



A bandwagon for offshore balancing?

Posted By [Stephen M. Walt](#) ■ Thursday, December 1, 2011

A few weeks ago, I mentioned that "**offshore balancing**" was a grand strategy whose time had come. My evidence at the time was the fact that Tom Friedman of the *New York Times*, previously an enthusiastic proponent of using American power to police the world and transform the Middle East, was **now endorsing** some of the key principles of offshore balancing. Now another recovering liberal interventionist, Peter Beinart, has written **a column** for the *Daily Beast* arguing that "offshore balancing" is the strategy that the Obama administration has adopted and offering a qualified endorsement of it.

On the one hand, it's gratifying to see another mainstream pundit embrace a strategy that is long overdue. But it is also troublesome that neither Friedman nor Beinart bothered to mention any of the people who have been championing this approach for a decade or more, including **Christopher Layne, John Mearsheimer, Barry Posen, Christopher Preble, Robert Pape, Andrew Bacevich, Patrick Porter**, and **yours truly**.

The omission may just be due to carelessness or haste, but it is not without consequences. By ignoring these (mostly) realist scholars who were among the earliest critics of neoconservative excesses (excesses that Beinart and many others once supported) and who have also been the principal advocates of a different approach to American grand

strategy, Beinart's essay helps ensure that foreign-policy debates in the U.S. remain confined within rather narrow circles.

As I've **observed elsewhere**, a striking feature of our contemporary foreign-policy debates is the rather modest role that realists play in policymaking circles or in mainstream commentary. Neoconservatives are still highly influential despite a steady litany of failures, and liberal internationalists dominate the Democratic Party's foreign-policy establishment despite a mixed track record. By contrast, genuine realists remain something of an endangered species inside the Beltway, even though they were once important players in foreign-policy circles and even though "realism" is a respected theoretical perspective within the academic study of international relations. Yet there is no genuine realist writing on a regular basis for any of the major news outlets like the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, or *Washington Post*. (If you want to know how marginal realists have become, consider the frightening possibility that this rather modest blog might be the most visible mainstream outlet for more-or-less realist commentary.)

Of course, my point is not that realists get everything right, though **our track record** is pretty good. My point is that a realist perspective on U.S. foreign policy ought to get more attention than it typically does these days.

Beinart is a smart and independent thinker, and he deserves credit for recognizing where things are now headed and for calling his readers' attention to it. But he doesn't fully grasp some of the essential features of offshore balancing. His (and Obama's) version of this strategy remains highly interventionist; the only difference is that Washington now uses drones, cruise missiles, and special forces instead of large land armies. But we are still violating other states' sovereignty and killing terrorists and civilians in several different places, including some areas that are hardly vital interests. As we are witnessing in Pakistan, this approach is inflaming anti-Americanism, radicalizing the Pakistani diaspora, jeopardizing the overdue effort to leave Afghanistan, and quite possibly making the terrorism problem worse over time. And Obama and Beinart's version of the strategy still assumes that it is America's responsibility to solve security problems in places like Yemen or Central Asia, instead of relying primarily on others to do it.

Beinart also believes one of offshore balancing's limitations is that "it requires abandoning the idea that via nation building the U.S. can remake other societies." Offshore balancers do not see eschewing nation-building as a "limitation" but rather as an acknowledgement that outside intervention and foreign occupation are not good ways to move societies in a positive direction. On the contrary, realists believe that the United States is more likely to move the world in the right direction by offering a powerful and positive example to the world, an example that others admire and seek to emulate over time. Hence their concern that excessive global adventurism has fueled anti-Americanism in many places, inflated the influence of the military-industrial complex, led to torture and other violations of U.S. ideals, and gradually undermined civil liberties back home.

Beinart is also somewhat critical of allying with states that have questionable democratic credentials, which is sometimes necessary to preserve favorable balances of power in key regions. But we should not forget that the United States has done this throughout its history and benefited from many of these partnerships. Alliances with fellow democracies might be preferable (though some of them can cause problems too), but international politics is a contact sport and even powerful states cannot afford to be overly choosy when selecting allies and partners.

Finally, Beinart depicts offshore balancing as a strategy that has been forced upon us largely by fiscal constraints. In his words, "offshore balancing reemerges when the money and bravado have run out." He's correct that our economic woes have pushed the United States towards this more sensible strategy, but that does not mean we should go back on the interventionist warpath if we ever get our fiscal house in order. The interventionist approach that the U.S. followed from 1992 onward -- and especially after 2001 -- was a blunder even when our economy was healthy and the budget was in surplus, because it embroiled us in costly conflicts that were very hard to win and did not advance core U.S. interests anyway. Had we followed more realistic prescriptions after 1992 -- limiting or forgoing NATO expansion, rejecting "dual containment" and "regional transformation" in the Middle East, playing "hard to get" a bit more with key allies, and acting as an evenhanded mediator in the Oslo Process, etc. -- the United States might not have been attacked on 9/11 and would certainly have avoided the costly quagmires in Iraq and Afghanistan. We might even have

achieved the ever-elusive two-state solution in the Middle East, though it is impossible to say that for certain.

The key point is that offshore balancing is the right strategy even when our coffers are full, provided that no peer competitors are threatening to dominate key strategic regions. Even during good times, it makes no sense to take on unnecessary burdens or to allow allies to free-ride on Uncle Sam's hubristic desire to be the "indispensable nation" in almost every corner of the world. In other words, offshore balancing isn't just a strategy for hard times; it is also the best available strategy in a world where the United States is the strongest power, prone to trigger unnecessary antagonism, and vulnerable to being dragged into unnecessary wars.

As I **wrote back in 2005** (p. 223):

Offshore balancing is the ideal grand strategy for an era of U.S. primacy. It husband the power on which U.S. primacy depends and minimizes the fear that U.S. power provokes. By setting clear priorities and emphasizing reliance on regional allies, it reduces the danger of being drawn into unnecessary conflicts and encourages other states to do more to help us. Equally important, it takes advantage of America's favorable geopolitical position and exploits the tendency for regional powers to worry more about each other than about the United States. But it is not a passive strategy, and does not preclude using the full range of U.S. power to advance core American interests.

I cannot help but wonder how much better off we would be today had the United States followed this basic blueprint over the past two decades, instead of indulging in a series of misguided interventions around the globe.