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John M. Schuessler

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Ambivalent Offshore Balancer: America in the Middle East and Beyond

John M. Schuessler
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ABSTRACT: This article enters the debate on American grand strategy by questioning the logic underpinning offshore balancing. It concludes that the United States is an ambivalent balancer due to the stopping power of water. It builds on the relevant literature in international relations, producing a novel set of theoretical propositions that are applied to the contemporary Middle East. There and elsewhere, the United States could fail to maintain the balance of power when it is most threatened.

Keywords: freedom to roam, grand strategy, offshore balancing, offensive realism, regional hegemony, stopping power of water, Middle East

How committed is the United States to maintaining the balance of power abroad? John J. Mearsheimer, a well-known realist, has long argued that the United States intervenes as an offshore balancer to forestall the rise of regional hegemonies when local states prove unequal to the task. The stopping power of water, or the way large bodies of water sharply limit the power projection capabilities of armies, underpins his logic. The stopping power of water, Mearsheimer argues, explains why great powers can aspire to regional hegemony at best, even though they would be more powerful and thus more secure as global hegemonies. When applied to American grand strategy, the stopping power of water explains why the United States contents itself with being the only regional hegemon while acting as a balancer of last resort against any other power that tries to duplicate the feat.¹

I contend that the stopping power of water allows the United States to tolerate the emergence of another regional hegemon when offshore balancing becomes prohibitively costly. If the United States has an incentive to remain the only regional hegemon in the international system, it is to enjoy the freedom to roam that comes with that. The freedom to roam, however, is a luxury and not a necessity, and the benefits that flow from it need to be weighed against the costs of balancing. Exactly because balancing against a potential hegemon is costly, it is destined to be politically controversial.

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

Even when the United States ends up balancing, the outcome is therefore contingent rather than inevitable. In other words, the United States is an ambivalent balancer, in large part due to the stopping power of water.

In the Middle East, Iran is the most plausible candidate for regional hegemon, even if the prospects for that are remote at the moment. Can we be confident that the United States will balance against Iran if the need arises? To the extent that balancing entails leading a diplomatic coalition, applying economic pressure, or even supplementing the defenses of local allies, the most likely answer is yes. The offshore balancing logic gets that right. If the United States is forced to confront the prospect of a major war with Iran, however, then the domestic debate will become contentious and unpredictable, with the final outcome contingent. A hegemonic Iran, in turn, could wield the oil weapon to coerce the United States or aid a rising China in its efforts to become a regional hegemon, all of which would be problematic for offshore balancing.

More generally, this analysis underscores that restraint is embedded in the American grand strategic tradition and will remain influential as the debate pivots to great-power competition.² Restraint reminds us that the United States is easy to defend and thus can be discriminate in the commitments it makes and the wars it fights. It has been easy to lose sight of restraint in the post–Cold War period when the United States has been a unipole. American grand strategy during this period has been invariably described in hegemonic terms. Indeed, offshore balancers have been among the most persistent in explaining why the United States has not adopted their preferred grand strategy but has sought hegemony instead.³

Although hegemony has proven durable in the unipolar era, restraint should not be underestimated. If the United States is indeed as geopolitically blessed as offshore balancers claim, then, paradoxically, we cannot be confident that the United States will balance when the need arises. Containing a potential hegemon near the peak of its strength is a formidable undertaking, and the United States might shy away from the high costs involved. When it matters most, offshore balancers may find that their arguments

2. On restraint, see Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014). On the return of great-power competition, see Brian D. Blankenship and Benjamin Denison, “Is America Prepared for Great-Power Competition?” *Survival* 61, no. 5 (October–November 2019): 43–64, <https://www.iiss.org/publications/survival/2019/survival-global-politics-and-strategy-octobernovember-2019/615-04-blankenship-and-denison/>; and Hal Brands and Evan Braden Montgomery, “One War Is Not Enough: Strategy and Force Planning for Great-Power Competition,” *Texas National Security Review* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 80–92, <http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/8865>.

3. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018); and Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America’s Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).

are too persuasive by half: If the United States is the most secure great power in history, then why balance? Why not trust the stopping power of water? To the extent that the United States derives grand strategic benefit from being free to roam, then offshore balancers should be concerned.

Going forward, I critically assess offshore balancing to reach firmer conclusions on whether it is a sound basis for American grand strategy. First, I situate offshore balancing within the grand strategy debate. Second, I discuss the stopping power of water. Third, I unpack the implications of the stopping power of water for American grand strategy, with a focus on whether to balance or not. Fourth, I derive hypotheses for what we should see empirically if the United States is as ambivalent about balancing as the argument implies. Fifth, I use these hypotheses to inform an analysis of offshore balancing's prospects in the Middle East, with a focus on Iran. Finally, I conclude with some general reflections.

Offshore Balancing in the Grand Strategy Debate

Offshore balancing occupies a critical position in the ongoing American grand strategy debate. Relative to alternatives like deep engagement, liberal internationalism, and conservative primacy, offshore balancing asserts that the United States can stop short of global hegemony.⁴ Instead, offshore balancing asks the United States to be the balancer of last resort in core regions like Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East. In essence, "the aim is to remain offshore as long as possible, while recognizing that it is sometimes necessary to come onshore" when local states cannot handle a threat on their own.⁵ Deep engagement, liberal internationalism, and conservative primacy, on the other hand, insist on global hegemony. Specifically, they privilege those long-standing alliances and partnerships that have allowed the United States to keep the peace among the major powers, which has headed off the kinds of security competitions and wars that threatened American security and prosperity in the past.

Offshore balancers have made a number of important contributions to the grand strategy debate, such as situating offshore balancing within international relations theory. Mearsheimer, in particular, has argued that offshore balancing is consistent with offensive realism: offshore balancing

4. 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* 2, no. 1 (November 2018): 31, <http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/869>.

5. John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 4 (July/August 2016): 74, <https://www-foreignaffairs-com.usawc.idm.oclc.org/articles/united-states/2016-06-13/case-offshore-balancing>.

is the grand strategy we should expect from a regional hegemon that is determined to remain the *only* regional hegemon.⁶

Offshore balancers have also explained why the United States has not consistently pursued offshore balancing, despite its merits—namely, when the United States enjoys a preponderance of power, it can pursue global hegemony free of external constraints. Offshore balancers disagree among themselves about whether the United States has pursued global hegemony since the end of World War II or the end of the Cold War. Christopher Layne dates the American pursuit of global hegemony to World War II. Michael Desch, Mearsheimer, and Stephen Walt treat it as a post–Cold War phenomenon.⁷ All agree, however, that when the US power position becomes dominant enough, it will pursue a grand strategy of global hegemony rather than offshore balancing.

Offshore balancers have provided a powerful critique of global hegemony as well, highlighting its costs and failures.⁸ Among the most consequential are damaged relations with other great powers, unhealthy alliance dynamics, failed military interventions, and illiberalism at home. Ultimately, offshore balancers argue, global hegemony will become unsustainable as unipolarity passes and the United States must contend again with great-power competitors.

Offshore balancing is a firmly established and legitimate contender in the grand strategy debate. Its critique of global hegemony is particularly well-developed, but its proponents have yet to grapple thoroughly with the implications of the stopping power of water.

The Stopping Power of Water

In *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Mearsheimer develops a theory of offensive realism that explains why great powers attempt to maximize their share of world power. While the ideal situation is to be a hegemon—a state so powerful that it dominates all other states in the system—it is virtually impossible for any state to achieve global hegemony. According to Mearsheimer, “The principal impediment to world domination is the difficulty of projecting

6. Mearsheimer, *Great Power Politics*.

7. Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006); Michael C. Desch, “America’s Liberal Illiberalism: The Ideological Origins of Overreaction in U.S. Foreign Policy,” *International Security* 32, no. 3 (Winter 2007/08): 7–43, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30130517>; Mearsheimer, *Great Delusion*; and Walt, *Good Intentions*.

8. Layne, “The Containment of Europe: American Hegemony and European Responses” and “Liberal Ideology and U.S. Grand Strategy,” chaps. 6–7 in *Illusions*, 118–58; Mearsheimer, “Liberalism as a Source of Trouble,” chap. 6 in *Great Delusion*, 152–87; Walt, “A Dismal Record” and “Why Liberal Hegemony Failed,” chaps. 1–2 in *Good Intentions*, 21–90; and Posen, “The Perils of Liberal Hegemony,” chap. 1 in *Restraint*, 24–68.

power across the world's oceans onto the territory of a rival great power.” In other words, because of the stopping power of water, “there has never been a global hegemon, and there is not likely to be one anytime soon.”⁹ Rather, the best outcome a great power can hope for is to be a regional hegemon and dominate its neighborhood. The United States, in fact, is the only great power to have succeeded in securing hegemony in its region, the Western Hemisphere.

Since becoming a regional hegemon, the United States has worked hard—not to secure global hegemony, but to prevent hostile powers like Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, and the Soviet Union from overturning the balance of power in their respective regions. In fact, the United States has been reluctant to intervene in Europe and Northeast Asia unless a peer competitor has been on the horizon, preferring to pass the buck to local states instead. The United States, in other words, has acted as an offshore balancer, intervening in other regions to forestall the rise of potential hegemonies when local states have proven unequal to the task. The ultimate rationale has been geopolitical: if there are two or more great powers in other regions, those powers will spend most of their time competing with each other rather than meddling in the offshore balancer's backyard.¹⁰

The stopping power of water and the related tendency of insular great powers to act as offshore balancers add an element of stability to the international system. States may have incentives to maximize their share of world power, but only regional hegemony is attainable. Even this has been in doubt since the United States came to dominate the Western Hemisphere and proved itself ready to intervene should another great power attempt to dominate its region. Even in an offensive realist world, the stopping power of water limits how much a great power can and should expand.

Mearsheimer's incorporation of the stopping power of water in his analysis is consistent with offense-defense theory, which states that factors that privilege the defense relative to the offense should disincentivize expansion and war.¹¹ Essentially, the stopping power of water amounts to the claim, “armies that have to traverse a large body of water to attack a well-armed

9. Mearsheimer, *Great Power Politics*, 41.

10. Mearsheimer, *Great Power Politics*, 41–42, 140–43.

11. Barry R. Posen, “The Best Defense,” review of *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, by John J. Mearsheimer, *National Interest*, no. 67 (Spring 2002): 121, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42897407>; Layne, *Illusions*, 20; David W. Blagden, Jack S. Levy, and William R. Thompson, “Correspondence: Sea Powers, Continental Powers, and Balancing Theory,” *International Security* 36, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 196, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_c_00060; and David Blagden, “When Does Competition Become Conflict? Technology, Geography, and the Offense–Defense Balance,” *Journal of Global Security Studies* 6, no. 4 (December 2021): 13–16, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogab007>.

opponent invariably have little offensive capability.”¹² In offense-defense terms, water shifts the offense-defense balance in favor of the defense.

The significant limits on the number of troops and the amount of firepower a state can bring to bear in an amphibious operation against another state make it extremely difficult to overwhelm a prepared defender on land.¹³ Robert Jervis foreshadows the logic of the stopping power of water in his seminal treatment of the security dilemma:

Anything that increases the amount of ground the attacker has to cross, or impedes his progress across it, or makes him more vulnerable while crossing, increases the advantage accruing to the defense. When states are separated by barriers that produce these effects, the security dilemma is eased, since both can have forces adequate for defense without being able to attack.¹⁴

Oceans serve as buffer zones in this respect—if all states were islands, Jervis argues, anarchy would be much less of a problem.

Similarly, Mearsheimer finds exceedingly few cases in which a great power launched an amphibious assault against territory that was well-defended by another great power. Exceptions, such as the Normandy landings, prove the rule: only when a great power has been on the verge of catastrophic defeat, with its forces stretched thin and pinned down on multiple fronts, has it become vulnerable to amphibious assault, and then only when the invading force has enjoyed clear-cut air superiority. Additionally, neither of the insular great powers—Great Britain and the United States—has ever been invaded, whereas France and Russia, two leading continental powers, have been invaded a total of 12 times since 1792—11 times across land, but only once from the sea. “The apparent lesson,” Mearsheimer argues, “is that large bodies of water make it extremely difficult for armies to invade territory defended by a well-armed great power.”¹⁵

12. Mearsheimer, *Great Power Politics*, 114.

13. Mearsheimer, *Great Power Politics*, 114–19.

14. Robert Jervis, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (January 1978): 194–96, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009958>; Stephen Van Evera, “Offense, Defense, and the Causes of War,” *International Security* 22, no. 4 (Spring 1998): 19, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539239>; Charles L. Glaser and Chaim Kaufmann, “What Is the Offense-Defense Balance and Can We Measure It?,” *International Security* 22, no. 4 (Spring 1998): 64–66, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539240>; Keir A. Lieber, *War and the Engineers: The Primacy of Politics over Technology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 30; and Charles L. Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 141.

15. Mearsheimer, *Great Power Politics*, 118–19, 126–28.

The stopping power of water is not absolute, however. Take, for instance, the anomaly of Imperial Japan.¹⁶ An insular power, Imperial Japan nonetheless annexed Korea and conquered large parts of China in the first half of the twentieth century. Mearsheimer chalks up Japan's gains to the fact that the Asian mainland was a soft target from 1900–45. Unlike Europe, which “was effectively a giant fortress closed to conquest by distant great powers,” Asia was “open for penetration from abroad.”¹⁷ This fact suggests that water only has stopping power if there is a formidable army waiting on land to exploit its defensive advantages.¹⁸ In offense-defense terms, though water may shift the balance toward defense, it will not be dispositive if the power asymmetry between the attacker and defender is too great.

American Grand Strategy and the Stopping Power of Water

The stopping power of water provides the United States with a defensive advantage par excellence and, according to Mearsheimer, explains why the United States has traditionally acted as an offshore balancer.¹⁹ Unrivaled in its hemisphere and separated from other great powers by the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, the United States is exceptionally secure—“probably the most secure great power in history.”²⁰ Its margin of security allows the United States to pass the buck to frontline states in core regions, intervening only at the last moment when a potential hegemon threatens to overturn the balance of power.

At first blush, Mearsheimer seems to capture an important tendency in American grand strategy. The United States ostensibly intervened in World War I and World War II to turn back potential hegemonies and waged a protracted Cold War to contain the Soviet Union, another potential hegemon. On its face, this evidence suggests that the United States is committed to maintaining the balance of power abroad. A closer look at these cases, however, demonstrates that the offshore balancing logic tenuously applies in each instance. Galen Jackson, for example, has argued that balance-of-power considerations were simply not a major factor in the American entry into

16. Posen, “Best Defense,” 123; Glenn H. Snyder, “Mearsheimer’s World—Offensive Realism and the Struggle for Security: A Review Essay,” review of *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, by John J. Mearsheimer, *International Security* 27, no. 1 (Summer 2002): 160, <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228802320231253>; and Richard N. Rosecrance, “War and Peace,” review of *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, by John J. Mearsheimer, *World Politics* 55, no. 1 (October 2002): 149, <https://doi.org/10.1353/wp.2003.0007>.

17. Mearsheimer, *Great Power Politics*, 264–65.

18. Patrick Porter, *The Global Village Myth: Distance, War, and the Limits of Power* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015), 20.

19. Mearsheimer, “The Offshore Balancers,” chap. 7 in *Great Power Politics*, 234–66.

20. Mearsheimer, *Great Power Politics*, 127.

World War I.²¹ In the World War II case, balance-of-power considerations were front and center with Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan together threatening to dominate Eurasia, but only the latter's (fortuitous) attack on Pearl Harbor opened up sufficient political space for the United States to join the war in full.²² As far as the Cold War, Marc Trachtenberg and others have ably documented the United States' reluctance to assume a security commitment to Europe through at least the 1950s.²³ In short, the United States has amassed a record of balancing, but it could easily have been otherwise. The cases for and against offshore balancing still need to be fleshed out.

The Case for and against Offshore Balancing

Given the stopping power of water, it is not clear why the United States should act as an offshore balancer. More generally, it is unclear why a regional hegemon should fear the emergence of another regional hegemon. Mearsheimer concedes the point: "One might wonder why a state that stood astride its own region would care whether there was another regional hegemon, especially if the two competitors were separated by an ocean. After all, it would be almost impossible for either regional hegemon to strike across the water at the other."²⁴ Focusing on the freedom to roam can resolve this contradiction—namely, regional hegemons are free to roam and interfere in other regions because they dominate their own neighborhoods.²⁵ The United States, for example, can project power abroad in part because it does not need to worry much about defending itself at home. As Mearsheimer puts it:

Most Americans never think about it, but one of the main reasons the United States is able to station military forces all around the globe and intrude in the politics of virtually every region is that it faces no serious threats in the Western Hemisphere. If the United States had dangerous foes in its own backyard, it would be much less capable of roaming into distant regions.²⁶

21. Galen Jackson, "The Offshore Balancing Thesis Reconsidered: Realism, the Balance of Power in Europe, and America's Decision for War in 1917," *Security Studies* 21, no. 3 (July–September 2012): 455–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2012.706502>.

22. John M. Schuessler, "Shifting Blame to the Axis," chap. 2 in *Deceit on the Road to War: Presidents, Politics, and American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 27–58.

23. Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945–1963* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Mark S. Sheetz, "Exit Strategies: American Grand Designs for Postwar European Security," *Security Studies* 8, no. 4 (Summer 1999): 1–43; James McAllister, *No Exit: America and the German Problem, 1943–1954* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); and John M. Schuessler and Joshua R. Shiffrinson, "The Shadow of Exit from NATO," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 13, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 38–51, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26760127>.

24. Mearsheimer, *Great Power Politics*, 142.

25. On the freedom to roam, see John M. Schuessler, Joshua Shiffrinson, and David Blagden, "Revisiting Insularity and Expansion: A Theory Note," *Perspectives on Politics* (forthcoming), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S153759272100222X>.

26. Mearsheimer, *Great Power Politics*, 365.

In this respect, the United States can be usefully contrasted with the string of European great powers who failed to gain regional hegemony and have thus been unable to realize their global ambitions.²⁷ A rising China faces similar constraints today in breaking out of its neighborhood in East Asia.²⁸

When there are two or more great powers in other regions of the world, they spend most of their time competing with each other, rather than causing trouble in the United States' backyard.²⁹ By acting as an offshore balancer, the United States ensures that it retains the freedom to roam while denying that freedom to others. In turn, this means that the United States can go on the offense and encircle others rather than stand pat on the defense and risk being encircled itself. Offshore balancing, in other words, locks in a surplus of security for the United States by preserving its freedom to roam.

The freedom to roam is desirable, but the stopping power of water means it may not be desirable *enough* to justify the high costs of balancing. Recall that offshore balancing entails intervening in another region to forestall the rise of a hegemon when local states have proven unequal to the task. If intervention becomes necessary, it can only be costly and protracted, as the potential hegemon will be at the peak of its strength. Is such a sacrifice warranted, given the amount of security at stake? The stopping power of water makes the answer unclear. Even in the worst case—the emergence of a rival hegemon—the relevant threat is indirect. Consider the most-cited danger: an alliance between a rival hegemon and a state that neighbors the offshore balancer. Such an alliance would force the offshore balancer to devote more strategic attention to its own backyard, thus restricting its freedom to roam. It seems implausible, however, that the offshore balancer would allow the rival hegemon to project so much military power via the neighboring state that attack and conquest become real possibilities. In other words, a rival hegemon could not do much more than meddle in the offshore balancer's backyard.³⁰

Crucially, there is a legitimate debate to be had over whether indirect threats are so unendurable that the case for balancing trumps the one for staying offshore. Along these lines, Robert J. Art has argued that the United States could have remained secure from invasion had it stayed out of World War II and had Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan consolidated

27. Layne, *Illusions*, 29.

28. Evan Braden Montgomery, "Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific: China's Rise and the Future of U.S. Power Projection," *International Security* 38, no. 4 (Spring 2014): 124–25, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00160.

29. Mearsheimer, *Great Power Politics*, 41–42, 140–43.

30. Peter Gowan, "A Calculus of Power," *New Left Review* 16 (July/August 2002): 58–59, 62, <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii16/articles/peter-gowan-a-calculus-of-power>; and Christopher Layne, "The 'Poster Child for Offensive Realism': America as a Global Hegemon," *Security Studies* 12, no. 2 (Winter 2002/3): 126–27, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09636410212120011>.

control over Eurasia. The American public, however, would have suffered a degraded standard of living in an Axis-dominated world, which was reason enough to have entered the war.³¹ Perhaps he is right, but his analysis underscores that US entry into World War II was a matter of choice—and a closer call than often assumed.³² More generally, a great power should not give up its freedom to roam lightly—nor should it pay any and all costs to preserve it, which renders offshore balancing controversial.

An Ambivalent Balancer

The stopping power of water presents the United States with a dilemma: maintain the freedom to roam, or avoid the high costs of balancing? Since the answer is not obvious, the United States should be an ambivalent balancer. Specifically, we should see the following when the United States is confronted with the prospect of balancing against a potential hegemon in a core region:

1. *The prospect of high costs should trigger a contentious domestic debate—at all levels—over balancing.* This outcome would be consistent with Randall L. Schweller's insight that balancing is costly and risky and thus politically contentious.³³ The states that Schweller highlights, however, are so internally divided that they are effectively unable to balance. In the American case, it is a materiel factor—the stopping power of water—that makes balancing particularly contentious.

2. *To the extent that the United States ends up balancing, the outcome should be contingent, with a provocation opening the needed political space.* As Richard Ned Lebow argues, a provocation can be “held out to the public as compelling evidence of the adversary’s aggressive intentions” and “portrayed as a serious enough challenge to the nation’s commitments, credibility, or honor to demand a forceful response,” overriding resistance to balancing.³⁴ If the public becomes convinced the other side has forced the issue, they will be more tolerant of the high costs of balancing against a potential hegemon.

31. Robert J. Art, “The United States, the Balance of Power, and World War II: Was Spykman Right?” *Security Studies* 14, no. 3 (July–September 2005): 365–406, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410500323120>.

32. Patrick Porter, “A Matter of Choice: Strategy and Discretion in the Shadow of World War II,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35, no. 3 (June 2012): 317–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2012.667369>.

33. Randall L. Schweller, “Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing,” *International Security* 29, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 159–201, <https://doi.org/10.1162/0162288042879913>; and Randall L. Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

34. Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crisis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 29.

In contrast to offensive realism—which predicts a linear progression from buck-passing to balancing as a potential hegemon comes closer to overturning the regional balance of power—the prediction here is that the United States will remain ambivalent about balancing right until the end, with the final outcome by no means inevitable.

Before proceeding, an important caveat is in order—namely, the stopping power of water’s effects are not all in the direction of restraint. As I have argued elsewhere with coauthors, insular powers enjoy two advantages when it comes to expansion. First, they are free to roam. Second, they are at the same time relatively nonthreatening. Combined, these advantages translate into spheres of influence abroad.³⁵ This observation helps make sense of the fact that the United States has been both ambivalent about balancing and quite expansionist at times. In a related piece of scholarship, Paul van Hooft argues that the United States enjoys so much security by virtue of the stopping power of water that its grand strategy is pushed and pulled toward extremes. Most importantly, in the event the United States commits to maintaining the balance of power in a core region, credibility concerns leave it little choice but to go “all-in,” which means risking major war.³⁶ It is exactly when Americans are confronted with this fact, I argue, that their commitment to maintaining the balance of power wavers.

Offshore Balancing in the Middle East

Ambivalent balancing has important implications for the US approach to the Middle East. Many agree that Iran is the most plausible candidate for regional hegemon, even if the prospects for that outcome are remote at the moment. Certainly, Iran has tense relations with its neighbors, especially Israel, and the continued wrangling over its nuclear program means war cannot be ruled out. Currently, however, Iran is much too weak economically and militarily—not to mention internally divided—to entertain a run at hegemony.³⁷

35. Schuessler, Shiffrinson, and Blagden, “Revisiting Insularity and Expansion.”

36. Paul van Hooft, “All-In or All-Out: Why Insularity Pushes and Pulls American Grand Strategy to Extremes,” *Security Studies* 29, no. 4 (August–September 2020): 701–29.

37. Joshua Rovner, “After America: The Flow of Persian Gulf Oil in the Absence of the U.S. Military Force,” in *Crude Strategy: Rethinking the US Military Commitment to Defend Persian Gulf Oil*, ed. Charles L. Glaser and Rosemary A. Kelanic (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2016), 149–53; and David Blagden and Patrick Porter, “Desert Shield of the Republic? A Realist Case for Abandoning the Middle East,” *Security Studies* 30, no. 1 (January 2021): 33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2021.1885727>.

If Iran were to overcome these obstacles, offshore balancing counsels that the United States should do what is necessary to prevent it from becoming a regional hegemon. As Mearsheimer and Walt advise:

Iran has a significantly larger population and greater economic potential than its Arab neighbors, and it may eventually be in a position to dominate the Gulf. If it begins to move in this direction, the United States should help the other Gulf states balance against Tehran, calibrating its own efforts and regional military presence to the magnitude of the danger.³⁸

To the extent that these efforts entail leading a diplomatic coalition, applying economic pressure, or even supplementing the defenses of local allies, the United States should be capable of containing the Iranian threat. Indeed, well-placed analysts expect a light military footprint to suffice to secure US interests in the region, which can be taken as a vote of confidence for offshore balancing.³⁹

Serious problems would emerge only if that light footprint proved insufficient and the United States confronted the choice between a major war and Iranian hegemony. Why might the United States tolerate the latter outcome? Beyond the costs associated with fighting Iran, the strategic stakes are less clear-cut in the Middle East than in other core regions. The prevailing concern has long been that a Middle East hegemon would manipulate the oil market, not project power into the Western Hemisphere.⁴⁰ Although serious, the oil threat arguably implicates US economic interests more directly than its security.⁴¹

With the rise of China, the Middle East's strategic salience may soon increase again. China depends heavily on Middle Eastern oil imports and may not indefinitely tolerate the United States' ability to interrupt those imports.⁴² Moreover, a hegemonic Iran could boost China's prospects

38. Mearsheimer and Walt, "Offshore Balancing," 83; and Walt, *Good Intentions*, 270.

39. Joshua Rovner and Caitlin Talmadge, "Hegemony, Force Posture, and the Provision of Public Goods: The Once and Future Role of Outside Powers in Securing Persian Gulf Oil," *Security Studies* 23, no. 3 (August 2014): 575–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15325024.2014.935224>; Rovner, "After America," 161; Caitlin Talmadge, "The Future of U.S. Force Posture in the Gulf: The Case for a Residual Forward Presence," in *Crude Strategy*, 251–79; and F. Gregory Gause III, "Should We Stay or Should We Go? The United States and the Middle East," *Survival* 61, no. 5 (October–November 2019): 20.

40. Rovner, "After America," 142.

41. Charles L. Glaser and Rosemary A. Kelanic, "Should the United States Stay in the Gulf?," in *Crude Strategy*, 235.

42. Charles L. Glaser, "How Oil Influences U.S. National Security," *International Security* 38, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 133–37, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00137.

for regional hegemony if the two states sided together against the United States. Even the China factor cuts both ways, however, as balancing too aggressively against Iran could undermine the United States' ability to balance directly against China. For this reason, Evan Braden Montgomery recommends that the United States adopt a "punishment-via-blockade" strategy against Iran to conserve high-value military assets for a more demanding "denial" strategy against China.⁴³

The United States certainly has an interest in preventing Iran from becoming a regional hegemon, but it could tolerate Iranian hegemony just the same. It would be unwise to assume that the offshore balancing logic will inevitably prevail.

Conclusion

The United States is destined to be an ambivalent balancer, which is another reminder that restraint is embedded in the American grand strategic tradition. Along these lines, Colin Dueck has identified a preference for "limited liability" as a persistent feature of American strategic culture.⁴⁴ Limited liability has manifested itself in resistance to: entangling alliances, involvement in foreign wars, the creation of a large standing army, and constraints on America's freedom of action abroad. While not as powerful today as it was in the first half of the twentieth century, limited liability still influences American grand strategy, in part due to the stopping power of water. In Dueck's words, "America's relative distance and security from conventional military threats have frequently fed into a mindset that denies the need for costly, long-term commitments overseas."⁴⁵

It has been easy to lose sight of restraint in the post-Cold War period, when the United States has been the only great power in the international system.⁴⁶ However durable hegemony has proven in the unipolar era, and however wedded the elite foreign policy establishment remains to it, offshore balancers should be careful not to underestimate restraint. Indeed, if the United States is as geopolitically blessed as it claims, then we cannot be confident that

43. Evan Braden Montgomery, "Primacy and Punishment: US Grand Strategy, Maritime Power, and Military Options to Manage Decline," *Security Studies* 29, no. 4 (August-September 2020): 769–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2020.1811463>.

44. Colin Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders: Power, Culture, and Change in American Grand Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 26–30.

45. Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders*, 29.

46. On unipolarity, see William C. Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security* 24, no. 1 (Summer 1999): 5–41; G. John Ikenberry, Michael Mastanduno, and William C. Wohlforth, *International Relations Theory and the Consequences of Unipolarity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011); and Nuno P. Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

it will actually balance when the need next arises. Containing a potential hegemon near the peak of its strength is a formidable undertaking, so it would not be surprising if the United States shied away from the high costs involved. When it matters most, offshore balancers may find that their arguments are too persuasive by half: If the United States is the most secure great power in history, then why balance? Why not trust the stopping power of water? To the extent that the United States derives grand strategic benefit from being free to roam, offshore balancers should be concerned that American ambivalence may ultimately prevail.

John M. Schuessler

John M. Schuessler, PhD, is an associate professor in the Department of International Affairs and is codirector of the Albritton Center for Grand Strategy at the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University. Previously, he taught at the Air War College. Schuessler received his PhD in political science from the University of Chicago. He is the author of *Deceit on the Road to War: Presidents, Politics, and American Democracy* (Cornell University Press, 2015).

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