



Forward Partnership: A Sustainable American Strategy

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Abstract: *Many commentators now contend that America's power is in relative or absolute decline. However, Declinists overstate their argument, as America has both a commanding amount of residual power and many enduring strengths. Decline, absolute or relative, is not predetermined. However, retaining our influence and preserving our ability to protect and advance U.S. interests does require addressing key shortfalls in strategic priorities to ensure synergies among the components of U.S. national power. A variety of strategies— particularly Offshore Balancing— have been offered to better balance ends, ways and means. These alternatives suffer from policy, historical and implementation challenges. A hybrid solution, Forward Partnering, avoids these deficiencies and is presented as an alternative grand strategy.*

America's purported "Unipolar Moment" has quickly passed in little more than a decade.¹ America's uncontested preponderance was not an illusion, nor was it a permanent reality. History has returned, and so geostrategic challenges and macroeconomics have returned to the forefront of policy

¹ Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment, America and the World," *Foreign Affairs*, 1990/91; Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment Revisited," *The National Interest*, Winter 2001/2002, pp. 5–17.

considerations. A few years ago we could ask ourselves “Are We Rome?” given our imperial reach and our unsurpassable military clout.² Now we purportedly live in a Post-American World characterized as “nonpolar” or chaotically “apolar.”³

Other pundits suggest we prepare for a Post-American Era, one in which American decline, absolute or relative, is both inevitable and irreversible. From our lofty unipolar perch, America has slid into what Robert Kaplan suggests is “America’s Elegant Decline.” In the space of five years we have been transformed from Goliath to merely “The Frugal Superpower.”⁴ The slope of American decline is so steep that some analysts fail to accord *primus inter alles* status to a country that will retain the world’s largest economy for at least a decade and whose military power roughly outspends the rest of the world and still bestrides the globe.

But other scholars have swiftly noted that claims about American declinism are cyclical and have a short shelf life since they overlook enduring U.S. strategic advantages and underestimate the obstacles facing purported rivals to U.S. primacy.⁵ Is the present truly different?

America’s quite public fiscal and political debate on priorities and waning power decline has led to calls for a new American Grand Strategy. Some scholars suggest that America suffers from a grand strategic deficit or that its strategic apparatus is rusty at the discipline of having to sort out priorities rather than simply outspend our rivals.⁶ The perennial call for the next “Mr. X” has been taken up in numerous circles. Recently, a pair of military strategists responded with a proposal under the pseudonym of Mr. “Y.”⁷

Given the resources still available to the United States, it is premature to call for U.S. retrenchment or to consider America as retreating from the world stage. However, it is clearly the case that a debate and consensus on a new grand strategy is in our best interests. “The United States cannot continue to operate as we do at

² Cullen Murphy, *Are We Rome, The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt, 2007).

³ Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World*, (New York: Norton, 2009); Richard Haass, “The Age of Nonpolarity, What Will Follow U.S. Dominance,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2008; Niall Ferguson, “A World Without Power,” *Foreign Policy*, July/August 2004. Writing in 2004, Ferguson argued “the world’s experience with power vacuums (eras of “apolarity,” if you will) is hardly encouraging. Apolarity could turn out to mean an anarchic new Dark Age...”

⁴ Robert D. Kaplan, “America’s Elegant Decline,” *The Atlantic*, November 2007. Accessed at <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2007/11/america-8217-s-elegant-decline/6344/>; Michael Mandelbaum, *The Case for Goliath, How America Acts as the World Government in the 21st Century* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005); Michael Mandelbaum, *The Frugal Superpower: America’s Global Leadership in a Cash-Strapped Era* (New York: Public Affairs, 2010).

⁵ Aaron L. Friedberg, “Same Old Songs: What the Declinists (and Triumphalists) Miss,” *The American Interest*, November/December 2009, pp. 28–35; Eric Edelman, *Understanding America’s Contested Primacy*, Washington, DC: Center for a New American Century, 2009.

⁶ John Lewis Gaddis, “What is Grand Strategy?” Karl Von Der Heyden Distinguished Lecture, Duke University, February 26, 2009.

⁷ Mr. “Y” (aka Captain Wayne Porter, USN and COL Mark Mykleby, USMC (ret.)), *A National Strategic Narrative*, Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center, 2011. Accessed at <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/A%20National%20Strategic%20Narrative.pdf>

this moment with no clear strategy,” notes one author. “It is critically important that we not only settle on a grand vision for our actions, but that we encourage a fresh, diverse debate on what that vision should be.”⁸

Why a Grand Strategy?

Briefly, a grand strategy is needed to preserve and extend America’s ability to advance and secure its national security interests. Our definition of grand strategy is derived from Colin Gray, an eminent transatlantic scholar and geostrategic advisor, “Grand strategy is the direction and use made of any or all the assets of a security community, including its military instrument, for the purposes of policy as decided by politics.”⁹ Grand strategies serve in numerous ways, but the most important benefits include:

- Creates a consensus on priorities, interests and associated costs of securing and advancing them in a dynamic environment.
- Generates coherence between ends, ways and means—a logic that must be constantly assessed in a dynamic security environment but absolutely necessary to obtain desired policy aims at an appropriate cost of scarce resources.
- Guides the development and sustainment of instruments of national power.
- Produces trans-domain synergies in the application of instruments of national power.

Recent scholarship on the importance of coherent grand strategies in the past suggests that effective grand strategies are an all too rare phenomena. Professor Williamson Murray warns that “the history of the past century certainly underlines the importance of a coherent approach to grand strategy, one that is flexible, realistic, and above all connects means to ends.” You would think that major powers might take heed of this. But the same history, he notes, reveals “that this has rarely been the case.”¹⁰

⁸ Joshua Cooper Ramo, *The Age of the Unthinkable: Why the New World Disorder Constantly Surprises Us and What We Can Do About It* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Co, 2010), p. 67.

⁹ Colin S. Gray, *The Strategy Bridge*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 18. He goes on to support John Lewis Gaddis’ definition of strategy as the “calculated relationship of means to large ends.”

¹⁰ Williamson Murray, “Thoughts on Grand Strategy,” in Williamson Murray, Richard Hart Sinnreich, and James Lacey, eds., *The Shaping of Grand Strategy: Policy, Diplomacy, and War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 4.

Strategic Options

The purpose of this essay is to assess the most prominent Grand Strategy options in the public market place of ideas. These options include the following four alternatives, and a fifth option which the author proposes as a sustainable synthesis particularly well suited to America's geostrategic position and the security context we now face.

Strategic Restraint. This strategy focuses largely on defense of the American homeland (missile defense and border security) and eliminates most forward stationed forces. A larger portion of the force would be allocated to the Reserve component and a smaller force and Department of Defense's (DoD's) Total Obligational Authority would be lowest of the options.

Offshore Balancing. A number of advocates across the political spectrum are promoting a more classical strategy of Offshore Balancing. In its classical formulation, this policy would forgo most if not all formal alliances, and like Strategic Restraint, the removal of most forward-based forces. Forward deployed naval forces, however, could pick up the slack in maintaining access to key regions, preserving the global commons, and securing critical chokepoints.

Selective Engagement. This is a traditional strategic option, more discriminate in the use of force and also more selective on where U.S. interests are defined and protected. Military forces in this strategy retain some forward presence and a high proportion of active duty personnel forward stationed in a few key regions, and the option requires a robust Joint force and resourcing levels almost as high as DoD's programmed Future Years Defense Program (FYDP).

Assertive Interventionism. This approach generates the greatest amount of military power, a higher degree of unilateral action, the highest propensity to use military forces, and seeks to dissuade competitors from challenging U.S. interests. It preserves preponderance of power but largely in the military domain. It vigorously uses military to promote democracy and state-building. Because it seeks primacy and has the highest deployment and employment tempo, it is the most expensive strategic option.

There are limits to simple categories, and the inherent difficulty of placing many scholars within a single school of thought is acknowledged but necessary for presentation and comparison.¹¹

¹¹ Inspiration for this approach can be attributed to the seminal article by Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, "Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy," *International Security*, Winter 1996/1997, pp. 5–

These four options and the synthesis proposal are graphically compared here in **Table 1: Grand Strategy Options**

	Strategic Restraint	Offshore Balancing	Forward Partnering	Selective Engagement	Assertive Interventionism
Foreign Policy	Neo-Isolationist	Checking Regional Competitor	Stabilize key regions and global commons	Prepare for Major Peers	Primacy, Democracy Promotion
Historical Precedents	1920-30s	Persian Gulf (78-90)	NATO operations off Libya	Regional Defense: Base Force	Iraq 2003
Role of Alliances	Minimal	Created ad hoc	Heavy reliance: tailored partners	Focus of key alliances	More unilateral
Willingness to Use Force	Lowest	Low	Medium, supportive of democracy and values	More discriminate based on interests	High
Force Structure	NMD and Reserve	Naval, Airpower	Naval, SOF, Airpower, and Enablers	Joint Force for traditional MTW	Ground forces key
Rough Order of Magnitude Topline*	\$400B	\$450B	\$500B	\$550B	\$600+B

53. For another approach see Hans Binnendijk and Richard L. Kugler, *Seeing the Elephant: The U.S. Role in Global Security* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2006); and Michael Gerson and Alison Lawler Russell, *American Grand Strategy and Seapower*, Conference Report, Alexandria, VA: Center for Naval Analyses, November 2011.

The Strategy of Restraint

In response to America's present strategic and fiscal circumstances, a number of analysts have argued for a more sustainable strategy that reassesses our role in the world, the threats we face and the remedies pursued to advance U.S. security interests. The strategy has roots in arguments that emerged before 9/11 and is titled a Strategy of Restraint.¹² The foreign policy orientation of this approach is sometimes labeled as "new-isolationist" and draws from a foundation of conservative and libertarian scholars. But rather than isolationist, this school more accurately subscribes to clear limits about the role this country should play and accepts the need for the United States to conceive of ways to *shape* rather than *own* or *control* international problems and politics. This school holds that the United States should be "more reticent about the use of military force; more modest about the scope for political transformation within and among countries; and more distant politically and militarily from traditional allies."¹³

Other advocates of this strategic option go a bit further and argue for retrenchment with an assessment that "The United States can no longer afford a world-spanning foreign policy." "Retrenchment—cutting military spending, redefining foreign priorities, and shifting more of the defense burden to allies—is the only sensible course," they assert if only to recharge our national batteries to renew America's legitimacy and solvency.¹⁴

The military component of this strategy relies upon the formidable power-projection capability of the U.S. military. While much of that power would reside back within the Continental United States, the Strategy of Restraint argues for continued U.S. command of the global commons.¹⁵ This U.S. command of the sea, air and space is a prerequisite for both deterrence and as an enabler for prompt responses to cast a stabilizing shadow during emerging crises and for rapid assistance. Advocates contend that U.S. power should exploit our favorable geography, currently commanding military posture, and mastery of the commons to

¹² Eugene Gholz, Daryl G. Press and Harvey M. Sapolsky, "Come Home, America: The Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation," *International Security*, Spring 1997, pp. 5–48.

¹³ Barry R. Posen, "The Case for Restraint," *The American Interest*, November/December 2007, pp. 7–17. Another articulate spokesperson is Christopher Preble, *The Power Problem: How American Military Dominance Makes Us Less Safe, Less Prosperous, and Less Free*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2009).

¹⁴ Joseph M. Parent and Paul K. MacDonald, "The Wisdom of Retrenchment, American Must Cut Back to Move Forward," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2011, p. 33. Charles Kupchan of Georgetown University, argues that the U.S. "must rebalance means and ends by pursuing a judicious retrenchment; the nation needs to bring its strategic commitments back into line with its interests, resources, and public will." Charles Kupchan, "Grand Strategy: The Four Pillars of the Future," *Democracy Journal*, Winter 2012. Accessed at <http://www.democracyjournal.org/23/grand-strategy-the-four-pillars-of-the-future.php?page=all>

¹⁵ Barry Posen, "Command of the Commons, The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony," *International Security*, Summer 2003, pp. 5–46.

wait over the horizon. If a situation emerges in which regional parties have failed to resolve, the United States should help out, *but it should be stingy in this regard.*

To combat international terrorism in the form of al Qaeda and affiliated terrorists, the Strategy of Restraint contends that we draw as many other states as possible into the effort, while avoiding adding to the Islamist/jihadist narrative with aggressive actions or extended military presence. Thus, the United States would reduce its presence within the Middle East, operate with a lower profile, and not antagonize Islamist sentiments. Posen contends that the U.S. military should abandon permanent and semi-permanent land bases in Arab states. While the counter-terrorism fight against al Qaeda should continue, but largely fought in the shadows.

While Restrainers are stingy with military operations, they can support the use of military resources for positive policy goals. Posen has no qualms with applying military forces in ways that are consistent with U.S. values and generate a favorable view of U.S. actions. This includes disaster relief efforts like Operation Unified Assistance in the aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami in late 2004.

But U.S. forces would not be used to promote or install democratic institutions, America would remain a shining city on the hill, but “crusading” for democracy would be out.¹⁶ It would leave to others to find their own way to democracy—although the United States would remain an example and a voice for the rule of law, human rights, and for press freedom. The approach to humanitarian interventions is also restrained. Posen argues that the United States should rarely engage in “armed philanthropy” and when necessary, only under some kind of regional or international political mandate with a coalition. Nor should the United States insist on leadership or offer combat formations; instead it should avoid leading and provide logistical rather than direct combat resources.

With regard to alliances and foreign commitments, this camp holds that the United States needs to encourage others to be more responsible for their own security. American security guarantees tend to shift the burden to the United States and relieve some allies of the need to bear an appropriate share of the costs of their own security. A strategy of restraint “must include a coherent, integrated and patient effort to encourage its long-time wards to look after themselves.”

Thus, Restraint calls for the United States to eventually adapt NATO into a more traditional political alliance with U.S. forces gradually withdrawing from all military headquarters and commands in Europe. In Asia, our security relationship with Japan would also be examined with a view towards generating the domestic political debate inside Japan needed to define a new role for itself in Asia. Posen

¹⁶ The formulation is drawn from professor Walter McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State, The American Encounter with the World Since 1776* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1997). A modern critique of U.S. policy that supports this option and more directly attacks the conventional foundations of U.S. policy is found in Andrew J. Bacevich, *Washington Rules: America's Path to Permanent War* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010).

calls for a steady decline if not outright elimination of financial assistance to Israel and Egypt as well.

While the strategy seeks solvency and closes the gap between U.S. policy aims and resources, the strategic logic is arguable. Consider, for example, the statement "...a reduction in U.S. forward deployments could mollify U.S. adversaries, eliminate potential flashpoints and encourage U.S. allies to contribute more to collective defense."¹⁷ It is more likely to embolden some adversaries to take rash action, and create more possible flashpoints than it reduces. Such a strategy would arguably be less costly, with major savings coming from reduced forward deployed forces and a somewhat smaller force structure.¹⁸ While force size and operating tempo are reduced, this is achieved largely at the expense of U.S. leadership and a reassuring global role. Restraint could be misperceived as a power vacuum and lead to greater instability.¹⁹ It also fails to address how the United States should contribute to transnational challenges including the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and other security challenges that affect our own lives, as well as our friends and allies.

Offshore Balancing

Offshore balancing is recommended by a wide range of strategists and academics as the best alternative grand strategy for the United States. "A strategy of preponderance is burdensome, Sisyphean, and profoundly risky," Chris Layne of Texas A&M maintains. As an alternative, he proposes Offshore Balancing, a strategy that embraces multi-polarity, regional competition, and instability as geopolitical facts of life. "Instead of exhausting its resources and drawing criticism or worse by keeping these entities weak, the United States would allow them to develop their militaries to provide for their own national and regional security."²⁰

To its advocates, Offshore Balancing has three particular virtues that are appealing. First, it would significantly reduce (though not eliminate) the chances that the United States would get involved in another conflict like Iraq. Since America need not control the Middle East on a day-to-day basis with its own forces; it can focus on making sure that no other foreign power can do so. Offshore Balancing rejects the use of military force to reshape the politics of the region or conduct engagement projects. It would rely instead on local allies to contain their dangerous neighbors, as their own interests dictate. But as the offshore balancer, the

¹⁷ Parent and MacDonald, "The Wisdom of Retrenchment," p. 33.

¹⁸ Benjamin H. Friedman and Christopher Preble, "Budgetary Savings from Military Restraint," CATO Institute, *Policy Analysis no. 667*, September 21, 2010.

¹⁹ A point raised by Patrick Cronin, *Restraint: Recalibrating American Strategy* (Washington, DC: Center for New American Security, June 2010), pp. 23–24.

²⁰ Christopher Layne, "Offshore Balancing Revisited," *The Washington Quarterly*, Spring 2002, pp. 233–248.

United States would be in the position to husband its own resources, keep its powder dry until absolutely necessary.²¹

University of Chicago Professor John Mearsheimer is another advocate for this option:

We should build a robust military to intervene in those areas, but it should be stationed offshore or back in the United States. In the event a potential hegemon comes on the scene in one of those regions, Washington should rely on local forces to counter it and only come onshore to join the fight when it appears that they cannot do the job themselves.²²

Several advantages have been cited to support Offshore Balancing as a grand strategy. Like Strategic Restraint, this strategy seeks to avoid intensive or frequent entanglements or any international role or effort not directly tied to core U.S. interests. By not seeking hegemony or primacy in global affairs, it precludes any extensive forward presence or global police duty. This purportedly allows the United States to husband its increasingly limited resources and over-taxed forces. Some argue that it shifts burdens from our treasury to that of others—presuming that others are willing and able to step up to that role and do so in a positive way.²³ Both are big assumptions that are worth examining critically.

Finally, because it defers to regional powers, this approach argues that it exploits the capabilities of regional players in their own neighborhood where they have vital interests and intensive relationships in order to preserve stability. But it assumes that some regional power has the will and the capability to stabilize the respective region, and that it will not take advantage of its role or operate against U.S. allies negatively.

As Harvard's Stephen Walt puts it, Offshore Balancing is an ideal strategy even if the objective is to sustain the *Pax Americana* and U.S. primacy.

It husbands the power on which U.S. primacy depends and minimizes the fear that U.S. power provokes. By setting clear priorities and emphasizing reliance on regional allies, it reduces the danger of being drawn into unnecessary conflicts and encourages

²¹ For arguments for offshore balancing, see Christopher Layne, "From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing," *International Security*, Summer 1997, pp. 112–124; John J. Mearsheimer, "Imperial by Design," *The National Interest*, January/February 2011, pp. 31–34 and John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, (New York: Norton, 2001), pp. 257–259; Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006); Robert Pape and James Feldman, *Cutting the Fuse, The Explosion of Global Suicide Terrorism and How to Stop It*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

²² John Mearsheimer, "Imperial by Design," p. 31.

²³ Layne, "From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing," p. 90.

other states to do more to help us. But it is not a passive strategy, and does not preclude using the full range of U.S. power to advance core American interests.²⁴

Instead of risking resource overstretch by the extensive investment in building up and posturing military forces around the globe, Offshore Balancing allows American policymakers to focus first on our own defined interests. Other regions would be expected to provide for their own national and regional security commensurate with their interests. The major regional powers would police themselves, under the logic that they have the most interest and legitimate concerns. Some advocates of this approach would abandon many if not all of America's treaties and security obligations. Offshore Balancing also presumes that forward-based forces could be withdrawn, allowing a reduction in U.S. force structure.²⁵

While Offshore Balancing claims some historical evidence and some relevant geostrategic advantages as the basis for an American strategy, there are a few distinct disadvantages from a pragmatic perspective. Four possible disadvantages come to the fore. The first involves the tyranny of distance. How far off shore is Offshore Balancing? Advocates vary widely in their positions, from just "over the horizon" to all the way back in the Continental United States. The further one distances U.S. capabilities from its interests in critical regions of the world, the slower and harder it is to make an effective response.

The second challenge lies in the ability to shape/influence legitimate U.S. interest in regions where they are at risk while operating at stand-off distances. Offshore Balancers prefer to allow other regional powers to exercise within their own sphere of influence. As articulated by most theorists, this approach delegates regional stability to the major power(s) of the region. But as Robert Kagan has noted "The idea of relying on Russia, China, and Iran to jointly 'stabilize' the Middle East and Persian Gulf on our behalf will not strike many as an attractive proposition. Nor is U.S. withdrawal from East Asia and the Pacific likely to have a stabilizing effect on that region." Kagan suggests that the prospects of war on the Korean Peninsula could increase, and that critical allies like Japan would face the choice of succumbing to Chinese hegemony or taking steps for self-defense, possibly including nuclear arms.²⁶ Here again this strategic approach cedes the initiative and our national interests to another power.

²⁴ Stephen M. Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), p. 223.

²⁵ For more arguments in favor of Offshore Balancing, see, Steve Walt, "What I Told the Naval War College," *ForeignPolicy.com*; Stephen M. Walt, "In the National Interest, A grand new strategy for American foreign policy," *Boston Review*, February/March 2005; Stephen M. Walt, "Offshore Balancing, An Idea Whose Time Has Come," *ForeignPolicy.com*, November 2, 2011. Accessed at http://walt.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/11/02/offshore_balancing_an_idea_whose_time_has_come.

²⁶ Robert Kagan, "The Price of Power," *The Weekly Standard*, January 24, 2011. Accessed at http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/price-power_533696.html.

A related disadvantage is the presumption that U.S. forces will have the capability to regain access to key regions during crisis, after having left and been absent for some time. Having unburdened ourselves of forward stationed forces and infrastructure, we need to be realistic about the costs of surging without friends, bases, or airfields.

The fourth issue relates to the fallout from detachment. While most advocates maintain diplomatic and economic ties to key regions, they underappreciate the downsides of reducing a complementary military instrument. American credibility, commitment and trust are taken for granted, but to borrow a line from the 2007 maritime strategy produced by the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps, “trust cannot be surged.” It is earned and repeatedly demonstrated. Just as certainly, our perceived detachment undercuts early diplomatic maneuvers, and requires U.S. policy makers to be reactive and belated.²⁷

The Strategy of Selective Engagement

A grand strategy based on Selective Engagement has four major elements.²⁸ First, it is a proactive strategy that seeks to shape events, not simply react to the actions of others. It accepts the notion that working towards a stable international environment is in the U.S. interest. Second, not surprisingly, the strategy is discriminate in the sense that U.S. interests are prioritized on a regional basis and upon alliances rather than seeking global dominance and overstretch. The strategy is also selective in when and how it applies military force. It stresses interests over universal values, and holds that waging war is reserved for vital and highly important interests rather than humanitarian interventions or civil wars unless U.S. strategic interests are directly threatened. It eschews the use of force to spread democracy by force of bayonets or boots on the ground.

Third, unlike Offshore Balancing, Strategic Engagement emphasizes alliances and enables both cooperative solutions to regional security issues and a forward defense posture for U.S. military forces. For Robert Art, the foremost advocate of this strategy, “America’s key alliances retain enduring value” and the formalized international institutions of the Cold War era are not antiquated. In particular, the two key alliances of the Cold War era—NATO and the U.S.-Japan Alliance are critical, and because of the importance of the Persian Gulf to international energy networks, America’s relationships in the Persian Gulf are next in importance. Regional stability “is more likely with institutionalized alliances than

²⁷ For criticisms regarding offshore balancing see Kori Schake, “Limits of offshore balancing,” *ForeignPolicy.com*, Oct. 13, 2010 accessed at http://shadow.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/10/13/limits_of_offshore_balancing.html.

²⁸ The primary proponent for this school of thought is Robert J. Art, *A Grand Strategy for America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

with ad hoc, informal arrangements.” Coordination within regional alliances also augers well for consultation and true multilateral cooperation rather than unilateral approaches.

Fourth, this strategy places a premium on forward presence. This presence ensures the United States can rapidly and effectively influence events and attitudes within a region. While permanent in-theater military presence or forward operating bases are not necessary in every area of the world, bases in East and Southeast Asia, Europe, and the Persian Gulf are prized. “If the projection of U.S. military power abroad is useful to advance U.S. interests, then this is done more easily from bases abroad than from the homeland.”²⁹

The major advocate, Brandeis Professor Robert J. Art argues that this approach is both politically feasible and sustainable, steering “a middle course between not doing enough and attempting to do too much; it takes neither an isolationist, unilateralist path at one extreme nor a world policeman role at the other.”³⁰ Selective engagement, therefore, calls for discipline in the exercise of power, avoidance of excessive ambition, and deftness in diplomacy to forge coalitions for action. It better preserves America’s key alliances and their stabilizing role in Europe, East Asia, and the Persian Gulf—through the maintenance of a forward presence—than does the strategy of restraint. Persian Gulf oil networks are secured indirectly through an onshore and offshore military presence there. And it does not destabilize the region the way muscular Wilsonianism has done. It helps to preserve an open international economic order by providing a stable political-military framework within which the international economy operates, something offshore balancing does not provide. In general, this strategy, like Restraint, seeks to avoid getting bogged down in costly military interventions to fashion democracies or resolve longstanding conflicts.

The downsides of this approach are derived from its strengths. Discipline in force applications opens up opportunities for aggressors or actors who may misperceive U.S. priorities in other areas of the world. The chances for miscalculation regarding U.S. interests and response are much higher in this strategy. Moreover, concentration and fixed forward presence provides deterrence, but not global stability or global responsiveness as U.S. forces are committed to the key alliances. Selective Engagement preserves existing relationships and focuses on Cold War-era problems but not a more integrated global system with new challenges in new rising regions or developing and failing countries that may be facing severe

²⁹ Robert Art, “Selective Engagement After Bush,” in Michèle A. Flournoy and Shawn Brimley, eds., *Finding Our Way: Debating American Grand Strategy* (Washington, DC: Center for New American Security, June 2008), p. 33.

³⁰ Robert Art, quoted by Shawn Brimley, in Michèle A. Flournoy and Shawn Brimley, eds., *Finding Our Way: Debating American Grand Strategy* (Washington, DC: Center for New American Security, June 2008), p. 18.

pressures. Both discipline and self-interest help solve a potential solvency gap, but they do not necessarily underwrite a global leadership role for the United States.³¹

Assertive Interventionism

The fourth candidate among today's grand strategy options is what some call *Assertive Interventionism*. This strategy was the operative U.S. national approach after 9/11. While the George W. Bush Administration was initially resistant to employ military force to abet nation-building or institutional reengineering projects, it eventually evolved into a promoter of armed Wilsonianism.³² Assertive Interventionists are not "Reluctant Sheriffs," they are active promoters of American values and democratic governments.³³ The role of the United States under such a strategy is to serve as the guarantor of the international system and liberal values, representative government and a world economy based on open markets. They seek to apply U.S. power liberally and unilaterally if need be. The United States is the ultimate provider of security and stability because of its power and its alliance system, which supports its global reach and power projection. In short, the United States is "indispensable" as it provides global public goods which others cannot provide.³⁴

Democracy promotion is a part of this strategy, one with bipartisan support for some time among both conservative and liberal internationalists. "For a century, Democratic and Republican administrations alike," Council on Foreign Relations President Richard Haass notes, "have to varying degrees embraced the spread of democracy as a foreign policy objective. It is consistent with American values and a necessary precondition of the democratic peace..."³⁵ Surely it was a major component of the George W. Bush Administration's policy. In his second inaugural address President Bush raised the notion that the country faced a generational challenge and said that "America's vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now

³¹ For critiques of selective engagement, see Stephen Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy* (New York: Norton & Company, 2005), pp. 220–222.

³² Famously noted by the statement "We don't need to have the 82nd Airborne escorting kids to kindergarten," by Condoleezza Rice, later National Security Adviser, then Secretary of State under President Bush, made to the *New York Times* in 2000.

³³ A phrase derived from Richard N. Haass, *The Reluctant Sheriff: The United States After the Cold War* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1997).

³⁴ For the historical and theoretical underpinnings of U.S. primacy see Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation: America's Place in the World From Its Earliest Days to the Dawn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Knopf, 2006); and Mackubin T. Owens, "The Bush Doctrine: The Foreign Policy of Republican Empire," *Orbis*, Winter 2009, pp. 23–40.

³⁵ Richard N. Haass, "The Restoration Doctrine," *American Interest*, January–February 2012. Accessed at <http://www.the-american-interest.com/article.cfm?piece=1164>.

one.”³⁶ While ostensibly initiated to preclude Saddam Hussein from acquiring or deploying Weapons of Mass Destruction, the second Iraq War was predicated upon a notion that giving birth to a democratically run Iraq could cascade into an example for other regional powers. This was not a Utopian dream unique to the Bush team, and its policies were not outside the mainstream of American foreign policy.³⁷

Somewhat related to this approach is the strategy of Primacy. This school does not stress the promotion of democracy as a major goal but simply seeks to aggregate national power, largely in military terms, to dissuade competitors from seeking to usurp America’s role as the global unipolar power. The Bush Administration and its Vulcans were largely adherents to this school of thought.³⁸ One can trace this perspective back to Dick Cheney and Paul Wolfowitz during their days together at the Pentagon when they directed an effort at the Pentagon to think explicitly about a strategy for extending U.S. predominance in the international system. That policy guidance, reflected in a draft Defense Planning Guidance, was leaked to the *New York Times* and became the subject of immediate ridicule, but it was still a largely operative strategy for some time.³⁹ Yet, while controversial, the preservation of American military strength and its unilateral application was largely accepted as the mainstream or *de facto* strategy for a decade.

As Ambassador Eric Edelman, former U.S. Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, has commented:

Primacy has underpinned U.S. grand strategy since the end of the Cold War because no other nation was able to provide the collective public goods that have upheld the security of the international system and enabled a period of dramatically increased global economic activity and prosperity. Both the United States and the global system have benefitted from that circumstance.⁴⁰

In general, this approach seeks the greatest degree of unilateral action, the highest propensity to use military forces, and the ability to dissuade competitors from challenging U.S. interests. It preserves preponderance of power but largely in the military domain. It requires a large, standing military with high levels of readiness and a forward-based presence of credible combat forces. This approach vigorously uses military to maintain stability around the globe, as well as promote democracy and state-building. Because it seeks primacy and has the highest deployment and employment tempo, it is the most expensive strategic option. The

³⁶ Second Inaugural Address of President George W. Bush, January 20, 2005. Accessed at http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/George_W._Bush%27s_Second_Inaugural_Address.

³⁷ Owens, “The Bush Doctrine, The Foreign Policy of Republican Empire,” p. 40.

³⁸ James Mann, *The Rise of the Vulcans, The History of Bush’s War Cabinet* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

³⁹ Patrick E. Tyler, “U.S. Strategy Plan Calls for Insuring No Rivals Develop – A One-Superpower World,” *The New York Times*, March 8, 1992, p. A1.

⁴⁰ Edelman, “Contested Primacy,” p. x.

pursuit of primacy can lead to presumptions of requirements to lead everywhere and defend everything, a recipe for imperial overstretch.⁴¹

While it is an expensive option, the costs could be far less than either the costs of war or the inherent destabilization of a multipolar world.⁴² The military force that the United States currently maintains, with Cold War-level funding levels, supports Assertive Interventionism. In relative terms, such a strategy is sustainable as long as U.S. policymakers are able to preserve American economic vitality and fundamental government functions while containing health and entitlement programs.

Pursuing such a grand strategy would require preserving America's military at its present levels or even growing it more. There are arguments from Interventionists that "The American military is too small to shoulder the burden, and current defense spending is inadequate to rectify the problem." While current plans require the military to reduce ground forces from wartime levels, some prominent studies suggest that ground forces be preserved given the demands evident in countering irregular adversaries in distant theaters. The same studies also suggest the need to expand our naval power appreciably. In addition to winning the wars of today, "it must also maintain the forward-looking capability to deter China, Iran, and any other regional or possible global competitor."⁴³

Stability in the international system may evolve, but sustaining that evolution in a positive way requires those that favor it to develop the will and capacity to defend it. There is a genuine risk, if not likelihood, that the values and benefits Americans have sustained for the past half century erode with its perceived decline.⁴⁴ Then, in the face of crisis, the world will recognize that the United States generated a harmonious hegemony of Republican Empire not an imperial order.

Yet, this global policeman role could exacerbate U.S. fiscal instability, and do more to accelerate decline over the long run rather than perpetuate America's primacy.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Posen and Ross, p. 41.

⁴² Robert Kagan, "The Price of Power: The Benefits of U.S. Defense Spending Far Outweigh the Costs," *The Weekly Standard*, January 24, 2011, pp. 27–33; Bradley A. Thayer, "In Defense of Primacy," *The National Interest*, November/December 2006, pp. 32–37.

⁴³ For a thorough overview of American primacy see Frederick W. Kagan, "Grand Strategy for the United States," in Michèle A. Flournoy and Shawn Brimley, eds., *Finding Our Way: Debating American Grand Strategy*, Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, June 2008, pp. 61–80. Quote on p. 79.

⁴⁴ Robert Kagan, *The World American Made* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012); Robert Kagan, "Why the World Needs America," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 11–12, 2012, p. C1.

⁴⁵ Cronin, *Restraint*, p. 5.

Synthesis: Forward Partnering

So how do we square the circle, how can America advance and secure its interests (not simply preserve its global primacy), in the face of rising powers and a slowly eroding relative power base. This essay's argument is that the United States will be more secure, and global stability more sustained, if America shifts to a Strategy of "Forward Partnering." This strategy is a synthesis of the historical major approaches used by great powers in the past. American strategic experience reveals numerous successful precedents with such hybrid strategies.⁴⁶

Forward Partnering blends the discipline and concentrated resources of the Selective Engagement school with the freedom of action of Offshore Balancing. The "selective" component will husband scarce resources and forces, but our engagement/partnerships will retain American commitments to friends and allies.

Forward Partnering rejects the distance and reactive character of Strategic Restraint and the belated responsiveness and anti-collective security aspects of Offshore Balancing. It does however accept the need to engage broadly with designated partners and friends to preserve regional stability *without* extensive forward-stationed forces. The strategy focuses on critical national interests in global commons, ensuring access to critical markets and resources, for ourselves and our partners.

As suggested by the name, this strategy operates forward with alliances and partners to leverage cooperative and preventive actions to preclude conflicts before they occur. It uses forward-deployed naval power and Special Operations Force assets to generate and sustain preventive actions and promote true partnerships (vice dependents). Like advocates of Restraint and some Offshore Balancers, the strategy exploits command of the commons to both generate and sustain freedom of action for our alliances and partners.⁴⁷

The focus of the strategy is preserving a stable and rule-based international system. There are numerous inherent advantages of the international system currently in existence that are worth defending. As one team has concluded, "The system itself is so conducive to U.S. needs and interests that renewal and sustainment of that system should be one of our primary aims."⁴⁸ The United States should continue to serve as the managing partner of the larger concert of nations seeking to preserve this system. The grand strategy seeks to prevent problems early, working with and through others, employing all instruments of national powers. This will mandate both an integrated strategy with "whole of

⁴⁶ Colin Dueck, "Hybrid Strategies: The American Experience," *Orbis*, Winter 2011, pp. 30–52.

⁴⁷ Abraham Denmark and James Mulvenon, eds., *Contested Commons: The Future of American Power in a Multipolar World*, Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, January 2010. For a critique of the "securing the global commons" thesis see Gabriel M. Scheinmann and Raphael S. Cohen, "The Myth of 'Securing the Commons,'" *The Washington Quarterly*, Winter 2012, pp. 115–128.

⁴⁸ Shawn Brimley, Michèle A. Flournoy, and Vikram J. Singh, "Making America Grand Again" in Michèle A. Flournoy and Shawn Brimley, eds., *Finding Our Way: Debating American Grand Strategy*, Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, June 2008, p. 135.

government” applications at the operational and tactical level. It would also require our various instruments of national power to be interoperable in complex operations with partners in the international community.

A particular benefit of this approach to realists is the historical argument that sea power-based powers are less disruptive of domestic order and more likely to be bandwagoned *with* rather than balanced *against*. The contention that maritime-based powers tend not to produce the backlash and counter-balances of major continental powers would be another advantage to Forward Partnering.⁴⁹ In the twenty-first century security environment, a premium will be placed on mechanisms for collective action and problem solving, as well as sustainable defense investments.⁵⁰ Enhanced collective security mechanisms will require the adaptation of American partnerships and alliances. The alliance security architecture that was so successful in the Cold War is under some stress and subject to criticism. “Today, the United States is over-invested in alliance relationships that are no longer well aligned with our interests,” one critic claims, and under-invested with those that lack “the willingness of current partners to support common action and genuinely shared risks.”⁵¹ Such criticism overlooks the enormous operational contributions made by NATO allies in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet it is fairly clear that working in concert with others is strategically necessary, but that some allies are declining in their ability to make material shifts in the face of severe economic distress.

The real question for policymakers is “How can America’s alliances and security relationships be a continuing source of advantage in changed circumstances?”⁵² The answer lies in adapting old alliances and networks from protectorates to true partnerships, which have shared liabilities and mutual risks. It also requires seeking new friends and with designing tailored capability sets and enhanced interoperability to maximize outputs with greater access to shared assets. This also provides a means of ensuring that capability gaps in critical areas do not surface, and that our alliances are more than the simple sum of individual pieces. This preserves relationships and leverages capabilities of partnered regional players in pursuit of U.S. and coalition/alliance interests.

Military Force Design. The force design implications of this defense strategy suggest the following:

⁴⁹ Jack Levy and William R. Thompson, “Balancing on Land and at Sea,” *International Security*, Summer 2010, pp. 7-43. David Blagden challenges this notion in the correspondence section of *International Security*, Fall 2011, pp. 190-202.

⁵⁰ G. John Ikenberry, “Liberal Order Building,” in Melynn P. Leffler and Jeffrey W. Legro, eds., *To Lead the World: American Strategy After the Bush Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2008, p. 88.

⁵¹ Kori Schake, “The Allies We Need,” *The American Interest*, May/June 2011, p. 45.

⁵² James Thomas, “From Protectorates to Partnerships,” *American Interest*, May/June 2011, pp. 37-44.

- Places a priority on naval maneuver assets and SOF to generate both strategic and operational freedom of action in priority regions and the ability to exploit the global commons to shift resources flexibly.⁵³
- Also prioritizes long-range maritime and aerospace power projection platforms to generate and sustain access to critical regions and flashpoints.⁵⁴
- Would extend capability to control the global commons (including cyberspace) and critical international trade links.⁵⁵
- Naval forces would be structured to ensure sea control, access and to provide crisis response with tailored naval expeditionary assets.⁵⁶ The United States would maintain a highly ready and flexibly mobile crisis response posture that would exploit its freedom of maneuver to be wherever it was needed.
- Partnership with allies could focus on maximizing collective capabilities with U.S. provision of critical enablers like C2 and ISR or a deliberate cooperative mix that maximizes Alliance capabilities within constrained resources.⁵⁷
- Preserve credible combat power projection ability from CONUS to provide Strategic Reassurance with decisive Joint combined arms force.
- Access to bases and airfields, and necessary logistics support, is maximized as part of the mutual benefits of partnership. But base ownership and permanent stationing ashore in foreign countries is minimized.
- Forward-stationed ground forces in Europe and Asia would be reduced, but can be required where declaratory policy and treaty commitments not sufficient to deter aggression or reassure allies. Some reductions in NATO

⁵³ An early effort at defining this strategy can be found in Frank G. Hoffman, *From Preponderance to Partnering*, Washington, DC: Center for New American Security, 2007.

⁵⁴ Patrick Cronin, Peter A. Dutton, M. Taylor Fravel, James R. Holmes, Robert Kaplan, Will Rogers, Ian Storey, *Cooperation from Strength: The United States, China and the South China Sea*, Washington, DC: Center for a New American Century, 2012.

⁵⁵ Mark E. Redden and Michael P. Hughes, “Global Commons and Domain Interrelationships: Time for a New Conceptual Framework?” Washington, DC: National Defense University, Institute for National Strategic Studies, *Strategic Forum* 259, October 2010.

⁵⁶ For an updated comparison of these schools and their related impacts on naval force levels see Eldridge Colby, *Grand Strategy: Contemporary Analyst Views and Implications for the U.S. Navy*, Alexandria, VA: Center for Naval Analyses, November 2011.

⁵⁷ Charles Barry and Hans Binnendijk, “Widening Gaps in U.S. and European Defense Capabilities and Cooperation,” Fort McNair, DC: Institute for Strategic Studies, National Defense University, *Transatlantic Current* No.6, July 2012.

structure can be made, if matched with corresponding “smart defense” initiatives.⁵⁸

In sum a strategy of Forward Partnering reassures allies and builds up partners, with limited footprint and maximal freedom of maneuver. Freedom of action is at a premium since the exact character and location of the next crisis cannot be determined and preventive efforts may not always succeed. To the degree practicable, U.S. efforts will be devoted to collective efforts of prevention and the maintenance of the international system via an array of formal and informal partnerships. Forward stationed forces would be reduced in order to gain maximum strategic freedom of action over fixed positions or intensive protracted conflicts. Commitments would be sustained and routinely exercised, and force capability packages worked out to ensure that collectively there are no gaps between requirements and partner tool kits.

Conclusion

It is not the end of the American era.⁵⁹ Yet, in a world of dynamic change and shaky geopolitical equilibrium, the United States needs to craft a grand strategy that will frame its interests, shape the various instruments of national power, and most importantly marshal the necessary investments to underwrite its national security interests. The United States has enormous reserves in terms of human and fiscal capital, a dynamic economic base, incentives for innovation, and a superb university education system.⁶⁰ Renewing its economic foundation and getting its house in order will be part of any grand strategy for the United States, but that strategy cannot be used to turn it away from its international role and challenges beyond its shores. We should acknowledge the need for renewal and reshaping but we need not embrace retreat or retrenchment. We should not become complacent or Pollyannish about the world we live in today; North Korea, Iran, the Arab Spring, and the South China Sea all remain hotspots.⁶¹

The United States, despite ominous fiscal constraints, will remain the world’s foremost power for decades to come. But that position will not contribute to its strategic interests without conscious and deliberate effort. Its core interests,

⁵⁸ Hans Binnendijk, “A Leaner NATO Needs a Tighter Focus,” *International Herald Tribune*, February 4, 2011, p. 6.

⁵⁹ Steve Walt, “The End of the American Era,” *The National Interest*, November/December 2011.

⁶⁰ Bruce Berkowitz, *Strategic Advantage, Challengers, Competitors, and Threats to America's Future* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2008).

⁶¹ Micah Zenko and Michael A. Cohen, “Clear and Present Safety,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April, 2012, pp. 79–93. On China’s aggressive actions outside its territorial waters see “The South China Sea, Roiling the waters,” *The Economist*, July 7, 2012; Banyan, “The South China Sea, Troubled waters,” *The Economist*, August 6, 2012.

including a stable international system that favors access to the global commons, as well as markets and resources, must be secured and advanced. This mandates the preservation of our global reach and focused engagement. Yet, our ability to predict the time and place of the next crisis or conflagration is limited, mandating the need to have the freedom of maneuver to shift forces and resources to different regions to prevent crises and support partners over the long haul.

However, we cannot simply spend our way out the myriad challenges we face. We do not have the fiscal resources to simply eliminate all forms of risk. Thus, in a world of rising and potentially assertive powers, and declining resources, the necessity for priorities is becoming more apparent. The time for tradeoffs, choices and hard calls that are the essence of strategic reasoning has come.

A sustainable strategy that serves our core strategic interests has been offered here. A strategy of *Forward Partnering* offers a framework to generate greater coherence between the ends, ways and means of American security. This strategy is certainly relevant to the realities of geography in the Indian and Pacific theater.⁶² Clearly those interests are at greater risk in Asia given the importance of international trade and our allies and treaty partners in the region. As we “pivot” from Central Asia and the Middle East to this region, our engagements and focus will concentrate foremost on the Pacific.⁶³ This strategy is also very relevant to the Persian Gulf where vital interests in energy resources are balanced against political sensitivities about U.S. military presence. The grand strategy presented herein has several elements consistent with the strategic guidance for the Pentagon’s current “rebalancing.”⁶⁴

We need to realize what constitutes a good strategy, it is more than a list of objectives or a narrative, it has to be a plan for action.⁶⁵ This country has had various strategies over the past few years, but not good or effective strategies for a world in which fiscal realities will force choices upon us and our friends. This essay has strived to identify options and their strengths and potential downsides. This assessment suggests that America retains great strengths and options to continue to move forward even in an era of constraints. The notion that 500 years of Western dominance is fading to a rising Asia is not predetermined.⁶⁶ But there is little doubt

⁶² Robert Kaplan, “The Revenge of Geography,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2009; Michael Auslin, “Tipping Point in the Indo-Pacific,” *American Interest*, March/April, 2011; Christian Le Miere, “America’s Pivot to East Asia: The Naval Dimension,” *Survival*, June–July 2012, pp. 81–94. See also Robert J. Lieber, *Power and Willpower in the American Future, Why the United States is Not Destined to Decline* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁶³ Hillary Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century,” *Foreign Policy*, November 2011. Accessed at <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/issues/189/contents>

⁶⁴ Leon Panetta, *Sustaining Global Leadership, Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, Washington, DC: Department of Defense, January 5, 2012.

⁶⁵ Clark Murdock and Kevin Kallmyer, “Applied Grand Strategy: Making Tough Choices in an Era of Limits and Constraint,” *Orbis*, Fall 2011, pp. 541–557.

⁶⁶ Christopher Layne, “The Global Power Shift from West to East,” *The National Interest*, May/June 2012.

that the United States faces a mounting challenge in Asia that Forward Partnering is prepared to counter.⁶⁷

Some critics will reflexively dismiss alternative strategies with distinctive risks and reduced means as retrenchment. But, as Patrick Porter has quipped, American history demonstrates an ability to find the equilibrium between unbounded hegemony and insularity, and that Americans “do not have to choose between hiding from the world or dominating it.”⁶⁸

Strategies are like military campaign plans, they rarely survive contact with the opponent or the real world. Strategies must evolve consistent with ever changing contextual factors in the geostrategic environment. It must be much more than simply a narrative, we need a coherent logic and a sustainable action plan. A strategy seeking the level of preponderance we enjoyed in the last two decades may be unrealistic, but a strategy seeking to advance and secure U.S. interests is not.⁶⁹ But it requires careful and deliberate adaptation.

Ultimately, Forward Partnering defines priorities for acting in defense of our interests and for shaping American power and armed forces for the 21st century instead of the last.



⁶⁷ Thomas G. Mahnken et al., *Asia in the Balance: Transforming US Military Strategy in Asia*, Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, June 2012.

⁶⁸ Patrick Porter, “Isolationist heresies: Strategy and the curse of slogans,” *Infinity Journal*, 3, Summer 2011, p. 19.

⁶⁹ For options see Andrew Krepinevich, Simon Chin and Todd Harrison, *Strategy in Austerity*, Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2012.

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