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Rethinking U.S. Grand Strategy:
The Case for “Offshore Balancing”

Note: Below are informal notes taken by a JHU/APL staff member at the Seminar.

Dr. Walt began his seminar by noting that he intended to present a different way of thinking about Grand Strategy. He also wanted the audience to know that he considered himself a Realist who sees world politics as very competitive with states competing with one another because there is no world government to protect them from each other. Some countries will always afraid of others.

Some basic concepts
- Great Powers like being in charge – it is always better to be Godzilla than to be Bambi
- Permanent peace is illusive – world politics is not for sissies
- US leaders have largely understood these concepts throughout our history
  - Occasionally they bring up subjects like human rights

US Grand Strategy in history
- 1775-1900: US tried to stay out of Great Power conflicts
  - While building up structures and institutions at home and expanding across the continent
  - While working to establish regional hegemony
  - US was generally ruthless and successful in its efforts
- 1900-1945: “offshore balancing”
  - US only wanted to be a hegemom in its own hemisphere
  - US wanted to help others build balance in their own areas since no one else could dominate here
  - US did not intervene in others’ disputes, letting others do the heavy lifting,
  - US only entered conflicts when absolutely necessary
  - US also always came out ahead, comparatively speaking, especially after WWI & WWII
    - US rose to power as others ruined themselves in conflicts
- 1945-1991: “containment” (“onshore balancing”)
  - US had no one to pass the buck to, so it took on all kinds of tasks during the Cold War
  - US built up the military industrial complex that Eisenhower had warned about
  - More groups tried to get the US involved in their conflicts than wanted it out of their conflicts
  - When the Soviet Union fell, it left the US standing alone
  - US was left as the only country with a high level of primacy
  - Some (Bush I Administration) saw this period as a rare chance to remake the world
    - Expand NATO
    - Handle dual containment of Iran and Iraq in the Gulf
  - US became the “indispensable nation”
  - Lots of “made in America” solutions
  - US leadership believed that every time US got stuck with solving a problem it was a good thing

America primacy is still evident
- Economically – US has 25% of gross world product, purchasing power, etc.
- Militarily – US spends more on national security than does the rest of world combined; only country with global power projection capabilities and “command of the commons” (air, sea, etc.)
US may not have total information monopoly but it does have tremendous influence with the spread of its culture, media, roles in global institutions, etc.

US really is in a pretty good position geopolitically, however….
- US, as the 800lb. gorilla, is frightening to other countries
- While the world economy shrank by about $11trillion, there was no apparent effect on US foreign policy ambitions
- US does have enormous problems developing
  - CBO says that 13% of the GDP could be tied up in debt
  - US has large foreign debts, mostly to China
  - Baby Boom generation is educated and spoiled enough to expect a great deal from its government
  - Productivity is declining

Primary US interests
- Maintain its position of primacy
  - Since WWII the Balance of Power has been in our favor
  - No one runs for president espousing the idea that the US should be No. 2
- Maintain an open world economy to include the free flow of oil/energy supplies
- Deter attacks on the homeland
- When possible, advance the cause of democracy and human rights around the world – but only when convenient

What US power is good for:
- Economically – robustness of US economy helped win the Cold War
  - Many in the world want access to the US economy
  - A healthy economy is necessary to the American way of life
- Militarily – problems come when we forget what US military power is good at which is deterring or stopping large scale conventional aggression
  - Should never underestimate the value of a strong military
  - But US military not good at running other countries – especially those with very different cultures
    - However, no one is good at this
  - Iraq and Afghanistan will go down military failures
    - But we are also failing in Detroit and California at the moment
    - We should be able to understand the political situation here, but apparently don’t
    - If we can’t organize political realities here, how could we elsewhere?
  - Overall record for the military: tried to bring democracy to others about 25 times
    - Failed more often than not
    - If you don’t count Europe, almost all failures

Misuse of US power causes problems for the US
- Having a strong US conventional military encourages others to develop nuclear forces to keep the US out
- Such an active military is costly in both money and people
  - Also bad for the image of the US
- US does not gain much with all of this activity – most places are not that important to US interests

Alternative argument involves counterterrorism
- US military efforts in Afghanistan were to deny territory to terrorists
- However, it is not clear that safe havens have helped terrorists all that much
  - The 9/11 attacks were organized out of Hamburg
- Things might even go better in Afghanistan without the US there
  - Take the Russian example: the Mujahdeen did not follow the Russian Army back home
- Look at cost-benefit analysis
  - The cost of the US fight in Afghanistan is about 5 times that country’s GDP
Alternative Grand Strategies
- **Global Hegemony** – attempts to run the world
  - Appealed to the neo-conservatives
  - Concept died in Iraq
- **Selective Engagement** – basically the Bush I and Clinton strategies
  - Engaged worldwide but with selective use of power
  - Bad thing was that they were not very selective in practice
    - Troops were busy: Balkans, Somalia, Columbia
  - Encourages others to take a free ride – think Europe
  - Encourages “reckless driving” – think Georgia’s faceoff with Russia last year
- **Bottomline:** both are costly and not the best way to handle Grand Strategy

Offshore Balancing – beats the Alternatives
- Relies on regional allies to hold balances
- US gets involved only when things go bad
- Basic idea is to get others to do the heavy lifting
- Involves such things as drawing down the number of troops in Europe even more than what has happened
  - Europe is not doing its share so make them do it – start with making SACEUR a European
- Asian alliances would still need some significant presence
  - Build a better relationship with India
  - Might even consider an alliance with Russia to balance against China
- US must play hard-to-get

Would need a different approach in the MidEast and Central Asia
- US did Offshore Balancing in the MidEast after 1945
- Never stayed anywhere too long and kept presence offshore
- Then took the side of Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War but subsequently had to fight Iraq
- Before 1967 US support of Israel was much more conditional

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Core Principles of Offshore Balancing</th>
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<tr>
<td>U.S. remains only great power in W. Hemisphere (“regional hegemony”)</td>
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<tr>
<td>U.S. helps maintain balance of power in Europe, Asia, and Persian Gulf.</td>
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<td>U.S. relies as much as possible on regional allies, and “passes the buck” to them whenever possible.</td>
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<td>Key: U.S. deploys significant air/ground forces only when balance of power is in jeopardy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>U.S. does not pursue regime change, nation-building, or other forms of social engineering.</td>
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<td>U.S. does not disengage: OB is neither isolationism nor a strategy for radical disarmament.</td>
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Virtues of Offshore Balancing
- Balances are regional but the US maintains a massive capability to intervene
  - Do it with a minimal footprint
  - US does not want to look imperial
- Concept worked fairly well for a long time even when worrying about the Soviets
  - Should work even better without having to worry about the Soviets

Under “Dual Containment” it was possible to use Iran and Iraq to contain each other
- But made both Iran and Iraq resentful of US efforts
- US worried about Iraq and Saddam
- Could have gotten more out of linkage to the Oslo Peace Process
- The presence of US forces in Saudi Arabia pushed Al-Qaeda into action

- In early- to mid-1990s Iran pushed its client Hezbollah
  - Forcing increased interest in acquiring nuclear weapons
Policies of the time made it hard to respond adequately
Situation was bad geo-politics
Neo-conservatives did not go far enough

Another bad idea – regional transformation (mostly Bush II after 9/11)
- Administration wanted to use US power to overthrow governments we did not like (e.g., Saddam’s Iraq)
- The war in Iraq has made it harder to develop good balance in the region
- Also allowed Iran to increase its strength
- Moved to unconditional support of Israel – another bad idea, not good for balancing

Offshore Balancing is a better alternative Grand Strategy
- May be harder to get cooperation and it is costly
- China currently has more opportunities to make friends
- US has made itself less popular over the last few years
- China should want to be involved in the concept of Offshore Balancing for the next 20-40 years as it develops internally

Other elements of Offshore Balancing required of the US
- Get out of Iraq
- Move presence in the MidEast back over the horizon
- Take the concept of regime change off the table
  - Might stop the development of nuclear weapons or permit development of deterrence
- Develop a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine
  - All other solutions are worse
- Support broadening political participation, enhancement of women’s rights, etc.
  - Hard to predict the consequences

CONCLUSIONS
Offshore Balancing primarily gives the US a wide range of choices – more than any other alternative,
- To keep this going must use US power to shape other countries to support US interests
  - Hard to do and expensive
  - Must also remember that others have their own interests / values / etc.
  - Others may resent US efforts
- Doing too much can be costly, too

Offshore Balancing shifts the responsibilities for global security to others
- US would be available to back up others
- Must also avoid social engineering efforts – most will likely fail
  - Must remember that most parts of the world are not all that important to US interests

Expectation: the Obama Administration will move in the direction of Offshore Balancing
- But not as soon as they should
- Fits in with Churchill’s remark that the US always does the right thing, but only after trying everything else

QUESTION & ANSWER SESSION
Moving to Offshore Balancing will take some time
- Allies realize that if they don’t do what needs to be done, the US will do it eventually
- Must make it clear to allies that we are in a post-military status now
- US should not be defending Europe
  - Can’t expect them to help elsewhere in the world if they are not taking responsibility at home
- US would help in any big conflict – something that would be very unlikely now
  - Anything that did happen would take a long time to develop and could be handled
US always assumes that other countries are not rational about their nuclear weapons unless they are shown to be otherwise
- The Soviets were deemed to be rational for the purposes of nuclear deterrence
- China’s leaders once talked about losing 300 million people in a nuclear war but not now
- Iran’s elite are not suicidal, therefore, they are deterable if the country acquires nuclear weapons

Power and the Great Powers
- Power means the capability to effect others
  - US can effect others more than they can effect us
- Does not mean that the US can control others
- Power can be anything that provides the capacity to shape others – can be economic or military
- Hard power more important than soft power
  - Soft power capability depends on a strong hard power capability

Super-empowered individuals (non-state actors who might be terrorists or criminals)
- Terrorist organizations are fairly weak
  - If they could exert power any other way, they would be doing it
  - They must use terror activities to be noticed at all
- Terrorists still can cause problems for the US but we may exaggerate their power
  - Terrorists are not a threat to the US way of life – if nuclear weapons are not considered
  - If the US suffered a terrorist attack like 9/11 every 10 years, it would be horrible but would not change the US way of life
- Effects of terrorism not like the long-term effects of the Cold War
  - Terrorist acts would scare the people and reactions would be very inconvenient
- Situation changes if nuclear devices are acquired – or we think they have been
  - Important to keep all nuclear materials secure
  - Terrorist acquiring an entire nuclear weapon is the biggest scare
  - Terrorist acquiring nuclear materials is less scary since they would have difficulty developing a usable weapon

The existence of nuclear weapons according to some theories has made it more difficult to have major wars
- It is a mystery why US and Soviets thought they needed so many nuclear weapons during the Cold War
- Would be a good idea to have dramatic reductions in numbers of nuclear weapons on both sides
- Would not be a good idea to have no nuclear weapons or nearly none
  - Not better off without nuclear weapons because of the continuing threat of nuclear terrorism
  - Impossible to eliminate the knowledge of how to build nuclear weapons
- Another argument: no need for nuclear weapons if you have the world’s best conventional military
  - But that military would have to stay in only the non-nuclear parts of the world
  - Might not even be able to approach those areas where nuclear weapons are/could be present

Incentivizing other powers to take on more of the burden
- Many others have more interests in Afghanistan than we do
- US is really only there by accident – only geographic location of Al-Qaeda
- It was a good idea to go to Afghanistan to handle the Taliban/Al-Qaeda issue
- It was not a good idea to try to fix the place
- US should not try to dictate solutions – it won’t work

Force structure needed to handle future missions
- Not much developed on how the force should be structured for these efforts
- Navy should generally like Offshore Balancing
- Army should not be against it
  - They have been taking on commitments that grew into other missions
  - Army has had to take on more irregular warfare tasks and they do not like them
No one made a decision about whether these sorts of tasks were a good idea under earlier Grand Strategies

- Before Iraq Rumsfeld seemed to have in mind something like Offshore Balancing
  - US military might go places but would not be staying anywhere
  - Apparently did not understand that once you overthrow a government, you own it
- Hard to design a military that must do 3 or 4 major missions and must do them all well

Weaknesses of Offshore Balancing
- There is a premium on being able to gauge trends just right
- If the US had been more engaged as a Great Power in the 1930s, could it have prevented WWII?

Ways that the US will not try to shape others
- US should not use military power for humanitarian purposes
- US military rarely does do purely humanitarian efforts
- Hard to get the American people to support costly philanthropy

Alliances and relationships
- Europe still has a lot of military expertise that is underperforming
- If the US could get serious about Offshore Balancing, others could be forced to do more
- India should not be considered a liability – relations are touchy but manageable
- Israel is not a strategic asset for its region
  - Can’t help Israel too much for political reasons
  - Situation won’t change in the future
  - US is in the Gulf only for the strategic commodity of oil – Israel does not play a role
- Singapore is actually an example of how the system could work
  - When it looked like the US was leaving the region after the Cold War ended, Singapore built a base for the US Navy
- Some situations might go too far the other way
  - Some allies might say that they do not trust the US and so are moving toward China
- It is possible to underbalance but it would be a good idea for the US to be doing a little less in the world at the moment

Selling Offshore Balancing to the American people
- Won’t be easy, especially since they see themselves as being indispensable
  - Both Democrats and Republicans hold this view
- Only thing that might force Offshore Balancing is a recognition that the current course is costing too much
- When the economy fell apart, there should have been some change in foreign policy – but there wasn’t
  - US should be adjusting its foreign policy goals to fit the resources it has available
- No agreement on what doing more should include
  - Not necessarily giving up what we have (not an empire)
  - Footprint should be smaller
  - Should be done slowly

China
- Already has many geo-political challenges
  - Good situation for the US
  - Would not say so for diplomatic reasons
- Not a good idea for the US to be bogged down in the MidEast but also not a good idea to pull out of the area and leave it to China
  - China could not handle the lead role anyway
- US does not need to control the Persian Gulf
  - Just must make sure no one else does
  - If the Gulf is open, the Gulf countries will always want to sell their oil
- Soviet involvement in Afghanistan was a good thing in Cold War terms
It did help in ending the Cold War since they had to expend so much effort/funds

- Big problem is the difficulty of identifying what is important to the US

US has had about 25% of the world’s economy since WWII

- Unless there is a big problem, this will likely continue
- Military leadership is so much more than how much is spent
  - Most other Powers in the world are our allies at one level or another – a very good thing
- We should have enough funding to handle Offshore Balancing
- Biggest threat may be the AARP
  - Baby Boomer generation will be demanding their benefits soon
  - A greedy generation expects the most

Philippines

- Expenditures there seem modest so far
- May get bigger if US gets more involved

Egypt

- Mubarak’s visit to the US is not getting as much attention as Sadat’s did
  - His relationship with the US is not as strong as was Sadat’s
  - There are reasons for that on both sides
- Obama seems to understand the importance of the Palestinian issue & understands the few options
  - Really only the 2-state solution
- What won’t work
  - Israel keeps everything – ethnic cleansing operations – no one wants this
  - One state solution with all having equal rights – would mean end of the Jewish state since the Israelis would be outnumbered
  - Israel retains West Bank & Gaza with apartheid situation
- Although Obama gets the idea of the 2-state solution, it will be hard to make it happen
  - Deep divisions in Israel over this

Organizations

- UN should be taking care of more problems but they don’t have their own resources
- NATO – could do more but needs consensus to make decisions
- No others to handle large scale problems
- In any case still organizations must have individual countries willing to step forward