

A more-selective US grand strategy by Denny Roy

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From the British vote to exit the European Union to Trump rallies in the United States, democratic polities are awash in a wave of populist dissatisfaction with perceived failure of governments to serve the interests of ordinary citizens. In particular, Trump alleges that US foreign policy in Asia has led to countries such as China taking unfair advantage of the US in trade deals while allowing allies such as South Korea and Japan to underpay for military protection US taxpayers provide.

At the same time, the expensive and permanent policy of maintaining a US leadership role in Asia, intended to assuage regional conflict and maintain an environment conducive to prosperity for the US and its allies, has not prevented a new crisis with China.

The sense that the US is militarily over-engaged throughout the world, with counterproductive results, has led many analysts to advocate that it adopt an “offshore balancing” grand strategy. Rather than garrisoning conflict-prone regions with forward-deployed forces, the United States would maintain a more modest-sized military based in its own territory, intervening overseas only if and when this was necessary to stave off a direct and dire threat to the homeland.

An offshore balancing grand strategy might mean an “Amexit” from Asia, with Washington withdrawing from alliances and moving out of military bases. One vision of offshore balancing, however, has the US military staying put in Asia. Professors John J. Mearsheimer (University of Chicago) and Stephen M. Walt (Harvard), two of America’s most prominent international relations scholars, present this vision in an article published this month in *Foreign Affairs*.

The authors make many trenchant criticisms of post-Cold War US foreign policy. The case they build, however, does not completely match their conclusion. Rather, their analysis leads to support for either of two alternative recommendations for US policy they don’t make: giving up the role of global superpower, and pursuing what could be called a strategy of “more-selective engagement.”

Mearsheimer and Walt characterize current US grand strategy as “liberal hegemony.” This approach, they argue, overcommits the US to solving global problems and to building up an international order based on liberal principles. In particular, this strategy “commits American might to promoting democracy everywhere and defending human rights whenever they are threatened.” This is something of a straw man. Talking up democracy and human rights is an important aspect of US diplomacy, but when it comes to taking action,

US interests usually weigh more heavily than US values. In most parts of the world where human rights are “threatened,” Washington does not use military force to “defend” them, so the degree to which its liberal orientation drains US strategic resources is limited.

Nevertheless, Mearsheimer and Walt argue that the strategy of liberal hegemony has had at least two damaging effects on the US strategic position. First, the pursuit of ideological objectives led to US support for or participation in crusading discretionary wars that have not increased US security or wealth. Not only did these conflicts waste blood and treasure needed for rejuvenating the homeland, they have also generated international instability and suffering, leading to terror attacks against Americans and US allies. As examples, they specifically cite the recent conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, along with uncompromising US opposition to Assad’s regime in Syria.

Second, they charge that an excessive US military presence overseas gives allies an incentive to free-ride on US strength when in many cases they could defend themselves.

As a superior alternative, they call for offshore balancing. The premise of this strategy is that the United States should not go to war, nor base large numbers of US forces abroad, except in pursuit of two very specific and basic objectives.

The first of these objectives is maintaining US dominance of the Western Hemisphere. The second objective is to prevent an adversary from achieving dominance over one of the three strategically important regions of the globe: Europe, Asia, and the Persian Gulf. The authors make clear that US preeminence in the New World is the primary objective. Stopping a rival from taking over Europe or Asia is important because such a state, having subdued its own neighbors, might then “roam into the Western Hemisphere.” The Persian Gulf matters because of its oil.

By the authors’ own logic, however, the second objective is questionable. Opposing the rise of any great power in one of the three key regions is an excessively broad goal. The idea that overseas hegemonies are always bad for the US is an unexamined assumption. Would hegemony by a liberal government or governments in Western Europe, for example, be a serious threat to US interests, or a useful and welcome business and security partner? If the Persian Gulf merits strategic attention based on the fear that a dominant local state “could interfere with the flow of oil” and sabotage the world economy, which Gulf state do we foresee might suddenly lose interest in selling its oil on the international market, thereby dooming its own prosperity? For postwar US grand strategic architect George Kennan, Asia mattered because of the strategic imperative to keep its center of industrial strength (Japan) out of the hands of a hostile government. Since the

Chinese economy is a new center of global economic power larger than Japan's, that battle is already lost.

The more effective solution to the problems the authors identify – self-defeating foreign wars that create the conditions for new wars, foreign resentment that feeds anti-US terrorism, excessive US defense spending and permanently bloated US armed forces, and free-riding allies – would be for the US to turn in its global cop badge. That would mean focusing US military strategy on defending the homeland and the hemisphere from foreign attack or intrusion, and *giving up* the goal of cutting down potential great powers in regions outside of the New World.

Mearsheimer and Walt do indeed call for the US military to leave Europe and for Washington to withdraw from NATO. They also call for removing “most” US forces from the Middle East.

Somewhat incongruously, however, they don't call for a US pullout from Asia. Instead they say China will likely seek hegemony in Asia and China's neighbors are probably not strong enough to stop it, so “The United States should undertake a major effort to prevent [a Chinese hegemony] from succeeding.”

If the authors are concerned about US forward deployment acting as a disincentive to smaller but capable states taking more responsibility to defend themselves, eastern Asia would seem to be a suitable place to allow local balancing behavior to take its natural course. Furthermore, the authors note the “real possibility” of an activist United States being drawn into a conflict in the South China Sea. A US military exit from the region would likely result in the South China Sea becoming a Chinese lake, but that should not matter if the United States is no longer committed to preventing a Chinese regional hegemony. From the criteria Mearsheimer and Walt lay out, it is hard to see how the seemingly remote possibility of a Chinese invasion of South America justifies an expensive and risky US military intervention in Asia.

Mearsheimer and Walt specifically dismiss a strategy of “selective engagement,” defined as US forward military deployment in only certain areas of the globe, and only for the purpose of keeping the peace. They argue this approach “doesn't work,” but their reasoning is not persuasive. First, they say, keeping the peace inevitably mission-creeps into spreading democracy, and trying to spread democracy leads to disaster. They cite NATO expansion as an example. In Asia, however, this has not been a problem. Where US defense relationships led to pressure for democratization, the results were very good: Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. Yet Washington has tolerated non-democracy and partial democracy in several partner states in the region, and has not gone to war with North Korea or China over their illiberal practices. Mearsheimer and Walt also argue that the presence of US military forces does not guarantee peace, and can even cause conflict, as allies are emboldened to take risks or the US military itself antagonizes an adversary. This is true, but it must be balanced with the corollary observation that in other situations forward-based US forces have also helped deter conflict.

China has not yet embarked on a serious attempt to dominate Asia, although there are warning signs. Nor have we seen what Asian states might do in their own defense if they felt militarily threatened by China. Under these conditions, Mearsheimer and Walt's call for the United States to maintain its military engagement with Asia is more akin to selective engagement than offshore balancing.

Regardless of what label their grand strategy should bear, the policy recommendations Mearsheimer and Walt make are reasonable: it's time for the US to let the Western Europeans provide for their own security, while the US should stay the course in Asia. The implication is that China is a more serious threat to Asia than Russia is to Western Europe. Western Europe contains strong, technologically-advanced states, at least four of which have larger economies than Russia. China, on the other hand, holds massive quantitative advantages over its neighbors. If Putin dreams of reconstituting some of the former Soviet republics, Xi Jinping perhaps aims to implement a modern version of the Sinocentric tributary system, an arrangement that would intrude deeply on the autonomy of the many states surrounding China.

Most importantly, Mearsheimer and Walt advocate a more focused, engagement strategy based on a hard-nosed realist assessment of how best to protect basic US strategic interests without getting distracted by values-driven crusades. With the Middle East in turmoil, relations with China and Russia sour, and pressing problems within the US homeland, Americans will likely be more receptive than usual to a realist approach.

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