

THE LIMITS OF OFFSHORE BALANCING

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Should the United States embrace a fundamentally more modest and circumscribed approach to world affairs? Is it time for Washington to roll back, and perhaps do away with, the vast system of overseas security commitments and forward military deployments that have anchored its international posture since World War II? An expanding group of academic and strategic studies observers have answered “yes” to these questions in recent years. They assert that America’s long-standing, postwar grand strategy has become both dispensable and self-defeating—dispensable because that grand strategy is no longer needed to secure U.S. interests and sustain an advantageous global environment, and self-defeating because it wastes finite means while eliciting adverse behavior from allies and adversaries alike. The proper response to this situation, they believe, is to adopt a minimalist approach usually referred to as “offshore balancing.”¹ At its core, offshore balancing envisions a dramatic reduction in America’s overseas military deployments and alliance commitments and a shift toward greater restraint in U.S. foreign policy writ large. It is based on the seemingly counterintuitive idea that this type of retrenchment actually will produce security outcomes at a better price—that when it comes to grand strategy, less will actually be more.

“Less is more” is always a tempting proposition, and the attraction seems particularly strong of late. For at least a decade, offshore balancing has represented the preferred grand strategy for many international relations scholars of the realist persuasion, including eminent analysts like Stephen Walt, John Mearsheimer, Barry Posen, and Christopher Layne. In the aftermath of the Iraq War and the global financial crisis of 2007-08, the overall visibility and popularity of the concept have increased further still. The appeal

of offshore balancing has “jumped from the cloistered walls of academe to the real world of Washington policymaking,” wrote one proponent of the concept in 2012; the case for a “dramatic strategic retrenchment” is gaining strength.² Offshore balancing, another leading scholar adds, represents “an idea whose time has come.”³

Offshore balancing is indeed a concept with significant currency in the ongoing debate on the future of American grand strategy. Unfortunately, assessments of that concept have often been one-sided and incomplete. Because offshore balancing commands such strong backing within the academic strategic studies community, and because it is generally advanced as part of a critique of America’s existing grand strategy, analysts have too rarely treated that proposal with the sort of sustained, in-depth scrutiny that is required to adequately judge both its advantages and its limitations.⁴ The aim of this monograph is to redress that asymmetry through a critical assessment that explicates the core premises and rationale of offshore balancing in some detail, and then more vigorously probes its principal claims. The time is ripe for this sort of examination. The coming years will undoubtedly confront American officials with choices of great importance regarding U.S. global posture and policy. A more rigorous evaluation of prominent grand strategic ideas and alternatives is thus vital.⁵

The outcomes of such an evaluation cast serious doubt on the desirability, and even the basic viability, of offshore balancing. That strategy derives its attraction from the idea, as Walt has argued, that it will allow America to increase its national security and influence, while also decreasing “the resistance that its power sometimes provokes.”⁶ In reality, however, offshore balancing promises far more than it can

deliver. The probable benefits of that approach—both financial and geopolitical—are frequently exaggerated, while the likely disadvantages and dangers are far more severe than its proponents acknowledge. Offshore balancing ultimately hinges on a series of shaky and often unpersuasive claims about what the world would look like subsequent to a major retraction of American power. Once those claims come under close scrutiny, the appeal of offshore balancing crumbles. In all likelihood, adopting this strategy would not allow the United States to achieve more security and influence at a lower price. The more plausible results would be to dissipate American influence, to court heightened insecurity and instability, and to expose the United States to greater long-range risks and costs.

This monograph proceeds as follows. First, I briefly outline the basic parameters and rationale of the postwar (and now, post-Cold War) grand strategy that offshore balancers criticize. Second, I unpack the logic, claims, and purported benefits of offshore balancing itself. Third, and at greatest length, I critically scrutinize what effects a shift to offshore balancing would likely have for U.S. interests across a range of important issues. Fourth, and finally, I summarize the findings of this monograph and briefly discuss the implications for current debates on American grand strategy.

ENDNOTES

1. The literature in support of offshore balancing is immense, reflecting the support that concept commands within the academy. A non-exhaustive list of key texts would include Stephen Walt, "The End of the American Era," *National Interest*, No. 116, November/December 2011, pp. 6-16; Walt, "In the National Interest: A New Grand Strategy for American Foreign Policy," *Boston Review*, February/March 2005, available from bostonreview.net/BR30.1/walt.php, accessed February 12, 2015; Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy*, New York: Norton, 2006; Robert Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*, New York, NY: Random House, 2005, esp. pp. 237-250; Pape, "Empire Falls," *National Interest*, No. 99, January/February 2009, pp. 21-34; Barry Posen, "The Case for Restraint," *American Interest*, Vol. 3, No. 2, November/December 2007, pp. 7-17; Posen, "Lean Back: The Case for a Less Activist Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 92, No. 1, January/February 2013, pp. 116-129; Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014; Eugene Gholz and Daryl Press, "Footprints in the Sand," *American Interest*, Vol. 5., No. 4, March/April 2010, pp. 59-67; Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006, pp. 159-192; Layne,

"From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America's Future Grand Strategy," *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 1, Summer 1997, pp. 86-124; Layne, "Offshore Balancing Revisited," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 2, Spring 2002, pp. 233-248; Benjamin Schwartz and Christopher Layne, "A New Grand Strategy," *Atlantic Monthly*, January 2002, pp. 36-42; Eugene Gholz, Daryl Press, and Harvey Sapolsky, "Come Home, America: The Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation," *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 4, Spring 1997, pp. 5-48. It is worth noting that some of these scholars do not explicitly use the term "offshore balancing" to describe their preferred strategy, and they occasionally disagree on specific policy prescriptions. Generally speaking, however, the underlying strategy they recommend is the same.

2. Christopher Layne, "The (Almost) Triumph of Offshore Balancing," *National Interest*, January 27, 2012, available from nationalinterest.org/commentary/almost-triumph-offshore-balancing-6405, accessed February 24, 2015.

3. Stephen Walt, "Offshore Balancing: An Idea Whose Time Has Come," *Foreign Policy*, November 2, 2011, available from foreignpolicy.com/2011/11/02/offshore-balancing-an-idea-whose-time-has-come/, accessed February 24, 2015. See also Peter Beinart, "Obama's Foreign Policy Doctrine Finally Emerges with 'Offshore Balancing,'" *The Daily Beast*, November 28, 2011, available from www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/11/28/obama-s-foreign-policy-doctrine-finally-emerges-with-off-shore-balancing.html, accessed February 25, 2015; Walt, "A Bandwagon for Offshore Balancing?" *Foreign Policy*, December 1, 2011, available from foreignpolicy.com/2011/12/01/a-bandwagon-for-offshore-balancing/, accessed February 25, 2015.

4. For one insightful exception from more than a decade ago, see Robert Art, *A Grand Strategy for America*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002, esp. pp. 176-177, 181-191, 198-222. For a more recent but theater-specific critique, see James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, "An Ocean Too Far: Offshore Balancing in the Indian Ocean," *Asian Security*, Vol. 8, No. 1, March 2012, pp. 1-26. For a historical perspective on the strategy, see Williamson Murray and Peter Mansoor, "U.S. Grand Strategy in the 21st Century: The Case for a Continental Commitment," *Orbis*, Vol. 59, No. 1, Winter 2015, pp. 19-34.

5. For a good discussion of grand strategic choices and options facing the United States, see Richard Fontaine and Kristin Lord, eds., *America's Path: Grand Strategy for the Next Administration*, Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2012.

6. Walt, "In the National Interest."

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