

Rebalancing Offshore Balancing

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ABSTRACT: Long, indecisive wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have led some to propose a middle ground between intervening too much and too little. One prominent strategy for this is called offshore balancing. With ships on the water instead of boots on the ground, power and stability would be projected at seemingly little cost or risk. Offshore balancing, however, would be tantamount to an unstable selective isolationism leading to a delayed and perhaps more costly intervention.

Mearsheimer and Walt's Offshore Balancing

Perhaps the greatest interest to defense practitioners is the recent proposal of the University of Chicago's John Mearsheimer and Harvard's Stephen Walt for an offshore strategy.¹ As realists, they recognize not all regions reflect American national interests; many states can be left to sort out their difficulties without our help. In a swipe at neoconservatives, they decry the "misguided grand strategy of liberal hegemony" that includes spreading democracy.

Instead, Mearsheimer and Walt propose a realist grand strategy that would concentrate on "preserving U.S. dominance in the Western Hemisphere and countering potential hegemons in Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Persian Gulf." They would have the United States contribute to a regional balance carried out chiefly by local powers while American Military Power would "remain offshore as long as possible."²

These scholars call this a strategy with a limited agenda, but it could easily lose its limits—for example, they admit a fast-rising China "is likely to seek hegemony" in Asia, "which the United States should undertake a major effort to prevent." European NATO members should take the lead in Europe and the Russians in Syria.³ But, what happens when these areas blow up? The devil is in the details, and the generic problem of offshore balancing is how to control events on land from the sea.

Which shores? Mearsheimer and Walt do not mean our own shores—something they might have considered, but would basically amount to isolationism.⁴ They have no interest in the southern and

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1 John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 4 (July/August 2016). See also Hal Brands and Peter D. Feaver; John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "Should America Retrench? The Battle Over Offshore Balancing," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 6 (November/December 2016).

2 *Ibid.*, 71–74.

3 *Ibid.*, 81–82.

4 See Nicholas John Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1943).

eastern Mediterranean basin, including Syria, where the Russians have a small naval base at Tartus. These are areas, however, where unrest sprouts and spreads. If the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant is a menace in Iraq, it does not cease to be a menace when it crosses into Syria. Can local forces handle it with Iranian and Russian help? Surely, we do not wish to see stronger Iranian and Russian roles in the region.

A victory for Iran would solidify its Shi'ah corridor through Iraq and Syria into Lebanon, an uncomfortable development not least for emboldening Hezbollah, Iran's Lebanese outlet, to start a new war with Israel. Standing offshore in the Persian Gulf would not block the Shi'ah corridor. The situation could resemble the Tonkin Gulf, where the events of August 1964 illustrated how offshore operations easily become stepping stones to onshore wars.

Moreover, US ships must come into port to refuel, which could resemble the Gulf of Aden in 2000 where an al-Qaeda boat crammed with explosives blew a big hole in the USS *Cole*, killing 17 American sailors. We can, of course, refuel from supply ships, but they in turn become the targets. The point is there is no such thing as sitting completely offshore, a land connection always requires onshore security.

Is offshore balancing inexpensive? American offshore power projection chiefly revolves around carrier strike groups, each consisting of a carrier surrounded by escort vessels to protect it. As Lawrence Korb, a former Navy officer who also served as assistant secretary of defense, told the US Army War College in the early 1990s, these "floating cities" are the most expensive way to project power, far more expensive than land-based forces. And offshore costs are born entirely by US taxpayers; whereas American land bases are usually subsidized by the host country, such as Germany, Japan, and South Korea, which contribute free rent, base construction, and maintenance. Put everything at sea, and we lose these subsidies.

Does offshore balancing keep us out of harm's way? The Iran-Iraq War (1980–88) included the use of Iranian sea mines—some of them 1908 models purchased from tsarist Russia. One mine severely damaged a US frigate in 1988. In the Persian Gulf War (1990–91), Iraqi mines struck two American vessels because we lacked mine-sweeping capacity—too low-tech for us. Until European minesweepers arrived, we improvised using US Coast Guard whaleboats with US Marine Corps sharpshooters in the bow. At low cost, mines can block the shipping channels of the Persian Gulf, especially in the narrow Strait of Hormuz.

China, which insists the US Navy has no business in its seas, has shore-to-ship missiles that Beijing claims can reach hundreds of miles. The US Navy is conducting occasional freedom-of-navigation operations far to the south in the Spratly Islands to keep away from mainland shores. Years ago, China provided the design of Iran's C-802 antiship missiles, which passed some on to Hezbollah.⁵

The Mearsheimer-Walt article echoes Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism, in which major powers construct territorial shields to keep threats distant, an accurate description of current Russian and

5 James Holmes, "Is the U.S. Navy a Sitting Duck?" *Foreign Policy*, October 25, 2016.

Chinese expansionism.⁶ But Mearsheimer now argues we must intrude precisely where China does not want us to go—namely, into the South China Sea. China may well be bluffing, but finding out is highly risky.

What about the Philippines? America's pivot to East Asia suddenly developed a surprising hole: the Philippines. Manila's newly elected President Rodrigo Duterte vows to throw America out and purchase Chinese and Russian arms. A mercurial personality, he publicly cursed President Obama. The Philippines depends on American support, and we need the Philippines for an anti-China coalition; hence many suppose Duterte's temper tantrum will pass, but he reflects a long-simmering Filipino nationalism that seeks freedom of maneuver.

After the Philippine Islands gained independence in 1946, major American basing continued at Subic Bay and Clark Field until 1992, when Manila demanded too much to renew the leases. China noted the lapse and seized Mischief Reef in the Spratlys, claimed by the Philippines, and fortified it. China also claims Scarborough Shoal, just 123 miles west of Subic Bay, within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone. China muscles closer, but Duterte thinks he can get a deal: Filipino fishing rights in exchange for friendship with China.

So, how can offshore balancing block Chinese expansionism if there is a gap in the first island chain running from Japan through the Philippines and Indonesia to Vietnam, which China aims to neutralize or dominate? An international tribunal just found in favor of the Philippines, rejecting China's claims to the South China Sea; however, Beijing says it will ignore this ruling. Duterte, pursuing his other goals, has refrained from waving the ruling at Beijing, but the United States cannot defend someone who does not want to be defended.

Another part of our Asia pivot, the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement, finalized in early 2016 after seven years of negotiations, faces much opposition in the Senate. This rare case of Obama-Republican cooperation collapsed as presidential contenders denounced it as harmful to American workers. An altered and renamed partnership could conceivably pass later; many business executives and economists say it will boost our economy. Some strategists worry that without an agreement China will effectively dominate the Western Pacific.⁷ How would offshore balancing redress that?

How clever are we at offshore operations? The overnight detention in early 2016 of two small US patrol craft and their crews near Iran's Farsi Island does not inspire confidence. They missed their rendezvous with the refueling ship, US Coast Guard Cutter *Monomoy*. After covering 170 miles in four and a half hours at 38 miles per hour, the boats' tanks must have been dry, which explains why they did not outrun the slower Iranian boats. Squadron Commander Eric Rasch was relieved of command, but the Navy has not told us the whole story or permitted the detainees to speak to the media. Getting close to a hostile shore invites

6 John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, updated ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014).

7 See Michael J. Green and Matthew P. Goodman, "After TPP: The Geopolitics of Asia and the Pacific," *Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (Winter 2016): 19–34, dx.doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2015.1125827.

snafus that easily lead to gunfire and wet-boot operations. In other words, operations may start out offshore but are soon pulled ashore.

How do we handle China's New Silk Roads? Little remarked, the great geoeconomic development of our day is China's New Silk Roads, which are stitching Asia—and even Eurasia—together for the first time. Railroads, pipelines, and highways in several directions are returning China to its classic status as the Middle Kingdom (中国), the hub of networked land corridors. Goods are already shipped by rail from Shanghai to Spain. A rapidly growing portion of China's energy, both oil and natural gas, comes from central Asia and Siberia as well as through Myanmar. The more China trades along the new routes, the less traditional sea routes will matter and the safer China's energy supplies will be.

If an Axis-dominated Eurasia was a real and frightening prospect in World War II, a Sino-Russian Eurasia, distant from and essentially unreachable by American naval counterbalancing, is no less threatening. The construction and fortification of reefs in the Spratlys yield dramatic satellite photos, but they may be a diversion from China's inland constructions. Again, offshore balancing would not do much to influence this development.

Selective Isolationism, Delayed Intervention

Mearsheimer and Walt deserve praise for their critique of recent onshore interventions and their attempt to put limits on them. Such grand theories, however, always dissolve in the face of specific problem areas. If applied, offshore balancing would mean selective isolationism that easily turns into delayed intervention.

By designating just three areas for offshore balancing—Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Persian Gulf—our adversaries are alerted to the areas where we would not get involved, inviting expansionists' opportunistic adventures. Would the two scholars include the Black Sea in Europe, the South China Sea in Northeast Asia, and the Red Sea with the Persian Gulf? If they do not, they offer quasi-isolationism to keep us out of explosive areas—respectively the Ukraine, the Spratlys, and Yemen—not a bad idea but one that requires the cooperation of our adversaries. Mearsheimer and Walt look at much of the globe and say: “So what?” While this perspective is a welcome corrective to overengagement, if we say it often enough, we become isolationists.

With a grand strategy that rejects land action in the Persian Gulf's littoral states—or makes it rare and reluctant—what is the point of being in the Gulf at all? To be sure, Mearsheimer and Walt have not said “never” to land interventions but to remain offshore as long as possible. This might please Gulf clients who prefer an “over the horizon” US presence on ships since US bases attract resentment and bombings. American bases on the sacred soil of Saudi Arabia were targets of Osama bin Laden's ire and were terminated in 2003. Riyadh and Ankara did not permit us to launch the Iraq War (2003–11) from Saudi Arabia and Turkey respectively: we had to launch from tiny Kuwait. Soon we may not have a land option in the Persian Gulf.

Standing offshore in the Persian Gulf puts us in the middle of what could soon become a regional Sunni-Shi'ah war led by Saudi Arabia and

Iran. A US fleet cruising the Gulf could dissuade Iran, but do nothing about dangerous Saudi economic and demographic trends. Unrest builds over withdrawn subsidies, homegrown Sunni extremists, and an unhappy Shī'ah minority. A succession conflict looms between Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef and the king's son, Prince Mohammad bin Salman, who is 31 years old and in charge of just about everything. Prince bin Salman's ambitious reforms now rattle the kingdom. Mearsheimer and Walt are quite right in urging us to avoid local complexities, but Saudi instability has repercussions far beyond the peninsula.

America is already involved in an unsuccessful Saudi war in Yemen, which uses US intelligence, aircraft, bombs, and refueling assets. Something like a Tonkin Gulf incident is being replayed in the Red Sea. Land-based antiship cruise missiles—of Chinese design, probably manufactured by Iran—were deflected before they could hit the USS *Mason* off Yemen's shore, which was probably supporting Saudi bombing of Shī'ah Houthi rebels. The USS *Nitze* retaliated with cruise missiles, destroying several onshore radar sites.⁸ Yemen illustrates again how off-shore is intimately connected to onshore.

The Excluded-Middle Problem

Many strategic thinkers want to curtail US activity overseas, but some seek to preserve a hegemonic role. These include ex-neoconservatives, few of whom admit to ever having been neo-cons. Two Dartmouth professors, Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, propose a grand strategy of “deep US engagement” abroad to counteract the “retrenchment” mood.⁹ If the United States retrenched, they argue, several areas would quickly destabilize and soon require more extensive US intervention. America is still the sole superpower, able to stabilize the world cheaply and with little risk. They warn against the neoconservative temptation of overdoing engagement and the risk of escalating to major war but do not explain how to prevent them. Like Mearsheimer and Walt, their grand strategies are long-term and theoretical, brushing over the devilish details, which tend to trip up theories. If you oppose retrenchment, where precisely do you propose to defend the country's interests?

Mearsheimer and Walt occupy one pole of the emerging post-Iraq strategic debate, Brooks and Wohlforth the other. The former seek to limit engagement, the latter to maintain it. Both, however, face an excluded-middle problem, the difficulty of holding a middle ground between conducting massive interventions and avoiding complex entanglements. They reject extreme solutions but may find there is no golden mean. Events rudely shove us from cautious positions into major interventions. Few middle grounds work over the long-term; all may be quickly overthrown.

No strategy—offshore balancing or deep engagement—can prevent mistaken interventions any more than the 1973 War Powers Act could. Indeed, trying to “lock-in” any American grand strategy is a dubious undertaking. Things change too quickly.

8 Holmes, “Navy a Sitting Duck.”

9 Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *America Abroad: The United States' Global Role in the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

