay up front costs to shape the strategic environment in order to drive down war risk, it makes a decisive difference whether major conflagrations can be expected to come never, once, twice or more times each generation. And it is crucial to assess the deterrent effect of U.S. commitments. If engagement's effect on the probability of such wars is minor, then restraint's laser-like focus in keeping the United States out gains appeal. But can the strategy really keep America out? Another challenging assessment is the net benefits of hegemonic leadership. How much would the US suffer materially if it surrendered leadership to China? Were Beijing to attain a predominant position in Eurasia without major territorial conquest, what would be the cost to the United States? Is deep engagement right to care about China's potential domination of East Asia?

Anything scholars can do to improve knowledge on these key questions would assist in making this grand strategic call.