



## Hegemony vs. Restraint in the Debate Over U.S. Defense Cuts

By [Judah Grunstein](#) | 10 Nov 2011

The need to bring order to America's finances has made defense budget cuts unavoidable, with the question now turning to where and how much to cut. A [recent CNAS report](#) offered some granular -- and alarming at the high end -- details in terms of how various levels of cuts would impact U.S. military capabilities. Now two articles in Foreign Affairs bring into focus a more reassuring view of both defense austerity, which [Benjamin J. Friedman likens](#) to "the best possible auditor," and retrenchment, [which Joseph Parent and Paul MacDonald deem to be](#) the most promising way for an overextended superpower like the U.S. to regroup. The arguments are thought-provoking for those in the hegemonic lobby, of which I consider myself a member, who have fallen into the habit of accepting at face value the claim that without America's global security backstop, today's largely benign global order would quickly devolve into violent disorder. Parent and MacDonald also deserve credit for their measured and sober portrayal of America's relative decline, which both sides of the argument tend to exaggerate.

If there's a weakness to both articles, it's that their arguments depend largely on best-case scenarios of outcomes that remain uncertain. As such, the retrenchment they call for represents significant risk to both U.S. interests and the global order, risk that the authors address by assuming it won't materialize. This is especially true for Parent and MacDonald. For instance, they argue that none of our allies in Asia or Europe face territorial threats, certainly true in the sense that total wars of territorial conquest are unimaginable, although Taiwan could be reasonably considered an exception to this rule. Nonetheless, it's safe to assume that China has no desire to occupy Japan or South Korea, and that even if it did, both have sufficient capabilities to deter such an intention. The same holds true for Europe vis à vis Russia. However, the authors don't address the far more relevant threat of "nibbling at the edges" of disputed borders, as in the South China Sea, the Caucasus and even along the China-India border. Nor do they take into serious enough consideration the question of intimidation, because for them, reducing America's forward base structure in East Asia will not mean a reduced U.S. commitment to its regional allies. As a result, it will have no impact on either assuring our friends or on deterring potential rivals.

Perhaps, but perhaps not. A U.S. presence means U.S. skin in the game in the event of even an initial outbreak of hostilities. That has a far more visible and concrete impact in terms of assurance and deterrence than the promise of a U.S. riposte to any aggression. Offshore balancing certainly offers the U.S. more strategic flexibility than forward bases, but that very flexibility can create doubt in the minds of both allies and adversaries -- let alone friends that are not allies, such as India, that we are hoping to integrate into a regional security architecture.

Parent and MacDonald also assume that a U.S. retrenchment will be orderly, and that any vacuum it creates will be filled by benign powers looking to reinforce and not contest the existing arrangement. Again, perhaps, but perhaps not. It's easy, for both supporters and critics alike, to talk in the abstract about the U.S. global role, while glossing over the concrete and massive nature of that role. As this eye-opening congressional testimony by Vice Adm. Bruce W. Clingan, [via Raymond Pritchett](#), on "a day in the life" of the U.S. Navy shows, the U.S. really is everywhere and in a way that no other power has shown the willingness, let alone the ability, to replace even on a regional scale.

When it comes to the U.S. role, there's certainly a lot, and given the financial burdens of this role, there's even too much. But it's hard to say exactly where the fat is. Something's got to give. But does it have to give as abruptly and as drastically as the restraint lobby, of which I also consider myself a member, is now advocating for? It's easy to call out various defense programs, cite their cost overruns and condemn them to the chopping block. But when you have a sense of where each one fits into the intricate scheme of the U.S. -- that is, the global -- security architecture, it's hard to hold back a wince.

Finally, many if not all of the supporters of restraint base their argument on a reductionist vision of U.S. interests. But the U.S. simply cannot calculate its national interest as if it were just another nation -- it has assumed too prominent a global role. The reasons for that role were rarely altruistic, but they do create a responsibility to take into consideration our impact on the rest of the world. That means we must deleverage our global security position in the same manner that we deleverage our financial position -- gradually, orderly and responsibly. That might make the process more dangerous for the U.S., but it will most safely salvage the global stability we have for perhaps too long underwritten.