

Note to seminar participants:

Thanks in advance for reading my paper. It is going to be the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of my book on U.S. policy toward China. Apologies in advance for typos and other errors—this is a lightly footnoted, working draft.

I look forward to your comments. Thanks,  
-- Charlie

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## Implications of China's Rise for U.S. Grand Strategy: Should the United States Retain its Security Commitments to East Asia?

What are the implications of China's rise for U.S. grand strategy? Given the tremendous growth of China's economy and military capabilities, the United States needs to ask the most basic questions about its national security and economic policies. Should it retain and deepen its alliances in East Asia or instead terminate these commitments and withdraw from the region? If retaining its commitments, how should the United States stay in Northeast Asia? Should it pursue military dominance and an overall competitive approach or a more moderate military and political approach? Should it give priority to limiting defense spending and solving alliance burden-sharing problems?

The United States' key allies in East Asia are Japan and South Korea. In addition, the Philippines is a treaty ally, and the United States has an ambiguous commitment to Taiwan. More broadly, and vaguely, the United States strives to preserve the "rule-based order" in East Asia, as well as globally. The United States has forward deployed forces in Japan and South Korea, and relies on U.S. bases in Guam to support military operations in the region. The grand strategy debate focuses on Japan and South Korea.

We do not need to start from scratch to begin to answer these questions about the impact of China's rise. The U.S. grand strategy debate that began with the end of the Cold War, and is still evolving, provides a well-established template from which to analyze them.<sup>1</sup> Employing standard categories, I first divide the spectrum of grand

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<sup>1</sup> For an analytic review of the grand strategy debate in the 1990s, see Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, "Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy," *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Winter 1996/97), pp. 5-53. More recent reviews include Paul. C. Avey, Jonathan N. Markowitz, and Robert J. Reardon, "Disentangling Grand Strategy: International Relations Theory and U.S. Grand Strategy," *Texas National Security Review* Vol. 2, No. 1 (November 2018), pp. 29-51 and Rebecca Friedman Lissner, "What is Grand Strategy? A Conceptual Minefield," *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (November 2018), pp.

strategies into four types: Neo-isolation, which calls for terminating U.S. alliances; and Deep Engagement, Offshore Balancing, and Primacy, each of which calls for preserving U.S. alliances in Asia, but for different reasons and/or via different means. These four grand strategies share similar priorities—U.S. security and, to a lesser extent, U.S. prosperity.

There is a second dimension in the U.S. grand strategy debate—political and ideological goals, including most importantly spreading and preserving democracy, and to a lesser extent, protecting human rights. In principle, each of the four security-focused grand strategies could vary along this dimension. In practice, the combination of Neo-isolation with a high priority on spreading democracy is virtually non-existent. To keep the categories relatively simple, I will identify only one additional grand strategy—Liberal Hegemony, which combines Deep Engagement with a high priority for spreading democracy, including via the use of force if necessary, and protecting human rights, and has received extensive attention in the on-going debate. This simplification is analytically efficient because Deep Engagement is the key alternative to Neo-isolation; in many ways, Off-shore Balancing is best understood as a variant of Deep Engagement.

Neo-isolation has received relatively little attention in the recent round of the grand strategy debate, but it deserves consideration because its arguments are clear and its conclusions provide a sharp alternative to those offered by the other grand strategies. Some variants of the grand strategy of Restraint, which has been prominent in the grand strategy debate since the 2010s, come close to Neo-isolation.<sup>2</sup> Because other variants of Restraint are adequately captured by variants of Deep Engagement, I do not address Restraint as a distinct grand strategy.

At some risk of oversimplification, the various grand strategies reflect divergent answers to the following questions:

- Would a regional hegemon threaten the security of the U.S. homeland?

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53-73. Benjamin Miller and Ziv Rubinovitz, *Grand Strategy from Truman to Trump* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2020) provide a theory-driven explanation of change in U.S. grand strategy.

<sup>2</sup> On Restraint, see Barry Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014). On the varieties of Restraint, see Miranda Priebe, Kristen Gunness, Karl P. Mueller, and Zachary Burdette, *The Limits of Restraint: The Military Implications of a Restrained U.S. Grand Strategy in the Asia Pacific* (RAND, 2022), esp. pp. 6-8; the variant that they term Defense Restraint is very close to Neo-isolation.

- Would a major-power war (that did not involve the United States) threaten U.S. security because the United States might get drawn in?
- How large a threat does nuclear proliferation pose to the United States?
- Is Primacy feasible—can the United States decisively out compete China?
- Do U.S. alliances contribute to U.S. prosperity by supporting the international economic regime?
- How important is reducing/limiting U.S. defense spending?
- How important is spreading and preserving democracy abroad?

The grand strategies I have identified do not reflect the full potential variation produced by this range of issues; instead, the grand strategies tend to hold bundles of positions on these issues that support their overall conclusion. Moreover, not all scholars that are typically identified as included as proponents of a given grand strategy fully agree on all of these issues. The following discussion explores ideal types—defined by central positions on key issues—instead of attempting to fully delineate the ongoing U.S. grand strategy debate.

The deepest divide among the security-focused grand strategies is between Neo-isolation, which calls for ending U.S. major-power alliances, and a spectrum of grand strategies—Deep Engagement, Offshore Balancing, and Primacy—which calls for retaining them, at least under certain conditions. Neo-isolation is generally viewed as an extreme option and therefore has not played a central role in the recent grand strategy debate. The weight of recent debate has been between strategies that call for preserving U.S. alliance commitments. These grand strategies disagree on when and how the United States should retain its alliances and/or on what is required to meet the security demands of these alliances, but not over preserving them. The other deep divide in the debate is between Liberal Hegemony and the security-focused strategies, which place less relative weight on political/ideological values.

My assessment of the impact of China's rise is somewhat counterintuitive—China's rise increases the strength of the arguments for preserving U.S. alliances and for terminating them. Although intense debate has continued over decades, my own assessment is that the case between staying and leaving—Neo-isolation and Deep Engagement/Offshore Balancing has been a close call. The best arguments, if not all of the arguments, in these schools are logically sound, their assumptions are reasonable, and

their overall case is internally consistent. At least in broad gauge, China's rise strengthens both sets of arguments and does little to strengthen one relative to the other, leaving the choice between them a close call.

In contrast, China's rise weakens the case for Primacy and Liberal Hegemony. China's rise make Primacy—at least its military requirements—infeasible. In addition, and fortunately, the United States has excellent prospects for defending its allies with the capabilities implied by Primacy. The case against Liberal Hegemony is quite different and, in the end, more subjective. When a state's vital interests are not at risk, it has the leeway to pursue the spread and preservation of democracy through the use of force. This was arguable the situation from the end of the Cold War until China's growing power began to shift the balance of power and redefine the military situation in Northeast Asia; that is, during what is often termed the period of U.S. unipolarity. Now the United States has less leeway. Fighting a large war outside of Asia would reduce the military capabilities the United States had available to deter and fight China. Much more important, fighting a war in East Asia to preserve democracy would put U.S. security and, possibly even its survival, at serious risk.

The following sections summarize the arguments offered by the schools of thought in the grand strategy debate and consider how China's rise influences the strength of their arguments. The concluding section offers two arguments. First, a more nuanced (and subjective) assessment, suggests that China's rise makes terminating the United States' alliances and commitments to East Asia its best option. Second, ending U.S. alliances may not, however, be the United States best option because the spectrum of grand strategies does not identify the possibility of retaining some U.S. commitments, while ending others. We should consider this possibility because there is significant variation in the nature and importance of U.S. commitments in East Asia and the risks that they pose, ranging from alliance commitments to Japan, to complicated commitments to Taiwan, to still less clear commitments in the South China Sea. My conjecture is that if the United States ended its commitment to Taiwan, its best option would be to maintain its alliance commitments to Japan and South Korea.

Neo-isolation

*Summary.* Neo-isolationists believe that the United States can be highly secure without security alliances.<sup>3</sup> According to this view, two key features enable the United States to be highly secure. First, large oceans on the east and west protect the United States from all direct threats of invasion. The combination of distance and water make invasion extremely difficult, if not entirely impossible. Second, nuclear weapons are highly effective at deterring attacks against a country's homeland and the United States will be able to maintain extensive retaliatory capabilities—an assured retaliatory capability and more—against even a wealthy and technologically capable competitor. In other words, the United States enjoys a large advantage of defense over offense. Water and distance favor defense, as do nuclear weapons especially when combined with the wealth and technological skill of a major power.<sup>4</sup> A country would have to be much wealthier—possibly an order of magnitude—than the United States to effectively undermine the capabilities it requires for deterrence or to win a war against the United States. Thus, a Eurasian hegemon—a state that was able to acquire and harness the majority of the continents' wealth—would be unable to deny the United States the capabilities it requires to preserve its security.

In addition, during the 1990s Neo-isolationists included a third leg to their argument—a regional hegemon was unlikely to arise. There was a rough balance of power in Europe, geography favored defense in Northeast Asia, and the major powers that lacked nuclear weapons could acquire them if they security required it, and would be responsible and capable nuclear power. Eurasian wealth would therefore remain safely divided.

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<sup>3</sup> The central arguments are presented in Eugene Gholz, Daryl G. Press and Harvey M. Sapolsky, "Come Home, America: The Strategy of Restraint in the face of Temptation," *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (Spring 1997), pp. 5-48. For an early analysis along these lines, see Eric A. Nordlinger, *Isolation Reconfigured: American Foreign Policy in a New Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> On offense-defense theory see Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (January 1978), pp. 167-214; and Charles L. Glaser and Chaim Kaufmann, "What is the Offense-Defense Balance and Can We Measure It?" *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (Spring 1998), pp. 44-82.

Consequently, the United States was triply secure. Oceans and nuclear weapons individually meant that a hegemon would be unable to undermine necessary U.S. military capabilities. In addition, a hegemon was not going to arise anyway.

In response to various critiques (some of which are presented by the grand strategies described below), Neo-isolationists offered a range of additional arguments. Critics argued that because wars in Europe or Asia could not be ruled out and the United States might then get drawn into them—that is, choose to join, as it had in the First and Second World Wars—the United States should maintain its alliances to prevent these major power wars. According to Neo-isolationists, however, U.S. security would not be threatened by these wars, so the United States should stay out of them; and, although the United States might be tempted to join a major-power war, it should be able to exercise the judgement required to avoid being pulled in. Moreover, deterrence could fail even if the United States maintains its alliance commitments, in which case its forward-deployed forces would guarantee U.S. involvement in the war that it should have skipped. Critics also fear that ending U.S. alliances would lead to nuclear proliferation by major powers—prominently Germany and Japan—that have not acquired nuclear weapons because they are covered by U.S. extended deterrence commitments and its nuclear umbrella. Neo-isolationists counter that these countries have the wealth, technological capability, political institutions and political stability required for nuclear proliferation to be safe, possibly even desirable.

Neo-isolationists favor open international trade but believe that U.S. security alliances are not necessary to protect U.S. prosperity and the international economy. Because trade is in the interests of all of the major powers, a hegemonic power or a global security provider to maintain the openness of the international economy. Although the termination of U.S. alliances could result in some countries becoming less secure, this would not significantly reduce their willingness to trade because relative economic gains between powers of comparable size tend to be small and take a long time to accumulate. Furthermore, a war between other major powers, which the United States did not join, would hurt the U.S. economy, but not cripple it.<sup>5</sup> Trade accounts for a

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<sup>5</sup> Gholz and Press argue a step further, holding that the U.S. economy might even benefit; see Eugene Gholz and Daryl G. Press, “The Effects of Wars on Neutral Countries: Why It Doesn’t Pay to Preserve

relatively small share of the U.S. economy and not all, or even most, of this trade would be lost. In any event, the economic costs would be much smaller than the economic and personnel costs of preparing to fight and then fighting such a war; they would also be smaller than the risk that escalation of a major-power convention war involving the United States would escalate to nuclear weapons being used against the U.S. homeland.

Finally, Neo-isolation gives priority to limiting U.S. defense spending, highlighting the inherent value of investing in U.S. well-being and the instrumental value of maintaining and nurturing U.S. economic and technological strengths.

*China.* We can use this summary to evaluate the impact of China's rise on the strength of the Neo-isolationist analysis. In coming decades China's economic growth may produce an economy on the scale of the Eurasian hegemon that the United States feared during the Cold War. China's wealth and growing investment in its economy, combined with increasing knowledge of and experience with advanced technology, may enable it to become a global military power in coming decades. Unlike the Cold-war fear, China would achieve this imposing economic capability, and its related military potential, without war and conquest. Although there would be a couple of militarily capable countries in its region, China would have the wherewithal to pursue global ambitions.

Nevertheless, the Neo-isolationist argument remains strong—the United States will be able to maintain the military capabilities required to protect its homeland against attack and coercion, even when facing such an economically-capable China. The Pacific Ocean will continue to provide a highly effective buffer against invasion of the U.S. homeland. Advances in reconnaissance capabilities and conventional precision-guided weapons are increasing the advantage of the defender, thereby increasing the difficulty of crossing the Pacific to launch an invasion and driving up the costs the forces required for attacking versus those required for defending.<sup>6</sup> The United States will also be able to

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Peace," *Security Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (Summer 2001), pp. 1-57. For disagreements, see Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad*, pp. 184-187.

<sup>6</sup> On anti-access capabilities see Toshi Yoshihara, *Going Anti-Access at Sea: How Japan Can Turn the Tables on China* (Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, 2014); and Stephen Biddle and Ivan Oelrich, "Future Warfare in the Western Pacific: Chinese Antiaccess/Area Denial, U.S. AirSea Battle, and the Command of the Commons in East Asia," *International Security*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Summer 2016), pp. 7-48



maintain highly effective nuclear deterrent forces against a determined China. Advances in reconnaissance are making certain types of nuclear weapons more vulnerable, but the competition between retaliation and damage-limitation will almost certainly continue to favor the U.S. ability to retaliate for the foreseeable future, at a minimum due to the survivability of U.S. ballistic missile submarines.<sup>7</sup> In short, China's rise will not seriously challenge the United States' ability to keep its homeland abundantly secure.

The situation in East Asia has become rather different than predicted by Neo-isolationists in the early post-Cold War period.<sup>8</sup> Although water favors defense, the size and sophistication of China's military capabilities are posing an increasingly serious threat to regional states. Even with the United States involved in the fight, China's air and naval capabilities may enable it to effectively blockade Taiwan. The United States and Japan should be able to protect Japan from a blockade, but this will take a dedicated effort.<sup>9</sup> Japan's prospects without the United States would be much reduced. Japan's concern about China's growing military capabilities and assertive regional policies is reflected in its 2022 decision to roughly double its defense spending over five years.<sup>10</sup> South Korea faces a far more substantial threat than does Japan.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the military competition in East Asia is straining political relations, as are China's more assertive regional policies. Consequently, in Northeast Asia the probability of crises and escalation to war is increasing and will likely continue to increase in coming decades.

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<sup>7</sup> Charles L. Glaser and Steve Fetter, "Should the United States Reject MAD?: Damage Limitation and U.S. Nuclear Strategy toward China," *International Security*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Summer 2016), pp. 49-98. For disagreement and debate see Brendan Rittenhouse Green et al., "Correspondence: The Limits of Damage-limitation," *International Security*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (Summer 2017), pp. 193-207; and; Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, "The New Era of Counterforce: Technological Change and the Future of Nuclear Deterrence," *International Security*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (Spring 2017), pp. 9-49. On the survivability of U.S. ballistic missile submarines, see Owen R. Cote Jr., "Invisible nuclear-armed submarines, or transparent oceans? Are ballistic missile submarines still the best deterrent for the United States," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 75, No. 1 (January 2019), pp. 30-35.

<sup>8</sup> See Gholz, Press and Sapolsky, "Come Home, America," pp. 21-22, 31-32.

<sup>9</sup> See chapter 4 for further discussion of these assessments.

<sup>10</sup> Jennifer Lind, "Japan Steps Up: How Asia's Rising Threats Convinced Tokyo to Abandon Its Defense Taboos," *Foreign Affairs* (December 23, 2022) at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/japan/japan-steps>.

<sup>11</sup> Eric Heginbotham and Richard J. Samuels, "Vulnerable US Alliance in Northeast Asia: The Nuclear Implications," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Spring 2021), p. 158-159.

Maybe counterintuitively, from the Neo-isolationist perspective this increased probability of war makes the case for leaving Northeast Asia more urgent. The increased probability of wars in the region means there will be more crises and wars that the United States could become involved in. This, in turn, strengthens the case for the United States to end its alliances and its security commitment to the region. The temptation will be for the United States to do exactly the opposite. However, although the greater prospect of conflict is clearly bad for the countries of Northeast Asia, it need not be nearly as bad for the United States. U.S. security will be largely unaffected by a war in which it is not involved. The real danger is that the United States retains its security commitments in East Asia, then fighting if deterrence fails and risking escalation to attacks against the U.S. homeland.

Neo-isolationists believe that the economic risks of ending the U.S. security commitment to Northeast Asia would be small. To start, whether or not the United States stays, the global economy will shift toward bipolarity. The United States will be unable to fully maintain its leadership position in the international economy because this role reflects its economic power, not its security commitments. This will not greatly hurt U.S. prosperity, however, because a hegemon is not required to preserve the open trading system. In addition, according to the Neo-isolationist argument, trade does not depend on high degrees of security between trade partners. Consistent with this argument, the relative gains from trade between the China and the United States, as well as between China and its other trading partners, are now small enough that relative-gains concerns should not inhibit open trade. This prediction is supported by recent history. Relative-gains concerns did virtually nothing to slow U.S. trade with China when the relative gains were likely much larger—that is, during the period when China grew from a small economy to the world's second largest.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, withdrawing from Northeast Asia could improve U.S.-China relations, which if anything would support open trade. There is however the possibility that China, once not constrained by the U.S. forward presence, would become more assertive, which could further strain U.S.-China political relations,

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<sup>12</sup> Whether the United States should have supported China's economic growth in earlier decades is a largely separate question; arguing that it should not have is John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001).

even once the United States had ended its security commitments to the region. Either way, the insensitivity of trade to political relations should ensure that U.S. trade and prosperity would not be damaged.

A possible counterargument is that the emerging partial decoupling of the American and Chinese economies is inconsistent with these arguments.<sup>13</sup> However, decoupling is driven largely by concern about U.S. strategic vulnerabilities—including in semiconductors and energy technologies—not relative gains. Pulling out of East Asia would reflect greatly reduce U.S. concern about the security threat posed by China. Whether the United States would nevertheless want to continue partial decoupling would depend on whether it anticipated serious foreign policy disputes in which China might use trade coercively.

In sum, China's rise strengthens the Neo-isolationist case for ending U.S. security commitments to Northeast Asia. The U.S. homeland would remain highly secure. The probability of conflict in East Asia is growing, thereby raising the risk of war that the United States does not need to, and should not, fight. If the United States remains committed to Northeast Asian security, China's rise would reduce its security. In contrast, if the United States ends these commitments, as Neo-isolation calls for, then China's rise would leave U.S. security essentially unchanged. Reinforcing the case for leaving is the fact that the costs of U.S. forces required to maintain the military capabilities required to defend U.S. allies will continue to grow; cutting the U.S. commitment will therefore provide larger financial savings, which could be used to strengthen the U.S. economy. Trade with China would continue whether or not the U.S. retains its alliances and might even be enhanced by terminating them, although strategic decoupling would likely need to continue. Finally, although the increased probability of war does increase the possibility of damage to the U.S. economy and its prosperity, the risks of being directly involved in the war increasingly dwarf these costs.

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<sup>13</sup> On the logic of decoupling see Charles W. Boustany and Aaron L. Friedberg, *Partial Disengagement: A New U.S. Strategy for Economic Competition with China*, NBR Special Report #82 (November 2019) at [https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr82\\_china-task-force-report-final.pdf](https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr82_china-task-force-report-final.pdf)

### Deep Engagement

*Summary.* Deep Engagement (which is similar in many respects to what was earlier termed “Selective Engagement”<sup>14</sup>) holds that U.S. security is increased by preserving peace among the globe’s major powers and by a lack of intense security competition between them. In addition, U.S. security alliances support features of the international economy that increase U.S. prosperity. Both the security and economic dimensions identify Europe and Asia as the key major-power regions in which U.S. vital interests are at stake.<sup>15</sup> Preserving U.S. alliances in Europe and Asia is essential for protecting these interests. In various forms and iterations, Deep Engagement has formed the core of the security dimension of U.S. grand strategy since the early days of the Cold War.

Deep Engagement identifies two key arguments linking U.S. alliances and forward deployed military forces with increased U.S. security. First, great-power war is likely to draw the United States in. Even if the United States were not allied with countries in the fight, it might choose to join the conflict once it starts.<sup>16</sup> The United States joined two major-power wars during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and, therefore, a prudent strategy requires acknowledging that it might do so again. Moreover, getting drawn in is now more dangerous than before the Cold War because a distant major-power war could escalate to nuclear attacks against the U.S. homeland.

Second, Deep Engagement emphasizes that U.S. security commitments are necessary to reduce countries’ incentives to acquire nuclear weapons. U.S. alliances extend deterrence to major powers that would otherwise acquire nuclear weapons. Japan and South Korea are among the most likely candidates; Germany might also acquire nuclear weapons. Some proponents of Deep Engagement believe that nuclear proliferation increases the probability of nuclear use, even when the new nuclear states

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<sup>14</sup> Robert J. Art uses the term “selective engagement” in a series of articles and then in *A Grand Strategy for America* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2003). These strategies are sufficiently similar that I blend their arguments in the discussion that follows.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *America Abroad: The United States’ Global Role in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), *America Abroad*, chap. 5 and 6, which includes extensive citations to the earlier literature.

<sup>16</sup> Art, *A Grand Strategy for America*, pp. 55-58.

are technologically capable and politically stable.<sup>17</sup> Others worry less about the danger posed by these major powers and focus instead on the damage that their acquisition of nuclear weapons would inflict on the NPT regime, which would in turn result in an increased probability of nuclear acquisitions by more dangerous states and possibly non-state actors.<sup>18</sup> For either or both reasons, Deep Engagement holds that a grand strategy that reduces the probability of nuclear proliferation increases U.S. security.

It is worth noting that Deep Engagement does not necessarily rely on an argument that was long associated with the origins of U.S. containment policy during the Cold War. The concern was that that a Eurasia hegemon would control resources sufficient to enable it to attack and invade the United States, or blockade and compel it. This argument, however, turns out to be weak, largely for the reasons emphasized by Neo-isolationists and recognized by the other grand strategies—ocean buffers and nuclear weapons provide the U.S. homeland with an exceptionally high level of security, even against an equally powerful or more powerful (wealthy and capable) adversary.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to these security-focused arguments, Deep Engagement argues that U.S. security commitments increase U.S. prosperity. To start, major-power war and intense security competition would be bad for trade and would therefore damage U.S. prosperity. Most basic, large-scale war would disrupt the international economy, hurting the United States via lost trade. Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, who have provided the fullest statement of Deep Engagement, reject the argument made by some Neo-Isolationists who have argued that major-power war that did not involve the United States would not hurt the U.S. economy. Although the United States may have been insulated in previous eras, modern globalization leaves the U.S. economy much more vulnerable to major power war.<sup>20</sup> In addition, the decreased international security that would be generated by termination of U.S. alliances would reduce states' willingness to

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<sup>17</sup> Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad*, p. 107-110.

<sup>18</sup> Art, *A Grand Strategy for America*, p. 53.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Art, "A Defensible Defense: America's Grand Strategy After the Cold War," *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (Spring 1991), pp. 10-23. See however Elbridge A. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), pp. 6-10, which discusses this logic, while placing greater weight on economic rationales.

<sup>20</sup> Brooks and Wohlforth p. 184-187

preserve open trade, among other reasons because “the security commitments of Deep Engagement support the global economic order by reducing the likelihood of security dilemmas, arms racing, instability, regional conflicts, and, in extremis, major power war.”<sup>21</sup> Related, although scholars have demonstrated that economic openness could continue without U.S. leadership, openness is nevertheless more likely with it, because leadership can help reduce collective action and relative-gains problems. Thus, Deep Engagement calls for maintaining U.S. security commitments to protect U.S. prosperity via international openness.<sup>22</sup>

In addition, Deep Engagement argues that U.S. security commitments help sustain U.S. leadership of the world economy, and thereby help preserve features of the international economy that benefit the United States. For example, the United States benefits from having the dollar serve as the world’s dominant currency; and U.S. security commitments help in a variety of ways to preserve the dollar’s standing.<sup>23</sup>

*China.* From the perspective of Deep Engagement, China’s rise increases the importance of preserving U.S. alliances in Northeast Asia. China’s expanding and improving military capabilities, and growing military competition in the region, increase the probability of a war. Therefore, given the judgement that the risks of remaining committed and forward deployed are smaller than the risks of leaving and getting drawn back in, the importance of preserving U.S. alliances in Northeast Asia increases. The value of these alliances also increases because the United States is likely to incur greater damage when fighting against a more militarily capable China. Not only will the states’ forces be more comparably matched, but in addition a U.S.-China war would likely be fought in ways that increase the probability of escalation to higher levels of conflict. Recent analyses have highlighted the possibility that U.S. plans for defeating China’s area-denial capabilities would fuel pressures for escalation to still larger conventional war, including early attacks against U.S. space-based assets, and even to nuclear war.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry and William C. Wohlforth, “Don’t Come Home, America: The Case against Retrenchment,” *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Winter 2012), p. 41.

<sup>22</sup> Brooks, Ikenberry and Wohlforth, “Don’t Come Home, America,” p. 42.

<sup>23</sup> Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad*, pp. 176-181.

<sup>24</sup> Avery Goldstein, “First Things First: The Pressing Danger of Crisis Instability in U.S.-China Relations,” *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (Spring 2013), pp. 49-89; and Caitlin Talmadge, “Would China Go

A closer look, however, paints a more complicated picture. Although U.S. alliance commitments likely reduce the probability of war, they also increase the probability of a larger regional war. The most likely scenario in which the United States and China get into a large war is over Taiwan. If a war occurs between China and Taiwan, and the United States comes to Taiwan's defense, China would have large incentives to attack Japan. This is the scenario that most Japan experts envision when anticipating a large war involving Japan and China. China would have two complementary reasons for attacking Japan. First, it could attack U.S. and Japanese forces to reduce the alliance's ability to protect Taiwan. U.S. forces based in Japan would be essential to its efforts to defeat a Chinese campaign against Taiwan. In addition, since the mid-1990s, Japan has become more likely to provide support to U.S. forces in a conflict over Taiwan, which creates incentives for China to attack Japanese bases and forces. Changes made during the 2010s—including a moderate expansion of the conditions under Japan could employ force in response to an attack on a third party, an increase in opportunities for bilateral military exercises and intelligence operations, and a variety of institutional arrangements that deepen the U.S.-Japan alliance<sup>25</sup>—have moved Japan further in this direction.

In contrast, without the U.S. security commitment to the region, a Chinese attack against Taiwan would be much more likely to be remain limited. The United States would then be considering whether to join this more limited conflict. Without the United States using bases in Japan, Japan would likely remain outside this war. Consequently, the key comparison is between retaining U.S. alliances and risking a regional war and terminating the alliances and risking returning to engage in a war over Taiwan. Arguably, the probability of returning to protect Taiwan is lower than the probability of retaining U.S. alliances and then protecting them in a regional war. If this is the case, then China's rise does less to strengthen the case for Deep Engagement.

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Nuclear?: Assessing the Risk of Chinese Nuclear Escalation in a Conventional War with the United States,” *International Security*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (Spring 2017), pp. 50-92.

<sup>25</sup> Adam P. Liff, “Japan’s Security Policy in the ‘Abe Era’: Rational Transformation or Evolutionary Shift?” *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (May 2018), pp. 13-21.

The impact of China's rise on nuclear proliferation seems clearer. China's growing capabilities pose an increased threat to Japan, which increases the probability that U.S. withdrawal would lead to Japanese acquisition of nuclear weapons. In fact, the combination of the growing Chinese threat and increasing doubts about the depth of the United States' commitment—fuel both by Donald Trump's criticism of alliances and domestic U.S. debates about its role in the world—have already increased discussion of in Japan of acquiring nuclear weapons.<sup>26</sup> South Korea faces a growing North Korea's growing nuclear capability, which would be the immediate concern if the U.S. ended its alliance;<sup>27</sup> China's growing capabilities would add to these pressures. Ending the U.S. commitment to South Korea would be very likely result in South Korea acquiring nuclear weapons. Given Deep Engagement's beliefs about proliferation, China's rise increases the value of continuing and deepening the U.S. commitment to Japan.<sup>28</sup>

Overall, Deep Engagement finds that China's rise reduces U.S. security. Preserving U.S. alliances can reduce the danger of China's rise, but not eliminate it. This may seem obvious—facing a more powerful state reduces U.S. security. But recall that Neo-isolation finds otherwise, if the United States adopts its preferred grand strategy. This is an important, often underappreciated, divide between the schools.

Turning now to economic impacts, as summarized above, Deep Engagement holds that U.S. alliances support U.S. prosperity by reducing the probability of major power war, supporting open international trade, and preserving the benefits of U.S. economic leadership. However, focusing on China's rise draws all of these claims into question.

First, the Deep Engagement arguments about economic openness are less compelling when applied to China. As argued above, the U.S. security commitments reduce Chinese security. Thus, the calming and economically beneficial effects that alliances are supposed to generate are not being produced evenly across East Asia. This is

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<sup>26</sup> Heglinbotham and Samuels, "Vulnerable US Alliance in Northeast Asia."

<sup>27</sup> NYT, Jan 2023\*

<sup>28</sup> Largely separate from China's rise, North Korea's acquisition of nuclear weapons significantly increases the probability that South Korea would acquire nuclear weapons if the United States ended its alliance. This change in the Northeast Asian landscape further supports the Deep Engagement case for the United States to maintain its security commitments.



because the impact of U.S. alliances differs from their Cold-War. NATO did reduce security concerns within Western Europe, that is, *within* the alliance, which did support trade among alliance members. It did not, of course, have this effect between NATO and the Soviet Union. Unlike the Soviet Union, however, China is extensively integrated into the global economy. But because U.S. security commitments now reduce China's security and strain political relations via arms racing and political spirals, these alliances should, according to Deep Engagement be bad for trade. If the United States ended its security commitments to the region, arms competition in the region would likely become less intense, although Japanese insecurity would grow and its military expenditures would almost certainly increase. If military competition driven by security dilemmas hurts the international economy, as Deep Engagement holds, then the net economic impact of U.S. withdrawal could be positive.

There is, though, a countervailing set of considerations. Some proponents of preserving U.S. alliances believe that if the United States withdraws from East Asia, China would likely use its dominant regional position to create a trading bloc that favors its economy and regional economies, while limiting U.S. trade access to the region. In a worst case, the result could open the United States to coercion and undermine its national security and domestic stability.<sup>29</sup> It is unclear, however, why ending U.S. security alliances would directly enhance China's economic ability to influence regional states' trade policies. The clearer path would be for China to use military threats to impose a new economic regime. Even in this case the net effect is unclear: the globe's other economies would likely respond by limiting China's access to their markets; the global economy would suffer, but China's relative share and its ability to coerce the United States would decrease, not increase.

Second, if China's economy continues to grow faster than the United States for the next couple of decades, China may provide a test of the importance of U.S. security commitments in maintaining U.S. economic leadership. Even if these commitments do support the United States' leading role in the global economy, it may well be that the dominant determinant is the size of the U.S. economy. As China's economy comes to

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<sup>29</sup> Colby, *The Strategy of Denial*, pp. 10-15.

equal and then exceed the size of the U.S. economy, China's global economic influence will almost certainly continue to grow. Security commitments or not, U.S. leadership is likely to be whittled away. Here again, the beginning of this shift is already evident. China is now the leading trade partner of the countries of East Asia and has concluded a region-wide trade agreement.

In sum, then, Deep Engagement sees the value of U.S. alliances and forward deployments increasing with China's rise. China's rise does, however, generate a number of tensions within the Deep Engagement package. While reducing the probability of war in Northeast Asia, U.S. commitments may at the same time be increasing the probability of a war that involves Japan. In addition, the jury remains out on whether China's economic growth will end U.S. leadership of the international economy, even if the United States retains its security alliances.

### Offshore Balancing

*Summary.* Offshore Balancing calls for retaining U.S. major-power alliances, including forward deployed forces, when key regions of the world—Europe or Asia—face a significant possibility of a hegemonic threat. However, when a hegemon is unlikely to arise for the foreseeable future, the United States should end its forward deployment of forces. Under this condition, different strands of Offshore Balancing call either for the United States to terminate its alliance commitment completely or at least to loosen the nature and extent of these commitments.

Proponents of Offshore Balancing are frequently viewed as sharing a great deal in common with proponents of Neo-isolation (and more recently with Restraint). This partly because proponents of both strategies tended to oppose U.S. interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, and partly because both emphasize reducing U.S. defense spending and increasing allied spending. However, the major-power logic of Offshore Balancing shares much more in common with Deep Engagement than with Neo-isolation. In significant ways, however, Offshore Balancing is a narrower theory—it does not claim to moderate arms races and security dilemmas, which as we have seen creates some problems for Deep Engagement when applied to China; and it has little to say about the international economic implications of U.S. alliances.

Offshore Balancing emphasizes a different rationale for worrying about the rise of a hegemon than those offered by Deep Engagement. Offshore Balancers have emphasized the ability of a regional hegemon, drawing on its economic and technological resources, to project power globally. In contrast, a major power that has not achieved regional hegemony must focus on regional dangers, which makes global power projection riskier, if not impossible. John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt argue that a regional hegemon might “ally with countries in the Western Hemisphere and interfere close to U.S. soil” and that the United States’ should attempt to “maintain the regional balance of power so the most powerful state in the region....remains too worried about its neighbors to roam into the Western hemisphere.”<sup>30</sup>

Some versions of Offshore Balancing put less emphasis on the danger of getting drawn back into a major-power war, which lies at the core of the Deep Engagement security argument for maintaining great-power peace. Prominent offshore balancers have argued that if major-power war would not produce a hegemon, then the war would not threaten U.S. security and presumably the United States would stay out of it.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the United States would know if a country were gaining the capability to become a hegemon and could redeploy forces before this danger arose. However, other analysts who could be counted as Offshore Balancers do worry about the possibility of being drawn in.<sup>32</sup>

As I argued in Chapter Two, the security argument for maintaining distant alliances to prevent a regional hegemon from “roaming” into one’s own region is weak. Under most, if not all conditions, a regional hegemon can better achieve security—that is, at lower cost and risk—by engaging and policing its own neighborhood than by maintaining alliances to prevent the rise of a hegemony in a different region. This need

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<sup>30</sup> John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen N. Walt, “The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 95, No. 4 (July/August 2016), p. 73. Other offshore balancers question whether a regional hegemon would pose a security threat to the United States, which in important ways moves them closer to Neo-isolationists. See for example, Christopher Layne, “From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America’s Future Grand Strategy,” *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (Summer 1997), pp. 116-17. [[NOTE: Friedberg makes a similar argument, albeit not in the gs debate: Book, p. 7-8.]]

<sup>31</sup> Mearsheimer and Walt, “The Case for Offshore Balancing,” p. 73, 82; Layne, “From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing,” pp. 119-22, but also p. 117, where he does identify reasons that the United States might intervene.

<sup>32</sup> Posen, *Restraint*, p. 131.

not be a fatal flaw for Offshore Balancing, however, because the danger of getting drawn back to a large war could be added to its arguments, or simply replace the roaming argument.

Offshore Balancing also differs from Deep Engagement in its assessment of the dangers of nuclear proliferation. Some Offshore Balancers believe that proliferation is undesirable, but not necessarily very dangerous, and largely beyond U.S. control, while acknowledging that reducing U.S. commitments could lead a few states to acquire nuclear weapons. Others conclude that certain nuclear proliferation may, in the more distant, future be desirable—for example, by Japan—but caution that this process would need to be carefully managed, both politically and militarily.<sup>33</sup> This set of arguments is closer to the Neo-Isolationist position on proliferation. (The diversity within Offshore Balancing and its overlap with both Neo-isolation and Deep Engagement illustrates the point made at the outset—positions on a variety of key questions can be combined in numerous ways.)

Offshore Balancing gives weight to conserving U.S. resources and preserving U.S. power. Proponents call for the United States to achieve this both by decreasing its alliance commitments when conditions allow and relying on its allies to increase their investment in their own defense. Terminating or attenuating its alliance commitments will motivate its current allies to spend more on their defense and, more broadly, to take greater responsibility for their own behavior.

Offshore Balancers currently believe that the threat of a hegemon arising in Europe is sufficiently small and, related, the ability of the EU states to defend themselves sufficiently large, that the United States can withdraw its troops from Europe. Either NATO be disbanded—with the expectation that the EU would figure out how to replace it—or the nature of the U.S. commitment would be renegotiated, removing the guarantee that the United States would definitely intervene if a current European member of NATO

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<sup>33</sup> On the former, see for example Mearsheimer and Walt, “The Case for Offshore Balancing,” p. 79; on the latter see Posen, *Restraint*, p. 101.

is attacked. Herein lie points of divergence with Deep Engagement, which questions the EU ability to defend itself for both political and material reason.<sup>34</sup>

*China.* In contrast to Europe, Offshore Balancing calls for the United States to retain and deepen its commitments in Northeast Asia. There is a reasonable probability that China's economic growth will continue, enabling China to build military capabilities that other states in the region will be unable to offset, thereby creating the potential for it to become the regional hegemon.

As with Deep Engagement, Offshore Balancing finds that China's rise increases the importance of maintaining the U.S.-Japan alliance. In fact, China's rise is necessary for preserving this commitment. If the Chinese economy were not headed toward equaling and then surpassing the U.S. economy, Offshore Balancing would call for ending, or at least significantly weakening, the U.S. commitment to Japan, just as it has called for moving in that direction with NATO.

Considering China's rise does highlight the weakness in the Offshore Balancing's core logic: does it really make sense to remain committed to East Asia to prevent China from eventually posing a security threat in the Western hemisphere? The risks generated by U.S. commitments are clear and arguably large. Mearsheimer agrees, having argued that China's rise will bring "considerable potential for war." The possibility that China will pursue significant alliance commitments in the Western hemisphere remains entirely theoretical. Moreover, the United States would have many advantages in countering any such Chinese military deployments, including the advantages of distance. In addition, in anticipation of this potential future danger, the United States could invest economically and diplomatically to weaken China's ability to develop threatening inroads.

One Offshore-Balancing prescription calls for the United States to "lead the effort against China and focus much of its formidable power on that goal" and to coordinate an effective alliance among the regions far-flung states, including India, Japan and Vietnam.<sup>35</sup> A different Offshore Balancing prescription puts greater weight on increasing

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<sup>34</sup> Hugo Meijer and Stephen G. Brooks, "Illusions of Autonomy: Why Europe Cannot Provide for Its Security If the United States Pulls Back," *International Security*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (Spring 2021), pp. 7-43. In contrast, see Barry Posen, "Europe Can Defend Itself," *Survival*, Vol. 62, No. 6 (December 2020), pp. 7-34.

<sup>35</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics, updated edition* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014), p. 385.

the relative contribution of U.S. allies. Barry Posen concludes that the United States should preserve its alliance with Japan, but emphasizes the value of limiting U.S. efforts, at least for the time being. First, the United States enjoys a highly secure strategic position that allows it to respond in measured ways, while preparing the groundwork for a more effective and competitive alliance in the future, if necessary. China must overcome many obstacles before it would pose a threat to the United States and it may not be successful. Second, because China is fearful of the United States, highly competitive offensive policies risk generating a negative political spiral that could make China's rise more dangerous. The current U.S. pivot and its adoption of an Air-Sea battle type military doctrine are likely to generate these negative effects.<sup>36</sup> Third, the United States needs to work to reshape its alliance with Japan, both to reduce current costs but also to ensure that Japan is ready, politically as well as militarily, to shoulder the burden and responsibly of balancing against China if necessary down the road. This will require reducing U.S. troop deployments and renegotiating the U.S.-Japan treaty to shift primary responsibility for defending Japan from the United States to Japan.<sup>37</sup>

Exploring the basic implications of China's rise does highlight the problem with the roaming argument, but leaves the overall argument intact, if we replace it with arguments about the danger of being draw back into a large regional war. Then, both Offshore Balancing and Deep Engagement conclude that the United States needs to deepen its commitment to East Asia and do so on equally strong analytic grounds. The two grand strategies converge regarding the United States' commitments in East Asia.

### Primacy

*Summary.* Primacy calls for maintaining U.S. military and economic dominance. Proponents of Primacy argue that states pursue primacy to “insure their security, promote their interests, and shape the international environment.”<sup>38</sup> Like Deep Engagement,

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<sup>36</sup> Arguing that the U.S. pivot to Asia has had this effect, see Robert S. Ross, “The Problem with the Pivot: Obama's New Asia Policy is Unnecessary and Counterproductive,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 6 (November/December 2012), pp. 70-82.

<sup>37</sup> Posen, *Restraint*, pp. 91-102.

<sup>38</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, “Why International Primacy Matters,” *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Spring 1993), p. 70. For a skeptical view authored at the same time, see Robert Jervis, “International Primacy: Is the Game Worth the Candle,” *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Spring 1993), pp. 52-67.

Primacy calls for maintaining the United States' key alliances. But it sets a higher standard for U.S. military capabilities and broadly calls for more competitive military and economic policies.<sup>39</sup>

The United States became the globe's dominant military power with the end of the Cold War. This primacy was not required by its Cold War strategy and in large part was infeasible. Although the Soviet economy was much smaller than the U.S. economy, the Soviet Union spent a much large percentage of its GDP on defense. Maybe more important, the defense advantage created by nuclear weapons and difficulties of fighting across distance and oceans would have prevented the United States from acquiring militarily dominant capabilities, and for the most part it did not try to.<sup>40</sup> At least along some dimensions, the United States has maintained its post-Cold War dominance—in substantial part due to its overwhelming lead—but it has lost its regional dominance in East Asia.

Following the end of the Cold War, interest emerged in preserving the United States' dominant position. Possibly the clearest statement was in a draft of the Defense Planning Guidance that was leaked in early 1992, during the Bush administration. The document states that

Our first objective is to prevent the re-emergence of a new rival, either on the territory of the former Soviet Union or elsewhere, that poses a threat on the order of that posed by the former Soviet Union. This is a dominant consideration underlying the new regional defense strategy and requires that we endeavor to prevent any hostile power from dominating a region whose resources would, under consolidated control, be sufficient to generate global power.

The document goes on to argue that “we must maintain the mechanisms for deterring potential competitors from even aspiring to a larger regional or global role. An effective reconstitution capability is important here, since it implies that a potential rival could not hope to quickly or easily gain a predominant military position in the world.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> For discussion of the various uses and meanings of “primacy” see Van Jackson, “American Military Superiority and the Pacific-Primacy Myth,” *Survival*, Vol. 60, No. 2 (April-May 2018), pp. 107-132.

<sup>40</sup> This partial exception concerns U.S. nuclear policy, which was dedicated to counterforce targeting for much of the Cold War and did see value in a damage-limitation capability; see \* on counterforce doctrine; and Austin Long and Brendan Rittenhouse Green, “Stalking the Secure Second Strike: Intelligence, Counterforce, and Nuclear Strategy,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 38, Nos. 1-2 (2015), pp. 38-73.

<sup>41</sup> “Excerpts From the Pentagon’s Plan: ‘Prevent the Re-Emergence of a New Rival,’” *New York Times*, March 8, 1992, p. 14, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/03/08/world/excerpts-from-pentagon-s-plan-prevent-the-re-emergence-of-a-new-rival.html>

Consistent with the importance it places on military advantages, Primacy strongly supports nonproliferation because acquisition of nuclear weapons would reduce the U.S. ability to employ its conventional military advantages. The document argued further that in addition to this deterrence, the United States should try to accommodate the interests of major powers to convince them that U.S. dominance was not a threat to their interests.<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, this rendition of Primacy included a cooperative dimension, as well as a highly competitive one. Whether accommodation would have been successful is far from clear.

Although the United States never fully adopted Primacy as its grand strategy, elements of its spirit and language have appeared in the national security documents of many administrations. For example, the 2002 *National Security Strategy of the United States* states that “We must build and maintain our defense beyond challenge,” including the ability to “decisively defeat any adversary if deterrence fails.” Echoing the 1992 leaked guidance, it goes on to hold that “Our forces will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equally the power of the United States,<sup>43</sup> which is a significantly higher standard than being able to defeat an adversary.

Significantly, however, the United States did not adopt two policies that were likely required to support Primacy grand strategy over the long term. First, it did not attempt to prevent potential challengers from fully joining the international economy, which, if coordinated with other economic major powers, would have at least slowed the rise of the challenger. In fact, the United States led efforts to bring China into the WTO. Second, the United States did not attempt to restrict the flow of advanced technology and human expertise that would have hindered both the economic growth and military potential of a challenger. In addition, the United States did significantly decrease its defense spending and forces structure during the 1990s, although the 9/11 attacks generated a reversal.

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<sup>42</sup> For a fuller description of the 1990s version of Primacy, see Posen and Ross, “Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy,” pp. 32-43.

<sup>43</sup> George Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: White House, September 2002), pp. 29 and 30.



There are two key questions to ask about Primacy.<sup>44</sup> First, are its military requirements necessary to achieve U.S. objectives? There is likely not a general answer—different potential peer competitors, in different regions of the globe—will generate different deterrent requirements and have different thresholds for deciding that military competition would be destined to fail. Second, is Primacy militarily feasible against the peer competitor that United States now faces—China? This question in turn has two components: Will a vast military lead convince a rising power not to try to undermine U.S. military capabilities? and, Does the United States have the economic and technological capability to win this competition, if the rising power decides to compete?

*China.* China rise has generated renewed calls for Primacy. A 2014 version developed by Ashley Tellis, holds that “The loss of primacy to China would fundamentally undermine the national security interests of the United States in the most comprehensive sense imaginable.”<sup>45</sup> The loss of primacy would weaken U.S. alliances, could well lead Japan and South Korea to acquire nuclear weapons, could undermine international institutions that support economic growth and advance U.S. values and desirable norms, and could eventually even “allow Beijing to challenge Washington closer to U.S. shores.”<sup>46</sup> The latter point mirrors the Offshore Balancing logic about the danger posed by a regional hegemon.

Tellis argued that Cold-War style containment was not an option for a variety of reasons, including the dense economic ties between China and the United States, and the low probability that other countries would join the United States in trying to isolate China economically. Consequently, this version of Primacy focuses on the military dimension—the United States should compete militarily to maintain its military

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<sup>44</sup> A third key question is whether the United States could have prevented China economic and technological rise.

<sup>45</sup> Ashley J. Tellis, *Balancing Without Containment: An American Strategy for Managing China* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014), p. 19. He also holds that “The loss of American hegemony would be dangerous to U.S. security because it would entail a diminution of strategic autonomy, the first and most important benefit of possessing greater power than others in a competitive environment” (p. 14) and “The loss of American primacy to China, therefore, would put Washington at Beijing’s mercy far more than is currently the case.” (p. 14). See also Robert D. Blackwill and Ashley J. Tellis, *Revising U.S. Grand Strategy Toward China*, Council Special Report No. 72 (New York: Council of Foreign Relations, March 2015).

<sup>46</sup> Tellis, *Balancing Without Containment*, pp. 18-19, 31.

superiority, including “the U.S. ability to operate freely along the Asian littorals...” and to secure all of the benefits of nuclear deterrence, which likely requires preserving its damage-limitation against China’s nuclear forces.<sup>47</sup> Primacy argues that a distant blockade—from the Persian Gulf to the Strait of Malacca would fail to meet basic U.S. requirements, among other reasons because it would not prevent China from succeeding in a relatively quick war. Thus, the United States needs to adopt an offensive conventional strategy—something along the lines of the Air-Sea Battle concept—to meet the military and political dimensions of its alliance commitments.<sup>48</sup> In addition, although containment is not possible, to preserve its economic dominance, the United States should pursue regional economic pacts that exclude China, adopt tighter constraints on the export of militarily valuable technology, and adopt a multi-pronged strategy for revitalizing the U.S. economy.<sup>49</sup>

A 2021 paper authored for the Atlantic Council makes a related case for maintaining U.S. military advantages, arguing that otherwise China’s leadership—President and his inner circle—will continue to pursue policies designed to overthrow the U.S.-led international order.<sup>50</sup> The military requirements include preventing “any unacceptable shift in the strategic nuclear balance,” “maintaining US global conventional military dominance over any other adversary, in all theaters and in all current and emerging military technologies, platforms, and domains,” and “maintaining regional conventional US military predominance in the Indo-Pacific region so that the United States can prevail in the event of armed conflict.”

Ironically, while China’s rise generates calls for Primacy, it also almost certainly makes Primacy infeasible. The combination of China’s growing wealth and technological sophistication with the nature of the military missions required for Primacy likely put the required military dominance out of U.S. reach.

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<sup>47</sup> Tellis, *Balancing Without Containment*, pp. 65-66; and Tellis, “No Escape: Managing the Enduring Reality of Nuclear Weapons,” in Ashley J. Tellis, Abraham M. Denmark, and Travis Tanner, *Asia in the Second Nuclear Age* (Washington, D.C.: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2013), pp. 26-28.

<sup>48</sup> Tellis, *Balancing Without Containment*, pp. 64-65.

<sup>49</sup> Tellis, *Balancing Without Containment*, pp. 42-54.

<sup>50</sup> Anonymous, *The Longer Telegram: Toward A New American China Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: Atlantic Council, 2021), quotes from pp. 9 and 57.

The issue here is not whether the United States, at least for the next couple of decades, can spend more on its military than China. Although the gap has narrowed, the United States continues to outspend China by a factor of more than two (and spends roughly twice as large a percentage of its GDP), and will continue to out spend China for the foreseeable future.<sup>51</sup> Of course, the United States has military commitments across the globe, so adequately comparing spending dedicated to the Pacific theater is more complicated.

Instead, the issue is whether the United States would be able to maintain or achieve the ability to perform the missions required by Primacy: the ability to operate freely along the East Asian littorals and to limit damage in an all-out nuclear war. These capabilities are almost certainly beyond the United States reach, especially going forward. As note above, the technologies that support anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) missions relatively near a country's maritime periphery have an advantage over the technologies required to defeat them. Thus, competition between the United States and China over control of the South China Sea and the East China along China's periphery is creating a no-go zone in which neither country will be able to operate freely or protect ships trying to transit this zone during a major war. Even a large and expensive U.S. and allied military buildup has poor prospects for regaining the ability to operate "freely" near China's coast.<sup>52</sup>

The prospects for maintaining a significant nuclear damage-limitation capability are almost as bleak. Although the Chinese nuclear force was relatively small for decades, China is increasing both its size and survivability, primarily by deploy mobile ICBMs. While future technologies promise to increase the prospects for finding and destroying

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<sup>51</sup> There are large uncertainties involved in estimating China's defense spending; for helpful discussion and estimates see China Power, "What Does China Really Spend on its Military" (Updated June 29, 2022), at <https://chinapower.csis.org/military-spending/>

<sup>52</sup> Biddle and Oelrich, "Future Warfare in the Western Pacific"; for debate over their analysis see Andrew S. Erikson et al., "Correspondence: How Good Are China's Antiaccess/Area-Denial Capabilities," *International Security*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (Spring 2017), pp. 202-213; see also Eugene Gholz, Benjamin Friedman & Enea Gjoza, "Defensive Defense: A Better Way to Protect US Allies in Asia," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (Winter 2020), pp. 171-189.

these missiles, a variety of countermeasures will likely enable China to win the competition between retaliatory and counterforce capabilities.<sup>53</sup>

Fortunately, the United States does not need the military capabilities specified by Primacy to meet its alliance commitments in East Asia. As discussed fully in Chapters 6, the United States' nuclear forces will contribute substantially to extended deterrence even when China has an assured destruction capability. A significant U.S. damage-limitation capability might add to deterrence, but is not necessary. Similarly, as explained in Chapter 7, the United States does not need that ability to operate its conventional forces unimpeded in the South China and East China Sea. The United States will be able to defend its allies if it can prevent China from operating effectively in this space, which is both a less demanding and less offensive mission.

There is also a political rationale for competing to maintain/regain Primacy, even if the United States' prospects for success are poor. Pursuing military dominance could communicate U.S. resolve—the extent of its interests in East Asia—to China. Its willingness to invest vast resources and to invest political capital to convince its allies to increase their defense spending would serve as a costly signal. China would better appreciate the futility of demanding concessions and, if crises occur, deterrence would be more likely to succeed. This political argument is consistent with and reinforces Primacy's overall approach.

There is, however, a potential downside to such an offensive, competitive policy: it gives little weight to the possibility that highly competitive policies will fuel Chinese insecurity, thereby generating more competitive and risky Chinese policies, instead of deterring them. Given that China is an insecure state, as well as an ambitious one, Primacy is likely an overly competitive policy.<sup>54</sup>

In sum, Primacy holds that U.S. security requires truly superior and militarily dominant capabilities: without them, the United States will be unable to meet its alliance commitments, risks losing the confidence of its allies, and may even suffer direct threats

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<sup>53</sup> Glaser and Fetter, "Should the United States Reject MAD?" and other citations in footnote \*.

<sup>54</sup> How much weight to give to the adversary's insecurity is part of a large debate between the so-call Spiral and Deterrence models; see Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, Chp. 3 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976); and Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

to its homeland. China is well on its way to denying these capabilities to the United States and the continuing investment in military capabilities will put them further out of reach. For proponents of Primacy, therefore, China's rise greatly reduces U.S. security. Fortunately, Primacy's military requirements are inflated. Less capable U.S. and allied forces should be able to deter China and preserve allies' confidence in the U.S. commitment.

### Liberal Hegemony

*Summary.* Grand strategies could be designed to advance liberal values globally—including most importantly spreading and preserving democracy, as well as protecting human right and saving lives in civil wars—in addition to the security and prosperity values that guide the grand strategies discussed above. The United States could have a variety of reasons for advancing these values. In particular, spreading democracy could generate peace via the logic of democratic peace theory, increase the number of countries inclined to ally and cooperate with the United States, protect the rights of individuals, and protect liberalism in the United States. Most broadly, commitment to these liberal values combined with the United States post-WWII security alliances provide the foundation for the liberal international order, which includes rules, norms and institutions that the United States developed and has championed.<sup>55</sup>

In principle, each of the four security-focused grand strategies could be paired with this additional set of goals, producing still more grand strategies. In practice, however, only one additional grand strategy plays a significant role in the on-going debate over U.S. grand strategy—Liberal Hegemony.

Liberal Hegemony is often associated with U.S. grand strategy following the Cold War, when the United States became the only superpower or the unipolar power. However, although the unipolar power, the United States did not adopt Primacy as its grand strategy during this period, as explained in the previous section. In important ways, therefore, Liberal Hegemony is closer to a coupling of Deep Engagement with

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<sup>55</sup> G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

liberal values,<sup>56</sup> even though including “hegemony” in its name might suggest coupling with Primacy. Consistent with this framing, it is useful to note that the United States pursued liberal values during the Cold War, when it was not a unipolar power<sup>57</sup>, although it was the world’s most powerful state. In contrast to the Cold War, during the post-Cold War decades the United States had the power and international leeway—because it did not face a major-power threat—to pursue a much more assertive set of policies guided by liberal values, including using large-scale military force to advance democracy and save lives at risk in civil wars. It did this while pursuing the security and international economic policies prescribed by Deep Engagement.

During these post-Cold War decades, the United States did not directly challenge the other major power—China and Russia. Instead, it used the leeway created by its power position to pursue a variety of policies that had liberal goals, including, among others, the Iraq and Afghan interventions, followed by counterinsurgency and state building; NATO expansion; support for “color revolutions” in former Soviet republics; and involvement in Libya and arguably Syria. Many of these policies were not driven purely by liberal aims—for example, Iraq was also motivated by U.S. counterproliferation and counterterrorism goals, and NATO expansion was designed as a hedge against a resurgent Russia. Experts disagree about the relative contribution of liberal and security interests to these policies.<sup>58</sup> Critics of Liberal Hegemony have argued that liberal goals underpinned these U.S. policies, which they believe were major foreign policy errors that resulted in international failures, huge economic costs, and damage to U.S. liberal values at home.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad*, pp. 7-8, term this “deep engagement plus.”

<sup>57</sup> Tony Smith, *America’s Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy*, expanded edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

<sup>58</sup> Challenging the importance of liberal values in U.S. policy is Arman Grigoryan, “Selective Wilsonianism: Material Interests and the West’s Support for Democracy,” *International Security*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (Spring 2020), pp. 158-200.

<sup>59</sup> Posen, *Restraint*; John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); and Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intension: America’s Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of American Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2014). Disagreeing on a variety of points is Michael J. Mazarr, “Rethinking Restraint: Why It Fails in Practice,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (Summer 2022), pp. 7-32.

Evaluation of a U.S. policy that is guided by liberal values requires assessing the prospects for success, the benefits of achieving democracy and advancing human rights, and the costs and risks. Of course, if multiple types of goals are being pursued, then these other should also be considered. Virtually no U.S. analysts believe that liberal goals are without value. Critics has focused on their low feasibility—for example, the poor prospects of bringing democracy or even stability to Afghanistan—and the large costs. Many question whether force should be used to advance democracy.<sup>60</sup>

*China.* The implications of American liberal values for U.S. grand strategy in East Asia may not be immediately apparent—opportunities for the types of military intervention that defined the worst of Liberal Hegemony appear unlikely in the region. However, liberal values and ideas currently play important roles in the U.S. policy toward China. If we understand Liberal Hegemony as the combination of Deep Engagement with U.S. liberal values, current U.S. policy in East Asia is a form of Liberal Hegemony. In addition, recent U.S. moves to partially decouple the U.S. and Chinese economies could lead toward a version of Primacy.

First, the Biden administration has framed the competition between China and the United States in terms of democracy versus autocracy. In a 2022 speech, President Biden argued that “We’re seeing the world align not in terms of geography — East and West, Pacific and Atlantic — but in terms of values. We’re living through a global struggle between autocracies and democracies.”<sup>61</sup> This framing does not preclude cooperation with China, but likely does make it more difficult. Arguable it becomes unnecessarily difficult, as the United States focuses on the nature of the adversary and not its policies; the latter can change, the former cannot (at least not in a reasonable timeframe). The United States’ strategy should be designed to protect U.S. interests, not to undermine China as an end itself. Defining the relationship as a competition between democracy and autocracy risks driving U.S. policy off track.

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<sup>60</sup> On the poor prospects for foreign imposed regime change to produce democracy see Alexander B. Downes and Jonathan Monten, “Forced to Be Free: Why Foreign-Imposed Regime Change Rarely Leads to Democratization,” *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (Spring 2013), pp. 90-131.

<sup>61</sup> Remarks by President Biden at the United States Naval Academy’s Class of 2022 Graduation and Commissioning Ceremony, at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/27/remarks-by-president-biden-at-the-united-states-naval-academy-class-of-2022-graduation-and-commissioning-ceremony/>

Second, and much more important, democracy and human rights are arguably the United States' key interests in Taiwan.<sup>62</sup> The United States maintains an ambiguous commitment to protect Taiwan and much of U.S. military planning in East Asia is dedicated to its protection. The risks of the U.S. commitment are large—most observers believe Taiwan is by far the most likely source of a major war between the United States and China, and that a Chinese attack against Taiwan is not unlikely over the next couple of decades. To over-simplify just a bit, the United States is running this risk largely to protect a democracy.

Analysts will disagree on whether this risk is warranted. Those who place greater value on liberal values relative to security values will tend to more strongly favor the commitment. The challenge is also quite different from those the United States pursued during the post-Cold War decades: the U.S. would be defending an established and vibrant democracy instead of building one from the ground up. It would also be to protect the norm of state sovereignty. These differences—between preserving and changing the status quo—likely add to U.S. determination to protect Taiwan.

My own assessment is that democracy and human rights are the largest values at stake in Taiwan, exceeding the reputation and strategic costs. States, however, should almost always give priority to protecting their core security, not their ideological values. Taiwan is not an exception: the security costs and risks of protecting Taiwan exceed all other other benefits. The following chapter provides a full assessment. Let it suffice here to say that liberal values—while a defining feature of the United States—are leading it astray once again. And unlike the post-Cold War cases—in which the costs and risks were large but limited—over Taiwan the risks are extremely large.

## ASSESSMENT

### Comparing the grand strategies

The grand strategy debate is decades-long in the making and this short paper is not the place to try to fully adjudicate it. My overall take on the debate is that three of the

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<sup>62</sup> Taiwan is the subject of the following chapter. Other U.S. interests include the credibility value of maintaining the U.S. commitment and the possible military value of denying China control of Taiwan. It is also important to note that the United States established its commitment before Taiwan became a democracy.



grand strategies—Neo-isolation, Deep Engagement and Offshore Balancing—provide sound arguments; in their best presentation, there is not a clear winner. The case for Primacy appears weaker than the others, among other reasons because military dominance is not in general required for the United States to adequately meet its alliance commitments. Looking more specifically in terms of the implications of China's rise, the case for Primacy is further weakened because the United States has poor prospects for achieving its military requirements. Liberal Hegemony—understood as the liberal extension of Deep Engagement—has a poor record regarding the use of military force to achieve liberal values, but could be imagined on more solid footing. However, China's rise weakens the case for putting America's liberal values at the forefront of its grand strategy.

The Offshore Balancing argument for preventing a regional hegemon—to prevent roaming into the Western hemisphere—is weak, for the reasons I have sketched. However, that argument can be replaced by the Deep Engagement argument—the danger of being drawn back into a major-power war warrants preserving the United States' alliances. With this change, Offshore Balancing is essentially a subset of Deep Engagement's security arguments.<sup>63</sup> Choosing between Deep Engagement and Offshore Balancing then depends on a variety of specific judgments about the importance of reducing U.S. defense spending, the probability of major-power war in Europe and in East Asia, and the challenges of rebuilding alliance institutions and force structure if the probability of major-power war increases to the point that the United States would need to reestablish its alliances. If the probability of major-power war in Europe or Asia is sufficiently small, the Deep Engagement bottom-line would begin to converge with shore Balancing.

Given this framing, China's rise strengthens the case presented by Neo-isolation, Deep Engagement and Off-Shore Balancing. For Neo-isolationism, the greater probability of a war in East Asia increases the importance of ending U.S. alliances and thereby avoiding major-power war. In contrast, for Deep Engagement and Offshore Balancing the increased probability of war created by China's rise means that the

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<sup>63</sup> They could still diverge on the economic value of alliances, which Offshore Balancing has said relatively little about.

probability of getting drawn back into an East Asian war is greater, which increases the importance of preserving the alliances to prevent those wars. In short, in broad terms then, China's rise does not strengthen one of these grand strategies relative to the others; the choice between them remains a close call.

A more nuanced comparison does, however, favor Neo-isolation. The choice between ending and preserving U.S. alliances depends heavily on whether the United States can better avoid a major-power war by remaining in the region to deter it or by terminating its alliance to avoid it. Both approaches have risks. Staying essentially guarantees that the United States will be involved in the war. In contrast, leaving increase the probability of war, which in and of itself does not pose a security threat to the United States (except possibly via nuclear proliferation), but leaves the United States with the temptation or necessity of joining the war.

Although a more subjective than the preceding arguments, the United States alliances in East Asia do not sufficiently reduce the probability of war between the United States and China to make Deep Engagement or Offshore Balancing the United States best bet. The key danger is a conflict over Taiwan. Given the importance that China places on unification with Taiwan and its increasing capability to prevail in a conflict with Taiwan, United States may be unable to deter a war over the next couple of decades even if China believes the United States will come to Taiwan's aid. Although difficult to assess probabilities, many experts are increasingly worried about the possibility of a war involving Taiwan over the next couple of decades. Given this specific danger, ending U.S. alliances and withdrawing from East Asia is likely the United States best option.

#### A missing option: Are U.S. commitments an all or nothing choice?

Because the grand strategy debate focuses on regions of the globe, it does relatively little to consider possible variation within regional commitments. This leads to an important gap in evaluation of U.S. options in East Asia. The United States could end some of its commitments, while keeping others.

Specifically, the United States could end its ambiguous commitment to Taiwan, while maintaining its alliance commitments with Japan, South Korea and the Philippines.

This would radically change the grand-strategy calculation: the probability of war involving the United States and its allies would likely drop quite dramatically. As a result, the case for preserving these alliances would be much stronger. Once again, the choice between Neo-isolation and this narrowed version of Deep Engagement/Offshore Balancing would be a close call.

I would then opt for preserving the alliances. There is wisdom in the Brooks and Wohlforth argument that a shift to Neo-Isolation would “in essence entail a massive experiment.”<sup>64</sup> Running that experiment is likely warranted when the United States, via its alliances, faces a possible war that it has declining and relatively poor prospects of deterring—that is, Deep Engagement/Offshore Balancing that includes Taiwan. However, if the probability of major-power war is much lower—maintain alliance commitments in East Asia, minus Taiwan—then the case for preserving U.S. alliances commitments to counter a rising superpower is likely the United States best bet.

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<sup>64</sup> Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad*, pp. 195-199, quote at 195.