

## OFFSHORE BALANCING: BETTER THAN WHATEVER WE DO NOW

This paper will address the need for a grand strategy, define the term and describe the criteria for selection. It will then demonstrate that Offshore Balancing (OB) fits the criteria and address its advantages and disadvantages.

The U.S. has lacked a coherent grand strategy since the end of the Cold War, and adopting one now would benefit its international position. Grand strategy “represents a road map delineating our most important foreign policy goals and the most effective instruments and policies for achieving those goals”<sup>1</sup>. Credibly adopting a single grand strategy would make the behavior of the U.S. predictable, which would allow other states to operate in accordance with the strategy and thereby avoid conflict. For example, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990 under the impression that the U.S. would not interfere. If the U.S. had publicly operated its foreign policy in opposition to *any* interstate invasions, Hussein would likely not have acted and conflict would have been avoided.

Choosing a strategy is “a three-step process: determining a state’s vital security interests; identifying the threats to those interests; and deciding how best to employ the state’s [resources] [...] to protect those interests”<sup>2</sup>. Since the U.S. is both insular and the sole world power, no state or currently extant group of states presents a significant security threat at this time; terrorism is serious but poses no challenge to U.S. survival as a nation-state. Thus, the U.S.’s vital security interests *are* its economic interests. These lie in access to resources – primarily foreign petrochemicals – and access to relatively free and equitable trade. With both of these, the U.S. will be able to maintain or increase its security in terms of public safety and raw power. Poor or hostile relations with resource rich nations, regional blocs or regional hegemony constitute the threat to U.S. economic interests. At the moment, poor relations with oil producing nations like Iran, Venezuela and Russia are the best examples of this threat.

A strategy of Offshore Balancing would best use U.S. resources to protect its interests. OB would entail the removal of all forward-deployed ground forces from their bases abroad and the augmentation of U.S. naval capacity. The U.S. would abandon all traditional ‘friend’ and ‘enemy’ designations, like those it holds with the UK and France or with North Korea and Iran. Moreover, “although it might need to enter into temporary coalitions, the United States would disengage from permanent alliance relationships”<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Schweninger, Sherle R., “Revamping American Grand Strategy,” *World Policy Journal* 20 (2003): 25. Accessed December 10, 2010. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40209873>

<sup>2</sup> Layne, Christopher, “From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America’s Future Grand Strategy,” *International Security* 22 (1991): 110. Accessed December 10, 2010. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2539331>

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 116

The U.S. would seek only to maintain regional balances of power. For example, the U.S. would cease to publicly support Israel in opposition to its enemies and intervene in the region only in the case of runaway unbalancing. The U.S. would only become militarily involved in any area if aggressive regional hegemony began to emerge. The U.S. would then use its navy and limited ground deployments to support the victim states to restore regional balance before disengaging.

OB would protect U.S. interests through its cost effectiveness and its reduction of international resentment. OB “would be considerably less expensive than the [current] strategy of preponderance;” the elimination of bases and forward deployments abroad, along with the reduction of the size of the U.S. standing force at home would constitute this dis-expense<sup>4</sup>. The U.S. generates poor relations abroad by presenting itself as an overarching threat. For example, the U.S. threatens Iran through its support of Israel, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and a foreign policy which demonizes the Persian nation. Since states balance against threat,<sup>5</sup> if the U.S. can make itself less threatening than regional powers, it can cause states to balance regionally rather than against itself. Threat is determined by the “distribution of power, [...] geographic proximity, offensive capabilities<sup>6</sup>, and perceived intentions”<sup>7</sup>. OB decreases the geographic proximity of U.S. power by eliminating forward deployments. It decreases offensive capabilities by reducing the U.S.’s standing ground forces. And it reduces perceived aggression by credibly asserting balancing as the *only* U.S. foreign policy goal.

The primary disadvantages of OB are the need to abandon friendships and the implausibility of its adoption. However, OB only involves dropping *military* support for those friendly countries; the U.S. may still trade with them as before *and* return military assistance in the event that they become victims of attack. Since no U.S. ‘friends’ are actively pursuing regional hegemony, there would be no need to oppose them militarily. Moreover, OB is not so implausible, despite the drastic differences between it and current policy. Public sentiment always trends to isolationism and OB would extricate the U.S. from confusing foreign entanglements in places like Korea and the Middle East. The strategy has historical precedent; England and later Great Britain pursued OB with regards to the Continent for centuries with positive results<sup>8</sup>.

The current trend of U.S. foreign policy strategy – a curious mix of Selective Engagement, Primacy and Liberal Superpowering – is both unsustainable and inadvisable. The constantly changing criteria that govern U.S. action abroad increase the unpredictable and threatening nature of U.S. power

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 112

<sup>5</sup> Walt, Stephen, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987): 1-33

<sup>6</sup> The ability to invade and hold territory cost effectively

<sup>7</sup> Walt, Stephen, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987): 5

<sup>8</sup> That is, global hegemony

and compound the U.S. image problems abroad. These issues with international perception create resentment that gives rise to terrorism and unfriendly states. The U.S. method of dealing with these problems results in imperial overreach and the gradual weakening of U.S. military and economic power. The United States must therefore adopt *a* grand strategy, and *the* grand strategy it should adopt is Offshore Balancing.