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STEPHEN M. WALT

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Signs of realism in U.S. grand strategy

Posted By [Stephen M. Walt](#) ■ Friday, October 29, 2010 - 12:35 PM ■ [Share](#)



The [Council on Foreign Relations](#) is not the first place I look for outside-the-box thinking, but can be a useful weather-vane marking shifting attitudes within the establishment. And on that score, two articles in the upcoming issue of *Foreign Affairs* merit your attention.

The first article, entitled "[American Profligacy and American Power](#)," is by former Deputy Treasury Secretary Roger Altman and Council President Richard Haass. It is telling indictment of past policy errors that have undermined American power, and it is refreshing that Altman and Haass outline the strategic implications clearly. Some money quotations, with my emphasis added:

One way or the other, by action or reaction, there will be a profound shift in U.S. fiscal policy if the U.S. government continues to overspend. Deficits will be cut sharply through a combination of big spending cuts, tax increases, and, quite possibly, re-imposed budget rules. *No category of spending or taxpayers will be spared.*"

But the impact of the United States' skyrocketing debt will not be limited to the behavior of markets or central bankers. Federal spending will decrease once the inevitable fiscal adjustment occurs, and defense spending will go down with it. ...

The good news is that total defense spending could be reduced by five percent or even ten percent without materially weakening the United States' security if (and admittedly it is a big if) the cuts are done intelligently...

Military operations need to be subject to cuts, too, if defense spending is to come down significantly without reducing the number of people in uniform. Together, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan cost more than \$150 billion a year. The combat role of U.S. forces in Iraq has ended, and only 50,000 troops remain there. ... [T]here is a strategic argument for maintaining some U.S. forces in Iraq beyond December 2011 ... Nevertheless, the new fiscal order in Washington could require Iraq to pay for all or at least part of that presence, or go without it.

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“ The pessimist complains about the wind; the optimist expects it to change; the realist adjusts the sails. ”

— William Arthur Ward

ABOUT THIS BLOG [EMAIL](#)


Stephen M. Walt is the Robert and Renée Belfer professor of international relations at Harvard University.

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Shrinking budgets are likely to have an even greater impact on the future of the U.S. role in Afghanistan. . . . [A] U.S. military presence in Afghanistan at or close to 100,000 soldiers will cost around \$100 billion a year. The coming fiscal austerity and the need to find cost savings in the defense sphere argue against maintaining that expense. Indeed, *economic and strategic arguments both call into question the counterinsurgency approach of fighting the Taliban and the nation-building approach of investing heavily in the development of the Afghan government's capabilities and institutions.* They suggest a more modest counterterrorism approach: going after the terrorists directly with drones, cruise missiles, and Special Forces, much as the United States is doing in Yemen and Somalia."

Wow. If I didn't know better, I'd think I was reading the [Afghanistan Study Group report](#).

Then follow up Altman and Haass with Council President-emeritus Leslie Gelb's essay "GDP Now Matters More than Force." Although I'm not sure that title is fully justified, it's hard to argue with the following sentiments:

"Because Beijing has been playing the new economic game at a maestro level -- staying out of wars and political confrontations and zeroing in on business -- its global influence far exceeds its existing economic strength. China gains extra power from others' expectations of its future growth. The country has become a global economic giant without becoming a global military power. Nations do not fear China's military might; they fear its ability to give or withhold trade and investments.

And yet, for all the novel characteristics of the present era, there is one stunning constant: the national security strategy of the United States. Whereas other countries have adjusted to the new economics-based order, Washington has been tardy. . . . it must adjust its approach to recognize that economics is now at the center of geopolitics. Washington's failure to do so has already cost it in blood, treasure, and influence. Now, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, leaders in Washington proclaim their awareness of the new economic order but lack any semblance of a new national security strategy to embrace it."

Can you say "offshore balancing?" I knew you could, and **so can I**. In fact, a **few of us have** been **pushing** variations on **this idea** for **some years** now. When experienced insiders like Gelb, Haass, and Altman are moving in that direction, it's a sign that reality is starting to catch up with the "pay any price and bear any burden" world-view that has distorted U.S. foreign policy for decades. I hope somebody in the new Congress listens, and that Obama and his team of liberal interventionists does too.

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TOIVOS
5:33 PM ET
October 29, 2010

better late than never

If the administration would only listen. To withdraw our troops from Iraq and Afghanistan will require that we face the fact that we lost those wars. Can the pentagon do that? If we continue fighting then it is easy for the military to claim we are winning, but once we are out that claim is no longer valid. After the Baker commission in 2006 the military persuaded Bush to escalate rather than cut back. Recent events show that Obama is even more intimidated by the military than was Bush. Watching him accept humiliation at the hands of Netanyahu makes it seem unlikely that he has the strength to do the right thing.

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LROBBY99
6:12 PM ET
October 29, 2010

I hold out hope a 2nd Obama

I hold out hope a 2nd Obama term will see big changes in ME policy. Only the odds, Israel, and Israel's US clout oppose me.

► [REPLY](#)

LOBEWIPER
10:51 PM ET
October 29, 2010

Currently, the Lobby rules Washington

It will be most interesting to see whether the Israel Lobby's influence will continue in the face of increasing US fiscal and economic realism. Prof. Walt strikes a hopeful tone and I hope his optimism is justified. It seems very likely to me that the Lobby will continue to push for continued and substantial financial/military support for Israel even though that is not in the best interests of the US. To do so may ultimately result in tremendous backlash against the Israelis (and perhaps, diasporan Jews, which would be most unfortunate). Maybe the indentured servants who now populate our congress will get religion when faced with a choice between siding with Israel politically/financially and saving the US from economic disaster.

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SIN NOMBRE
7:12 AM ET
October 30, 2010

The epicenter

As someone greatly sympathetic to the "realist" argument generally I wonder though ... just how bad would we—or anyone—consider the U.S.'s foreign policy as being badly or very badly misguided if we discounted the U.S.'s policy(s) and involvement in the Middle East?

Not all that much I don't think, except maybe for the trade question.

► [REPLY](#)

SASHA
12:08 PM ET
October 30, 2010

perestrojka

For those who remember the history of Soviet Union, this is a deja vu. The US mirrors SU in so many respects (well, the Israeli lobby is an exception), and I don't see many chances that they would not follow the same road.

► [REPLY](#)

SLIGHTLY_OPTIMISTIC
12:12 PM ET
October 30, 2010

United Nations

Therefore the Council on Foreign Relations suggests the G20 next month will achieve little in maintaining, let alone improving global public goods? So much for hopes of keeping the thinking behind the UN multilateral system.

► [REPLY](#)

LOBEWIPER
1:01 PM ET
October 30, 2010

SIN NOMBRE,

Good question: factor the I-P conflict out of the equation and how does our FP look? We have significantly protected ourselves against a cut-off of middle eastern oil by the war in Iraq and military presence in Saudi Arabia. But what else is to like? Afghanistan is a disaster worsening by the day. We have a significant military presence in Japan and Korea which does not appear to be needed. Relations with Cuba are still strained (thanks to the Cuban-American lobby). We have out-spent our resources and are now heavily in debt, while our primary and secondary schools need expensive overhaul in order for us to not fall further behind our overseas competitors. Since money is now seriously limited, it does not seem possible for the US to be successful in both the domestic and foreign arenas so long as the latter pursues what I and others consider a path of reckless military adventurism. This is also Prof. Walt's point, as I understand him here and elsewhere on this blog.

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KUNINO
10:51 AM ET

We needed the US dead in Iraq to protect oil

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