

What My Students Think About U.S. Grand Strategy | Stephen M. Walt

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Like most residents of New England, I've spent the past day digging out from a major snowstorm. Unlike most of my neighbors, I've also spent many hours grading the take-home final from my course. It occurred to me that some of you might like to know what we asked our students, and what some of them had to say about it.

The exam was in two parts, and the first part consisted of the following hypothetical question:

Q1: "Due to an unexpected movement of tectonic plates, the United States and China have switched geographic locations. The United States is now located in East Asia; sharing borders with Russia, North Korea, India, Mongolia, Vietnam, etc., and is much closer to Japan, while China is now located in North America, in-between Canada and Mexico. Assume that all other features of the two societies are unchanged (i.e., each state faces this new situation with the same populations they have today, along with the same natural resource endowments, military capabilities, economic systems, political institutions, etc.).

The question: how would this development affect contemporary international relations? Your answer should draw upon the theoretical material covered in this course (e.g., realism, liberalism, constructivism, etc.) but feel free to add your own ideas as well."

Students were given 1250 words (5-6 pages) to address this question, and most of them did pretty well with it. The question is obviously designed to get them to think through what different theories tell you about how geography would affect relations between states. For instance: would US relations with India and Japan deteriorate if the US were located nearby, or would shared democratic values dampen potential rivalries? Would China try to establish regional hegemony in the Western hemisphere, and would states like Canada, Mexico or Brazil try to contain it? Or would they "bandwagon" with China as they have done with the United States? Would the United States have to curtail its global ambitions in order to deal with security problems closer to home -- such as Pakistan, North Korea, Burma, or Russia -- or would it feel compelled to use force against a threatening neighbor like North Korea? There's no single "right answer" to this sort of question; what I'm looking for is a clear, logically consistent, and well-argued set of predictions.

Not surprisingly, many of the papers argued that switching places would be a tremendous benefit to China. In particular, students clearly recognized that the United States enjoys some enormous geographic advantages. In addition to being wealthier and more powerful than any of the other major powers, the United States is protected by two enormous oceanic moats *and* has no great powers in its immediate neighborhood. Moving from East Asia to the Western hemisphere would put China in this same favorable position, and place the United States in a much more problematic location in East Asia.

But what was really interesting was an implication that some (though hardly all) students drew from this line of argument. A number of them argued that China would be so secure in the Western hemisphere that it could focus even more attention on economic development, and not worry very much about military or security developments elsewhere. It would want to defend its own territory,

and it would worry about securing energy supplies from Canada, Venezuela, Mexico, and elsewhere, but otherwise it would be sitting pretty and could remain aloof from lots of other security issues. The United States, by contrast, would be facing all sorts of challenges over in Asia and would have to try to deal with all of them.

An obvious question, therefore, is: why doesn't this same logic apply to the United States today? Instead of devoting trillions of dollars to transforming the Middle East, trying to bring Afghanistan into the 20th century (or is it the 19th?) and generally interfering all over the world, the United States could almost certainly do a lot less on the world stage and devote some of those resources to balancing budgets and fixing things here at home. It's called *nation-building*, but we'd be building *our* nation and *our* future, not somebody else's.

What some of our students have intuitively grasped (and not because we told them), is that there is in fact a very powerful case for a much more limited U.S. military posture overseas. Indeed, given the existence of nuclear weapons, there is even a cogent case to be made for something approaching isolationism, as laid out by people like the late [Eric Nordlinger](#), by the CATO Institute's [Chris Preble](#), or the team of [Gholz, Press, and Sapolsky](#). I don't go quite that far myself (i.e., I'm an offshore balancer, not an isolationist), but I recognize that there is a serious case for the latter position. And because this view does have a certain appeal, the current foreign-policy establishment has to do a lot of [threat-mongering](#) and engage in a lot of [ideological oversell](#) in order to get Americans to keep paying for foreign wars and sending their sons and daughters out to garrison the globe. It also helps to portray anybody who advocates doing less as some sort of idealistic pacifist or naive appeaser.

But this debate is beginning to [open up](#). When states and local governments are facing [bankruptcy](#), when military adventures like Iraq or Afghanistan yield not victory but at best only prolonged and costly draws, and when there is in fact no ideologically motivated great power adversary out there trying to "bury us," then continuing to try to manage the whole goddamn planet isn't just foolish, it's unconscionable. It will probably take another decade for this reality to work its way through our hidebound national-security establishment, but the [winds of change](#) are already apparent. And not a moment too soon.