

Selective Engagement in an Era of Austerity and Multipolarity

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Abstract

Does a strategy of selective engagement still make sense for the United States, especially given its current fiscal constraints and given the current strains on the US military due to its deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan? I will argue that while the United States is not a global hegemon, it still remains the world's only military superpower -- one capable of operating militarily in several regional theaters -- and its interests are still well served by helping to provide collective or public goods to the world. Provision of those goods is not only in the world's interests, but also in America's. Four key public goods are: preservation of freedom of the seas, preservation of access to overseas oil, prevention of the spread of nuclear weapons, and provision of regional stability in East Asia and the Middle East. Policies that call for a retrenchment of American power back to the continental United States, such as offshore balancing, do not serve these interests. Similarly, a policy of restraint, to the extent that it compromises America's ability to help provide these public goods, also damages America's strategic interests.

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Terms, Trends, Questions

America's unipolar moment is over. It began with the breakup of the Soviet Union in December 1991 and ended with the collapse of Lehman Brothers on September 15, 2008. During these 18 years, the United States had no military peer; its economy did quite well, at least during the first half of the period; and it fought two big wars in the Persian Gulf and three lesser ones in the Balkans and Afghanistan. For most of this period, its political-economic model – democratic capitalism – was heralded as the best way to organize a society. It did pretty much as it wished on the international stage, even when its actions were opposed by others, acting multilaterally when it could and unilaterally when it had to.

While the United States was ascendant during this unipolar moment, it was not by any stretch of the imagination a global hegemon in the sense that the term is commonly used. That is, the United States was not able to take on all other great powers at once and defeat them. It was, instead, a superpower and the world's only superpower: a state that projected military power to several regions simultaneously and that was usually the most powerful military actor in those regions. Moreover, because it was a superpower, it was also a hegemon in the second sense of that term – the sense the Greeks meant: it was a leader. In the unipolar era, America's overweening military and economic powers did not yield omnipotence, but they did fuel its global leadership role.

In the new era we have entered, the United States will, for at least the next decade or two, remain the world's only superpower when both military and economic dimensions are taken into account. Its superpower position will be diminished, however, compared to what it held in the unipolar era, due to two factors. First, America's current serious fiscal situation and economic troubles will

constrain the resources it can pour into its foreign policy and military power over the next decade.¹ It is hard to envision how the US deficit can be brought under control – and it must be brought under control if the United States is to generate the economic power necessary to sustain its military power – unless military spending, along with entitlements, are cut, because current defense spending accounts for about 19% of the federal budget, 53% of discretionary (non-entitlement) spending, and 4.9% of gross domestic product. Second, the rise of other powers, especially China, whose economy continues to grow rapidly and which continues to channel a part of those economic resources into the modernization of its military forces, will increasingly constrain what the United States can do in East Asia and internationally.

The world is already bipolar economically: the United States and the European Union are roughly equal in GDP when measured in nominal dollars. Within the next two decades, the world will probably be at least tripolar economically if China's GDP, which currently stands at a little over \$5 trillion in nominal dollars (compared to America's \$14+ trillion GDP), continues to grow at rates equivalent to the past 20 years, that is, somewhere between 8-12% per annum, and then surpasses America's.² (Somewhere between 2020 and 2030, China's GDP measured in nominal dollars will surpass that of the United States if present trend lines continue.³) The United States is likely to retain its dominance in the military realm longer than in the economic realm, given its overwhelming lead and given the time it will take others to build world class militaries, but eventually some form of multipolarity is likely to occur in that area too, although no one can now say with any precision when that will occur.

¹ See Michael Mandelbaum, *The Frugal Superpower: America's Global Leadership in a Cash-Strapped Era* (New York: Public Affairs Press, 2010), chap. 1, for an overview of America's dismal fiscal situation and economic outlook and for the constraints they will place on American foreign policy.

² In purchasing power parity figures, China's GDP in 2009 was \$9.1 trillion; America's \$14.26. Nominal and purchasing power parity figures come from World Bank, World Bank Development Indicators database, September 27, 2010..

³ In 2008, Goldman Sachs estimated that China's gross domestic product will surpass America's in 2028, up from its estimate of 2041 made in 2003. In 2009 the *Economist* Intelligence Unit predicted China's GDP would surpass the United States' in 2021. In January 2010, PricewaterhouseCoopers said the crossover would occur in 2020. Goldman Sachs data come from Chris Layne, "The Waning of American Hegemony – Myth or Reality?" *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Summer 2009), p. 173. ; PricewaterhouseCoopers estimate, from Bloomberg News, "China Overtakes Japan as World's Second-Biggest Economy," August 16, 2010, at www.bloomberg.com.

Thus, if America's fiscal troubles take the better part of a decade to solve, and if the economic-military rise of other great powers continues, the global distribution of power will be less advantageous to the United States in the next two decades than it was in the previous two. How disadvantageous, no one can say, in part, because the United States still retains considerable advantages. Due largely to its immigration policies, the United States will age less rapidly than all the other great powers, including China, with all the positive ramifications in economic innovation and competitiveness for the United States that this implies⁴; it retains an entrepreneurial spirit; its populace works hard; and it has a significant lead in many of the technologies of the future. Whether China can continue its high rate of economic growth for the next decade or two is also problematical, and economists are split on the issue. All we can say with certainty is that power will be more diffused over the next two decades than in the previous two, and this trend means some diminishment in American power and influence.⁵

The slow but steady international diffusion of power, combined with America's fiscal and economic troubles, force us to answer two fundamental questions about America's grand strategy. First, what should the US aim for internationally in this slowly emerging new era, and second, will it have sufficient resources to pursue whatever aims it sets for itself?

These two questions are not easy to answer. What the United States should do internationally cannot be determined without an assessment of what it can do, but definitive answers as to what it can do are hard to come by because we do not now know whether America's economic and fiscal ills are deeply structural and hard to fix, or are temporary and relatively easy to fix if the political will to do so can be mustered. We do not know whether the United States has reached an economic climacteric and is destined to a long term economic decline, as Britain began to experience at the end of the 19th century, whether America's current problems are mostly politically self-inflicted, or if they are, whether sufficient political will can be mustered to correct them. Furthermore, we cannot be certain that China's current rapid ascent will continue unimpeded, given that country's many

⁴ See Richard Jackson and Neil Howe, *The Graying of the Great Powers: Demography and Geopolitics in the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2008), pp. 185-196.

⁵ See Barry R. Posen, "Emerging Multipolarity: Why Should We Care?: *Current History*, November 2009, pp. 347-352; and National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World*, executive summary.

problems. So, prescriptions for the first question depend in part on how the second question is answered, but clear cut answers to the second are hard to come by.

My own position on these questions is as follows: (1) the United States can afford to continue, and for its own interests should continue, with a global political-military role; (2) America's economic problems are primarily, although not entirely, of its own making, are fixable, and will be fixed, although this will take some time because the United States has a lot fixing to do if it is to right its fiscal imbalance and remain highly competitive; (3) because of the uncertainty over how deep and long-lasting America's economic problems will be, and because other powers will grow stronger, prudence requires some curtailment in America's global political-military role, and this should come primarily in state-building enterprises, not in the provision of international collective goods; and (4) China is going to experience some difficult times ahead, and its 30-year run of extraordinary economic growth will come to an end within a decade or so. I can prove none of these, except perhaps the third, but they are the assumptions upon which the prescriptions specified below rest. I will focus on what the United States should do, because I am assuming it will have the resources to do what I prescribe. If not, all bets are off. I turn next to this task.

Selective Engagement in the Unipolar Era

In an article published 20 years ago, at the outset of the unipolar era, I laid out six fundamental national interests for the United States to pursue, argued that a forward defense posture was best designed to realize these interests, and concluded that the United States, for its own national interests, needed to continue with an activist, internationalist foreign policy and not retreat into isolationism or offshore balancing.⁶ I put these three components together – prescribed national interests, forward defense, and US global leadership – and called the resulting strategy “selective engagement,” having borrowed the term from an article by Barry Posen and Andy Ross.

⁶ The article was “A Defensible Defense: America's Grand Strategy after the Cold War,” *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (Spring 1991), pp. 5-53. At the height of the unipolar era, I elaborated upon that article in *A Grand Strategy for America* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2003). I lifted the term “selective engagement” from Barry Posen and Andy Ross to describe this strategy.

The six interests were (and still are): first, to protect the homeland from attack; second, to keep a deep peace among the Eurasian great powers; third, to preserve assured access to stable supplies of oil; fourth, to preserve an open international economic order; fifth, to spread democracy and the rule of law, protect human rights, and prevent mass murders in civil wars; and sixth, to avert severe climate change. The first goal required that the United States prevent the spread of weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear and biological, to more states and to keeping such weapons out of the hands of terrorists. The second required that the United States retain its two central alliances at either end of Eurasia – the NATO alliance and the US-Japan alliance. The third required that the United States act in ways that would prevent any state, either within the region or outside of it, from acquiring hegemony over Persian Gulf oil supplies. The fourth required that the United States maintain its commitment to international economic openness and use its military power in ways that preserved global stability. The fifth required that the United States help foster political liberalization and the rule of law within states and promote the economic development that helps create the large middle classes upon which stable democracies depend, as well as acting in concert with other states to stop or prevent mass murder in ethnic and civil wars that had already begun or were highly likely to occur. The sixth required that the United States and the world first cut and then stabilize the emissions of CO₂ and its equivalents into the atmosphere at levels that avoid severe climate change.

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Second, I proposed that a forward defense posture – retention of America’s key alliances and the deployment of American troops abroad, both onshore and afloat in three key regions (East Asia, the Middle East, and Europe) – was better suited to realize and protect these interests than a grand strategy of either isolationism or offshore balancing. In my usage, both isolationism and offshore balancing are strategies in which the United States has no standing military commitments in peacetime to come to the defense of other states, and no forward bases abroad.⁷ The US navy may steam the seven seas, but all US troops are home and there are no standing military alliances or permanent overseas military bases. Hence a strategy of offshore balancing does *not* mean forces afloat in a region.

⁷ In my usage, the two strategies differ mainly in how they would deal with a Eurasian power that made a run for hegemony. Isolationists would be indifferent to such a change in the Eurasian balance of power; offshore balancers would go back to the region to stymie a would-be hegemon.

Forward defense requires bases abroad and allies. Hence, selective engagement argued for the retention of key American alliances, not only because they enabled a forward defense posture, but also because they are tools of political management and because they enhance cooperative solutions to regional security issues. In this view, America's key alliances retain enduring value. They assure US access to overseas bases where needed; they facilitate joint training in peacetime and consequently joint operations in wartime; they promote transparency and a more open security dialogue in security matters; and they help structure expectations and develop shared attitudes towards problem solving. Standing alliances clearly experience difficulties and conflicts among their members, but all other things equal, they are more useful tools for projecting power into key regions than relying solely on ad hoc, informal arrangements, although the latter have their value, too.

I favored an in-theater military presence, either afloat or offshore, because in my view America's regional alliances retain greater credibility, and are therefore stronger for reassurance and deterrence purposes, with some US forces in the region than with US military guarantees absent any forces in the region. Credibility is a function of will and capability. In-theater forces enhance capability, but are probably more important for what they signify about will. Such forces are tangible and touchable, and therefore more politically salient as manifestations of political will than simply pledges on paper, with no tangible US forces in the region. In-theater forces are akin to actions speaking louder than words. They give concrete force, so to speak, to political-military guarantees. As such, they have a greater chance of affecting political-military developments in a region than alliances without them.

Third, I called for United States to lead, stressing the necessity of US leadership for finding solutions to collective action problems, whether they involved security or non-security issues. International politics is still organized around the nation-state model; consequently, states remain the primary, although certainly not the only actors in world politics. The United States was, and still is, the world's most powerful state, and therefore its actions and inaction bear mightily on whether international initiatives will succeed or fail. If the leader does not lead, things do not get done. But by the same token, the leader cannot get others to follow unless it takes allies' and other interested parties' interests into account when formulating policies and taking action, not simply consulting after having decided on its course of action. For these reasons, I argued that while the United States had to lead, it also had to avoid excessive unilateralism.

If properly implemented, selective engagement should work well to protect US national interests. It works actively to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons by extending the US nuclear umbrella. It is more likely to avoid backlash and balancing against America's use of military power, or at least minimize those two, than the muscular Wilsonianism of the first George W. Bush administration, because it eschews excessive unilateralism and ambition, and because it takes into account the interests of key regional allies in framing policy. It avoids the Lippmann gap by the judicious use of American military power, especially by being very careful about interventions within states and state-building exercises. It preserves America's key alliances and their stabilizing role in Europe, East Asia, and the Persian Gulf through maintenance of a forward presence, whereas an offshore balancing strategy does not. It assures the free flow of Persian Gulf oil through an on-shore and offshore military presence better than offshore balancing, and does not destabilize the region the way muscular Wilsonianism did. 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. It advances the spread of democracy through the generation of wealth and the expansion of middle classes that an open international economic order facilitates and, in general, avoids getting bogged down in costly military interventions to fashion democracies. Finally, even if indirectly, it can help combat climate change by making the world more stable, and hence better able to muster the resources necessary to deal with climate change, than if the world were more conflictual than is now the case.

In sum, as I envisioned it, selective engagement is a strategy that seeks to shape events in a region through the projection of US military power to that region rather than simply reacting to adverse events there once they have occurred. Military alliances and commitments, together with in-theater forces, either semi-permanently afloat or onshore, are crucial for shaping political developments in a region. Shaping, however, does not mean control. Hegemons control; superpowers, if they are successful, can only shape.

Selective engagement worked reasonably well under the first Bush and two Clinton administrations. The George W. Bush administration, however, made a hash of a strategy of selective engagement. We can argue whether it was a structural factor – unipoles are doomed ultimately to overextension because there are few external constraints on their behavior – or a personal one – Bush's world view and decisions, affected mightily by 9/11 – that produced America's overextension, or a combination

of the two. Whatever the cause, the current mess the United States is in is a product, in my view, not of pursuing a strategy of selective engagement, but of following a strategy of *non-selective* engagement (intervening in Iraq while ignoring Afghanistan), combined with eight years of fiscal irresponsibility and abdication of the government's regulatory function. In its essentials, I believe that selective engagement remains a sound strategy; therefore, don't shoot the strategy because it was misapplied.

Nonetheless, international conditions have changed over the last 20 years, the unipolar era is slowly ending, and the United States has real economic troubles that will affect its foreign policy for some time to come. Therefore, how can a strategy of selective engagement be adapted to this emerging era of austerity and multipolarity?

Selective Engagement in the Era of Austerity and Multipolarity

Collective Goods, Not State-Building

The purpose of selective engagement is to protect the six US national interests enumerated above. Clearly, the United States must do all it can to protect the homeland from attack – the prime directive of any grand strategy – especially from a WMD attack by a terrorist group. It is also still to America's interest to preserve as deep a peace among the Eurasian great powers as it can because any war among the Eurasian great powers would be deeply destabilizing, costly, and carry the risk of drawing the United States in, one way or another. It is also to American's interest to avoid intense security competitions among these states because such competitions could lead to WMD acquisition. Assured access to oil supplies for air, sea, and land transportation is essential to the prosperity of the global economy until the world can wean itself off its heavy dependence on oil for transportation, something that is going to take decades, even with the greater push recently to switch to renewables.⁸ An open economic order contributes to US prosperity, but it also contributes to

⁸ Studies of several years ago (2007) concluded that world energy consumption would increase by 50% over the next twenty years, and that the bulk of the increase (81%) would be in fossil fuel use, with renewable and nuclear energy constituting about 8% and 6%, of that increase, respectively. (Retrieve those sources). The US National Intelligence Council predicts that Persian Gulf oil production will grow by 43% between 2003 and 2025, and that oil, coal, and

global economic growth and prosperity, both of which are peace-inducing factors. Spreading democracy and the rule of law within states make for a more peaceful and prosperous world, and also lessens the need for costly military interventions in the affairs of other states because democracies are less likely to commit human rights abuses against their own populace than non-democracies. Finally, averting severe climate change is in the US interest because of the risks involved in kicking the earth into a new, irreversible, and adverse climatic state, even though under more moderate climate change scenarios, the United States will suffer less than the developing states and many of the other great powers. These goals endure, even if US power and influence will lessen in the new emerging era.

The central point about these six goals is that, by and large, they are also in the interest of a significant percentage of the world's states. Even the first goal is a global interest because if a terrorist group can attack the United States with a weapon of mass destruction, it can attack other states with it, too. This means that, with the exception of the fifth goal, what is in the interest of the United States to do for itself is also in the interest of many, many other states. At this level of generality, what is good for the United States is mostly good for the world (or the bulk of the states in the world). This means that five of the six US national interests are, essentially, global interests or global collective goods. All but the fifth center on relations among states, on creating a framework for a stable and prosperous global economy, or on combating threats that states share in common. It is the fifth that involves intervention in the affairs of states and that creates the greatest conflict between U. S. interests and those of other states, democratic or not.

The major adaptation of US grand strategy to the new era, therefore, is to eschew forceful (military) exercises in democracy promotion and state-building, which are time-consuming and resource-draining (and which selective engagement largely sought to avoid), and, instead, concentrate on those goals that stand a better chance of mustering the support of both America's allies and the global community. So, in an era when US resources need to be husbanded, forceful state building should be avoided.⁹

natural gas will account, roughly equally, for the overwhelming amount of the increase in energy use by 2030. See National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2025*, pp. 40-41.

⁹ Michael Mandelbaum comes to the same conclusion. See Mandelbaum, *The Frugal Superpower*, pp. 183-84.

Instead, to advance its own national interests in this new era, the United States should center its grand strategy on four global collective goods, all of which require power projection in some form – in-theater forces ashore, in-theater forces afloat, over-the-horizon forces that can quickly arrive to the theater, or US based forces that can rapidly be sent to the theater – the exact nature of the forward deployed forces depending on the political condition of the particular theater. The four collective goods are: (1) preventing the spread of nuclear weapons; (2) keeping the deep peace in Europe, deepening the peace in East Asia, and, if possible, keeping the peace in the Persian Gulf; (3) preserving two elements of a stable framework for an open international economic order – freedom of the seas and assured access to Persian Gulf oil; and (4) containing, if not also destroying, al-Qaeda. Many different types of policies, including political, economic, and military ones, contribute to producing these collective goods, but I concentrate on how a US forward defense posture contributes to them because that most directly affects how ambitious and costly a grand strategy the US pursues.

The Spread of Nuclear Weapons

The number one priority for US grand strategy is to prevent a WMD attack, especially a nuclear attack, on an American city or an ally's city. The best way to do this is to keep fissile material and warheads out of the hands of any terrorist group that aspires to obtain a nuclear weapon and that would use it if it had one. (The only clear candidate for that role right now is al-Qaeda; more below). There are many ways to do this, including programs like Nunn-Lugar to lock down fissile materials. How does a forward defense posture, together with the maintenance of US alliances, contribute to this goal? We should view US alliances as anti-proliferation tools. By extending its nuclear umbrella over other selected states, the United States helps dissuade them from acquiring nuclear weapons. Why, however, should the United States worry about an increase in the number of nuclear-armed states? My answer is simple, but hopefully, not simplistic. The greater the number of states that acquire nuclear weapons, all other things being equal, the greater the likelihood that fanatical terrorists could obtain them or the fissile material required to make them. Wider ownership increases the chances of undesirable ownership or warheads or fissile material through theft, sale, or outright transfer. A world with fewer nuclear-armed states is a safer world than one with a larger number of nuclear-armed states.

In terms of nuclear spread, two regions of the world today should concern us: East Asia and the Middle East. The US alliance with Japan is the cornerstone of US grand strategy in East Asia and a major tool in dissuading Japan from nuclear weapons acquisition. The end of the U.S.-Japan alliance would not automatically bring in its train a nuclear-armed Japan, but it would clearly increase the chances of its occurrence.

Three things should cause us to be wary of assurances that Japan would not “go nuclear” if the US abrogated its treaty. First, 15 years ago, people in Japan who advocated that the country should acquire nuclear weapons were viewed as on the lunatic right fringe. Today, debate over whether Japan should acquire nuclear weapons and over how much the United States can be relied on is now more or less mainstream.¹⁰ This shift shows how changes in international conditions can shift the terms of domestic foreign policy debates. Second, support for an independent nuclear deterrent within Japan is “negligible” among the decision-making elite, according the closest student of the subject, but the reasons why are instructive.¹¹ Japan made a decision to forego an independent nuclear deterrent after the end of the Cold War because it calculated it could rely on multilateral regimes and the US nuclear umbrella.¹² Absent the US guarantee, what could Japan rely on? Third, Japan’s leaders have made certain that should the governing elite make a decision to go nuclear, there will be no constitutional and legal impediments from doing so, only public opinion, which elites can manipulate, should they choose to do so. Hughes concludes: “...policymakers and scholars should not dismiss the propensity for future policy change, regardless of diplomatic rhetoric asserting that Japan has forever renounced the desire to develop a nuclear deterrent.”¹³

A Japan gone nuclear would have three effects on nuclear weapons spread: (1) a clear signal to other states in the region and perhaps even to those outside the region, that a major ally of the United States no longer had confidence in an alliance with the United States; (2) an enhancement of pressure on South Korea to consider seriously the acquisition of nuclear weapons; and (3) a major

¹⁰ Confirmed in email communication with Richard Samuels, November 27, 2010.

¹¹ Lewelyn Hughes, “Why Japan Will Not Go Nuclear (Yet)” *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (Spring 2007), p. 68.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 68, and 72-80.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 69 and 96.

blow to the nuclear non-proliferation regime. None of these developments is desirable, and, as a consequence, the US alliance with Japan remains central to nuclear non-proliferation efforts, not simply for East Asia but also globally.

The Middle East is equally worrisome, should Iran acquire nuclear weapons, which I believe they eventually will. A February 2008 staff report of the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations concluded that an Iranian bomb would “almost certainly lead to a Saudi bomb” if the United States did not take actions to guarantee Saudi security; that a Saudi bomb would increase pressure on Egypt to acquire its own, because a Saudi bomb would “represent a uniquely threatening challenge to Egypt’s self-conception and regional influence”; and that an Iranian bomb would “place significant pressure on Turkey to follow suit.”¹⁴ An Iran gone nuclear would enhance the chances of cascade effects in the region.

To deal with the fallout from an Iranian nuclear weapon and to avoid further nuclear spread within the Middle East, the United States would (or will) need to take on new commitments in the region, or at the minimum strengthen existing ones and make clear that its nuclear umbrella extended over those states that felt threatened by Iran’s nuclear force.¹⁵ Indeed, US policy has already moved in that direction. Speaking in Thailand on July 22, 2009, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that the United States would consider extending a “defense umbrella” over the Middle East if Iran continued with work that could lead to nuclear weapons. Obama administration officials in Washington subsequently made clear that this was the first public discussion of what had been privately discussed.¹⁶

¹⁴ Report to the Committee on Foreign Relations, US Senate, 110th Cong., second sess., *Chain Reaction: Avoiding a Nuclear Arms Race in the Middle East*, February 2008, pp. viii, ix, and x.

¹⁵ Barry Posen concludes, for example: “Should Iran become a nuclear power, both the immediate strategic risks and the proliferation risks can be addressed with a reinvigorated commitment of US power to stability and security in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East. Such a commitment is reasonable given US strategic interests in the region.” Quoted in Barry R. Posen, “A Nuclear-Armed Iran: A Difficult but Not Impossible Problem,” a Century Foundation Report, December 2, 2006, available at tcf.org.

¹⁶ Mark Landler and David E. Sanger, “Clinton Speaks of Shielding Mideast from Iran,” *New York Times*, 23 July 2009.

In sum, US anti-proliferation efforts in both East Asia and the Middle East require power projection – for East Asia, in the form of in-theater forces; in the Middle East, at the minimum a credible over the horizon presence, perhaps combined with a small onshore presence (see below).

Regional Peace in Europe, East Asia, and the Persian Gulf

A second collective good is to help keep the peace in Europe, deepen the peace in East Asia, and work to keep the peace in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East. For the purposes of regional peace (excluding the 70,000-80,000 troops in Iraq and the 95,000 troops in Afghanistan), the United States has stationed about 79,000 troops in Europe, the bulk of which are in Germany, Italy, and England; 75,000 in East Asia, of which 35,000 are in Japan, 28,000 in South Korea, and 11,000 are afloat; and about 5,600 troops in and around the Persian Gulf, of which 2,800 are afloat.¹⁷ This means that of the approximately 330,000 troops stationed abroad, roughly half (160,000) are stationed in three regions for the regional peace mission and the other half (165,000-175,000) for war-waging (Afghanistan) and stabilization (Iraq) missions. The regional peace mission consumes 11% of total active duty military personnel of 1,434,761 (as of June 30, 2010).

The purpose of this peacetime regional presence is to shape political events in each region in three ways: to deter attacks on US allies, to reassure key regional actors, primarily US allies, of US support so as to help buffer the region from destabilizing influences, and to enhance regional security cooperation and management. If these three mechanisms work well, they can help dampen, although not end, military competition within the region. A peacetime regional presence has a

¹⁷ There are 1,641 forces in Sub-Saharan Africa and 1,940 in the Western Hemisphere. Department of Defense, “Active Duty Military Personnel Strength By Regional Area and By Country,” June 30, 2010, available at defenselink.gov. The figures for total troops stationed abroad is a moving target because of the drawdown in Iraq and the buildup in Afghanistan. Moreover, the Defense Department does not break out separate figures for deployments in Korea and Kuwait, for reasons that are not clear to me. The June 30 figures show a total of 297,000 troops abroad, about 30,000 less than if we add the peacetime regional deployments listed in the text to the OIF and OEF deployments. This difference is accounted for by the fact that the Korean figures are not included in the DOD totals. The Kuwaiti figures are included in the OIF total and not broken out separately. GlobalSecurity.org shows 25,000 troops stationed in Kuwait. What the peacetime deployment will be if the US exits Iraq entirely is not clear. See GlobalSecurity.org, “World Wide Military Deployments.”

fourth benefit: should military action become necessary, it facilitates war waging through the advantages of joint training, in-theater bases, and the like.

Deterrence and reassurance are the main mechanisms in the Middle East and East Asia because regional security cooperation is not well developed in either place. In Europe regional security cooperation is well advanced and institutionalized, both within NATO and within the European Union through the European Security and Defense Policy. The size of the forces in each region is determined not only by the military missions the forces are to perform in the event of war, but also by political judgments as to what looks credible enough to deter and reassure. The peacetime regional presence of US forces, both ashore and afloat, is akin to gravity: it deeply affects the political contours of a region, but its effects are difficult to readily discern. Finally, in these three regions, most, but not all, states welcome the US in-theater presence. Even China still prefers some US presence in East Asia in order to contain Japan.

In this era of austerity, devoting 11% of US combat forces to the peacetime regional presence mission may be too expensive. Clearly, in this new era, US forces in Europe can and should be drawn down significantly, although not entirely removed. Europe is in a deep peace and Russia does not present a military threat of invasion. In East Asia, the United States has been bolstering its maritime forces, correctly so, in order to deal with China's growing maritime power. The Middle East is more complicated. In my view, all US forces should be withdrawn as quickly as feasible from Iraq, and there should be no peacetime presence in that country because for political reasons it is important to keep America's onshore footprint as small as possible in the Gulf. If all troops are withdrawn from Iraq, the onshore footprint of the United States in the Gulf is small, amounting to about 3,000 troops, with the largest contingent of 1,400 troops in Bahrain. Whether that is too much for the traffic to bear is not clear. What is clear is to keep the onshore footprint as small as possible, or if that proves not feasible, move to an over-the-horizon presence (see below).¹⁸

¹⁸ For a balanced assessment of the pros and cons of an onshore presence in the Gulf, see Daniel Byman, "A US Military Withdrawal from the Greater Middle East," in Stephen Van Evera and Sidharth Shah, eds., *The Prudent Use of Power in American National Security Strategy* (Cambridge MA: the Tobin Project, 2010), pp. 157-175.

Freedom of the Seas and Assured Access to Persian Gulf Oil

The third collective good that the United States should continue to help provide consists of two elements that are crucial to a stable framework for an open and prosperous international economic order: freedom of the seas and assured access to Persian Gulf oil. These two are collective goods in their own right, and the United States has been the major, if not sole provider of each for many decades. The United States and the world benefit from both.

Over 90% of the world's commerce travels by sea, and 10-12 million seaborne cargo containers come into the United States each year. Trade – imports and exports – accounts for 19% of total US economic activity.¹⁹ Trade is also important to the other great powers of the world, and it constitutes a greater share of their GDPs than is the case for the United States. The European Union is the world's largest importer and exporter, and China, the United States, and Germany are the largest national state importers and exporters. In 2008 oil tanker trade made up 34% of total world seaborne trade.²⁰ Freedom of the seas is central to seaborne trade, and to carrying the fuel (oil) that runs the world's transport systems. Freedom of the seas is guaranteed by strong naval power against piracy or national interference with trade. This has largely been done by the United States because there are not many blue-water navies other than America's. If the United States is to continue to provide this collective good, then it will have to continue to project its naval power on the oceans – forward deploy it, so to speak – and, as a consequence, will find that some overseas bases are likely make this task easier.

Assured access to Persian Gulf oil is also central to an open and prosperous international economic order because the Persian Gulf contains about two-thirds of the world's one trillion barrels of proven oil reserves.²¹ Because of the projections of continued reliance on oil for the next several decades, the world economy needs assurance of stable and secure supplies. Market forces largely determine supply

¹⁹ CIA 2009 estimates for US exports are \$1.1 trillion and \$1.6 trillion for imports (figures are rounded). See Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, online at cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/. Exports account for 7.8% of US GDP and imports for 11.5%.

²⁰ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), *Review of Maritime Transport, 2009*.

²¹ US Energy Administration and CIA Factbook.

and demand on a daily basis, and the market, as Eugene Gholz and Daryl Press demonstrate, has been good at smoothing out disruption in supply.²² But oil has never been left entirely to the market; political factors and military power have always intervened and played a significant role in Persian Gulf oil supplies (and elsewhere). The threat to Gulf oil supplies is much reduced now that Saddam Hussein is no longer in power and Iran is conventionally weak. But even Gholz and Press, who argue that the United States need not maintain peacetime deployments in the Persian Gulf to deter Iran from threatening tanker egress out of the Gulf, state: “At most, US energy interests require an offshore air and naval presence nearby.”²³ That is power projection and an in-theater (or nearby theater) presence by another name.

In sum, freedom of the seas and assured access to Persian Gulf oil require a strong US navy to ply the seas.

Contain and Defeat al-Qaeda

The final collective good that the United States should continue to take the lead in providing, although avoiding do so visibly as much as possible, is to contain, and preferably defeat, al-Qaeda. For our purposes, there are two central questions to ask about al-Qaeda: (1) what does al-Qaeda want? (2) How much of an “away game” does the United States need to play to achieve its objectives of containing and defeating al-Qaeda? Al-Qaeda’s central goal is to evict the West from Muslim lands – all Muslim lands – so that it can topple the Muslim regimes that are hostile to its vision of a good society. Its goal, in short, is to recreate the caliphate of the 8th to 9th centuries. Al-Qaeda chose to go after the United States because of its central role in propping up or supporting these regimes, and the United States found itself caught in a Muslim civil war or insurgency. In this sense there is merit to Robert Pape’s argument that it is foreign occupation by combat troops that has been the single biggest cause, if not the cause, of suicide terrorism, although Daniel Byman points out that Osama bin Laden did not turn against the United States as the decisive target until

²² Eugene Gholz and Daryl G. Press, *Energy Alarmism: The Myths That Make Americans Worry about Oil*, Policy Analysis Paper #589, (Washington DC: The CATO Institute, April 5, 2007), pp. 11-14.

²³ Ibid., p. 16.

1994-95, several years after the deployment of US troops to Saudi Arabia.²⁴ The war in Iraq, according to the Central Intelligence Agency, also made America's al-Qaeda terrorism problem much, much worse, not better. Thus, there is no denying that the projection of US military power to Muslim lands, especially Arab lands, helped to create America's al-Qaeda problem.

The question we need to ask now, however, is this: will the withdrawal of American combat military power from Arab and Muslim lands per se cause al-Qaeda to cease and desist against the United States? Byman concludes that withdrawal of US combat forces, while it will lessen popular Arab and Muslim support for al-Qaeda attacks, will not stop al-Qaeda from going after the United States if it still provides support for the regimes al-Qaeda wants to topple with security assistance, intelligence support, political-economic support, and the like.²⁵

I think we can make the case stronger than that. In my view the United States is in a "death match" with al-Qaeda because its stated goals are not something the United States can compromise on or satisfy. In a little known but apparently important video, Adam Gadahn, a senior operative, spokesman, and media advisor for al-Qaeda, stated what the United States must do to avoid al-Qaeda's wrath (and I quote at length):

"First, you must pull every last one of your soldiers, spies, security advisors, trainers, attaches, contractors, robots, drones, and all other American personnel, ships and aircraft out of every Muslim land from Afghanistan to Zanzibar."

Second, you must end all support – both moral and material – to Israel and bar your citizens from traveling to Occupied Palestine or settling there, and you must impose a blanket ban on American trade with the Zionist regime and investment in it.

²⁴ See Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005), and his updated data set in Robert A. Pape and James K. Feldman, eds., *Cutting the Fuse: The Explosion of Global Suicide Terrorism and How to Stop It* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Byman, p. 161.

²⁵ Byman, pp. 164-165.

Third, you must stop all support and aid – be it military, political, or economic or otherwise – to the hated regimes of the Muslim world. This includes the so-called ‘development aid’....

Fourth, you must cease all interference in the religion, society, politics, economy and government of the Islamic world.

Fifth, you must also put an end to all forms of American and American sponsored interference in the educational curricula and information media of the Muslim world..,

And sixth, you must free all Muslim captives from your prisons, detention facilities and concentration camps, regardless of whether they have been recipients of what you call a ‘fair’ trial or not.

Your refusal to release our prisoners or your failure to meet any of our other legitimate demands will mean the continuation of our just struggle against your tyranny....²⁶

A close student of al-Qaeda, Audrey Cronin concludes, after examining al-Qaeda’s goals:

“its [al-Qaeda’s] primary aim is to remove Western influence so as to put in place a political system that governs according to Islamist principles. Yet the world of the twenty-first century is increasingly interdependent and intertwined. Al Qaeda’s goals, at least as articulated over recent years, could not be achieved without overturning an international political and economic system characterized by globalization and predominant US power.”²⁷

²⁶ “Adam Gadahn: Legitimate Demands Part 2, Barack’s Dilemma, June 20, 2010,” online at www.nefafoundation.org. I am indebted to Mary Habeck of the Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, for bringing this material to my attention.

²⁷ Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 182.

In short, it is us or them that win.

Al Qaeda is still a dangerous organization and one that if it acquires WMD capabilities and operatives trained to use them, “it will do so.”²⁸ In my view, it is axiomatic that the United States needs to project military power abroad to go after al-Qaeda. That does not mean that military power is the silver bullet to defeat al-Qaeda, that projection of military power means waging large-scale counterinsurgency wars wherever we find an al-Qaeda cell, that political approaches are unimportant, or that homeland defenses do not need to be strengthened. To the extent that force is necessary to defeat al-Qaeda, it should involve close police and intelligence cooperation with other states, heavy reliance on other states capabilities to deal with their indigenous al-Qaeda operatives, and the use of US special operations forces and covert CIA operations to supplement host states forces, as has been the case in Yemen and Somalia. The main point, however, is that we cannot simply play an “at home game” to deal with al-Qaeda. Some type of “away game,” which involves the projection of US military power, operating from overseas bases, onshore or afloat, is inescapable.

Conclusion

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The case that I have presented for a less ambitious version of selective engagement has said little about what to do in Iraq, other than get out as soon as is feasible, and nothing at all about Afghanistan. Those two issues are important and will have great bearing on the future resources available for America’s military forces and, depending on how they are resolved, on public support for an internationalist US grand strategy. I do not deal with them here because I have tried to look beyond those two enterprises in order to lay out a vision for a global military role for the United States that is sustainable in light of the impact of fiscal austerity and the slow emergence of multipolarity. Nor have I laid out where and how the US can curtail some of its commitments in order to make a diminished version of selective engagement affordable and sustainable, other than to suggest some cuts of forces in Europe, or showed how the United States can get others to do more.

²⁸ Dennis C. Blair, Director of National Intelligence, “Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence,” February 2, 2010.

Finally, I have not suggested where the United States can cut the defense budget without undercutting the core missions of selective engagement that I have argued for. A more careful examination requires some things not yet done: a careful audit of US military commitments to aid other states, apart from the obvious treaties that involve clear defense commitments to about 36 states; a careful look at the defense budget for cuts; and some notion of what a trimmed down selective engagement force would look like.²⁹

What I have done is to make the case for a continuation of selective engagement in order to avoid a retreat into offshore balancing. The crux of my argument is that the United States benefits greatly by pursuing such a strategy because my belief is that if the United States does not take the leadership in working to provide these collective goods, they will not be provided for, and American interests and the world will be worse off. This is not a call for the United States to be the world's policeman, nor to bear these collective goods burden alone. It is a call for avoiding the wholesale withdrawal of American military power from abroad and a plea for continued American leadership.

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²⁹ For one analysis of where the defense budget can be cut, see Report of the Sustainable Defense Task Force, *Debts, Deficits, and Defense: A Way Forward*, June 11, 2010.