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# The Case for Offshore Balancing

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## A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy

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*John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt*

**F**or the first time in recent memory, large numbers of Americans are openly questioning their country's grand strategy. An April 2016 Pew poll found that 57 percent of Americans agree that the United States should "deal with its own problems and let others deal with theirs the best they can." On the campaign trail, both the Democrat Bernie Sanders and the Republican Donald Trump found receptive audiences whenever they questioned the United States' penchant for promoting democracy, subsidizing allies' defense, and intervening militarily—leaving only the likely Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton to defend the status quo.

Americans' distaste for the prevailing grand strategy should come as no surprise, given its abysmal record over the past quarter century. In Asia, India, Pakistan, and North Korea are expanding their nuclear arsenals, and China is challenging the status quo in regional waters. In Europe, Russia has annexed Crimea, and U.S. relations with Moscow have sunk to new lows since the Cold War. U.S. forces are still fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq, with no victory in sight. Despite losing most of its original leaders, al Qaeda has metastasized across the region. The Arab world has fallen into turmoil—in good part due to the United States' decisions to effect regime change in Iraq and Libya and its modest efforts to do the same in Syria—and the Islamic State, or ISIS, has emerged out of the chaos. Repeated U.S. attempts to broker Israeli-Palestinian peace have failed, leaving a two-state solution further

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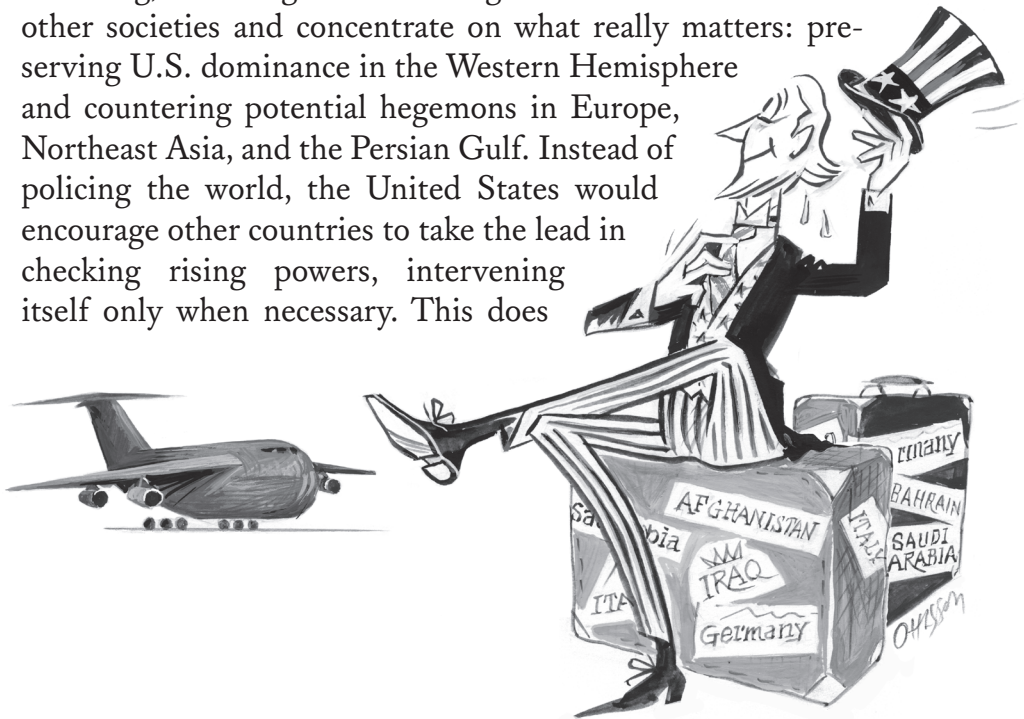
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away than ever. Meanwhile, democracy has been in retreat worldwide, and the United States' use of torture, targeted killings, and other morally dubious practices has tarnished its image as a defender of human rights and international law.

The United States does not bear sole responsibility for all these costly debacles, but it has had a hand in most of them. The setbacks are the natural consequence of the misguided grand strategy of liberal hegemony that Democrats and Republicans have pursued for years. This approach holds that the United States must use its power not only to solve global problems but also to promote a world order based on international institutions, representative governments, open markets, and respect for human rights. As “the indispensable nation,” the logic goes, the United States has the right, responsibility, and wisdom to manage local politics almost everywhere. At its core, liberal hegemony is a revisionist grand strategy: instead of calling on the United States to merely uphold the balance of power in key regions, it commits American might to promoting democracy everywhere and defending human rights whenever they are threatened.

There is a better way. By pursuing a strategy of “offshore balancing,” Washington would forgo ambitious efforts to remake other societies and concentrate on what really matters: preserving U.S. dominance in the Western Hemisphere and countering potential hegemonies in Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Persian Gulf. Instead of policing the world, the United States would encourage other countries to take the lead in checking rising powers, intervening itself only when necessary. This does



not mean abandoning the United States' position as the world's sole superpower or retreating to "Fortress America." Rather, by husbanding U.S. strength, offshore balancing would preserve U.S. primacy far into the future and safeguard liberty at home.

### **SETTING THE RIGHT GOALS**

The United States is the luckiest great power in modern history. Other leading states have had to live with threatening adversaries in their own backyards—even the United Kingdom faced the prospect of an invasion from across the English Channel on several occasions—but for more than two centuries, the United States has not. Nor do distant powers pose much of a threat, because two giant oceans are in the way. As Jean-Jules Jusserand, the French ambassador to the United States from 1902 to 1924, once put it, "On the north, she has a weak neighbor; on the south, another weak neighbor; on the east, fish, and the west, fish." Furthermore, the United States boasts an abundance of land and natural resources and a large and energetic population, which have enabled it to develop the world's biggest economy and most capable military. It also has thousands of nuclear weapons, which makes an attack on the American homeland even less likely.

These geopolitical blessings give the United States enormous latitude for error; indeed, only a country as secure as it would have the temerity to try to remake the world in its own image. But they also allow it to remain powerful and secure without pursuing a costly and expansive grand strategy. Offshore balancing would do just that. Its principal concern would be to keep the United States as powerful as possible—ideally, the dominant state on the planet. Above all, that means maintaining hegemony in the Western Hemisphere.

Unlike isolationists, however, offshore balancers believe that there are regions outside the Western Hemisphere that are worth expending American blood and treasure to defend. Today, three other areas matter to the United States: Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Persian Gulf. The first two are key centers of industrial power and home to the world's other great powers, and the third produces roughly 30 percent of the world's oil.

In Europe and Northeast Asia, the chief concern is the rise of a regional hegemon that would dominate its region, much as the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere. Such a state would have abundant economic clout, the ability to develop sophisticated weaponry,

the potential to project power around the globe, and perhaps even the wherewithal to outspend the United States in an arms race. Such a state might even ally with countries in the Western Hemisphere and interfere close to U.S. soil. Thus, the United States' principal aim in Europe and Northeast Asia should be to maintain the regional balance of power so that the most powerful state in each region—for now, Russia and China, respectively—remains too worried about its neighbors to roam into the Western Hemisphere. In the Gulf, meanwhile, the United States has an interest in blocking the rise of a hegemon that could interfere with the flow of oil from that region, thereby damaging the world economy and threatening U.S. prosperity.

Offshore balancing is a realist grand strategy, and its aims are limited. Promoting peace, although desirable, is not among them. This is not to say that Washington should welcome conflict anywhere in the world, or that it cannot use diplomatic or economic means to discourage war. But it should not commit U.S. military forces for that purpose alone. Nor is it a goal of offshore balancing to halt genocides, such as the one that befell Rwanda in 1994. Adopting this strategy would not preclude such operations, however, provided the need is clear, the mission is feasible, and U.S. leaders are confident that intervention will not make matters worse.

### **HOW WOULD IT WORK?**

Under offshore balancing, the United States would calibrate its military posture according to the distribution of power in the three key regions. If there is no potential hegemon in sight in Europe, Northeast Asia, or the Gulf, then there is no reason to deploy ground or air forces there and little need for a large military establishment at home. And because it takes many years for any country to acquire the capacity to dominate its region, Washington would see it coming and have time to respond.

In that event, the United States should turn to regional forces as the first line of defense, letting them uphold the balance of power in their own neighborhood. Although Washington could provide assistance to allies and pledge to support them if they were in danger of being conquered, it should refrain from deploying large numbers of U.S. forces abroad. It may occasionally make sense to keep certain assets overseas, such as small military contingents, intelligence-gathering facilities, or prepositioned equipment, but in general, Washington

should pass the buck to regional powers, as they have a far greater interest in preventing any state from dominating them.

If those powers cannot contain a potential hegemon on their own, however, the United States must help get the job done, deploying enough firepower to the region to shift the balance in its favor. Sometimes, that may mean sending in forces before war breaks out.

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During the Cold War, for example, the United States kept large numbers of ground and air forces in Europe out of the belief that Western European countries could not contain the Soviet Union on their own. At other times, the United States might wait to intervene after a war starts, if one side seems likely to emerge as a regional hegemon.

Such was the case during both world wars: the United States came in only after Germany seemed likely to dominate Europe.

In essence, the aim is to remain offshore as long as possible, while recognizing that it is sometimes necessary to come onshore. If that happens, however, the United States should make its allies do as much of the heavy lifting as possible and remove its own forces as soon as it can.

Offshore balancing has many virtues. By limiting the areas the U.S. military was committed to defending and forcing other states to pull their own weight, it would reduce the resources Washington must devote to defense, allow for greater investment and consumption at home, and put fewer American lives in harm's way. Today, allies routinely free-ride on American protection, a problem that has only grown since the Cold War ended. Within NATO, for example, the United States accounts for 46 percent of the alliance's aggregate GDP yet contributes about 75 percent of its military spending. As the political scientist Barry Posen has quipped, "This is welfare for the rich."

Offshore balancing would also reduce the risk of terrorism. Liberal hegemony commits the United States to spreading democracy in unfamiliar places, which sometimes requires military occupation and always involves interfering with local political arrangements. Such efforts invariably foster nationalist resentment, and because the opponents are too weak to confront the United States directly, they



sometimes turn to terrorism. (It is worth remembering that Osama bin Laden was motivated in good part by the presence of U.S. troops in his homeland of Saudi Arabia.) In addition to inspiring terrorists, liberal hegemony facilitates their operations: using regime change to spread American values undermines local institutions and creates ungoverned spaces where violent extremists can flourish.

Offshore balancing would alleviate this problem by eschewing social engineering and minimizing the United States' military footprint. U.S. troops would be stationed on foreign soil only when a country was in a vital region and threatened by a would-be hegemon. In that case, the potential victim would view the United States as a savior rather than an occupier. And once the threat had been dealt with, U.S. military forces could go back over the horizon and not stay behind to meddle in local politics. By respecting the sovereignty of other states, offshore balancing would be less likely to foster anti-American terrorism.

### **A REASSURING HISTORY**

Offshore balancing may seem like a radical strategy today, but it provided the guiding logic of U.S. foreign policy for many decades and served the country well. During the nineteenth century, the United States was preoccupied with expanding across North America, building a powerful state, and establishing hegemony in the Western Hemisphere. After it completed these tasks at the end of the century, it soon became interested in preserving the balance of power in Europe and Northeast Asia. Nonetheless, it let the great powers in those regions check one another, intervening militarily only when the balance of power broke down, as during both world wars.

During the Cold War, the United States had no choice but to go onshore in Europe and Northeast Asia, as its allies in those regions could not contain the Soviet Union by themselves. So Washington forged alliances and stationed military forces in both regions, and it fought the Korean War to contain Soviet influence in Northeast Asia.

In the Persian Gulf, however, the United States stayed offshore, letting the United Kingdom take the lead in preventing any state from dominating that oil-rich region. After the British announced their withdrawal from the Gulf in 1968, the United States turned to the shah of Iran and the Saudi monarchy to do the job. When the shah

fell in 1979, the Carter administration began building the Rapid Deployment Force, an offshore military capability designed to prevent Iran or the Soviet Union from dominating the region. The Reagan administration aided Iraq during that country's 1980–88 war with Iran for similar reasons. The U.S. military stayed offshore until 1990, when Saddam Hussein's seizure of Kuwait threatened to enhance

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Iraq's power and place Saudi Arabia and other Gulf oil producers at risk. To restore the regional balance of power, the George H. W. Bush administration sent an expeditionary force to liberate Kuwait and smash Saddam's military machine.

For nearly a century, in short, offshore balancing prevented the emergence of dangerous regional hegemony and preserved a global balance of power that enhanced American security. Tellingly, when U.S. policymakers deviated from that strategy—as they did in Vietnam, where the United States had no vital interests—the result was a costly failure.

Events since the end of the Cold War teach the same lesson. In Europe, once the Soviet Union collapsed, the region no longer had a dominant power. The United States should have steadily reduced its military presence, cultivated amicable relations with Russia, and turned European security over to the Europeans. Instead, it expanded NATO and ignored Russian interests, helping spark the conflict over Ukraine and driving Moscow closer to China.

In the Middle East, likewise, the United States should have moved back offshore after the Gulf War and let Iran and Iraq balance each other. Instead, the Clinton administration adopted the policy of “dual containment,” which required keeping ground and air forces in Saudi Arabia to check Iran and Iraq simultaneously. The George W. Bush administration then adopted an even more ambitious strategy, dubbed “regional transformation,” which produced costly failures in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Obama administration repeated the error when it helped topple Muammar al-Qaddafi in Libya and when it exacerbated the chaos in Syria by insisting that Bashar al-Assad “must go” and backing some of his opponents. Abandoning offshore balancing after the Cold War has been a recipe for failure.

## **HEGEMONY'S HOLLOW HOPES**

Defenders of liberal hegemony marshal a number of unpersuasive arguments to make their case. One familiar claim is that only vigorous U.S. leadership can keep order around the globe. But global leadership is not an end in itself; it is desirable only insofar as it benefits the United States directly.

One might further argue that U.S. leadership is necessary to overcome the collective-action problem of local actors failing to balance against a potential hegemon. Offshore balancing recognizes this danger, however, and calls for Washington to step in if needed. Nor does it prohibit Washington from giving friendly states in the key regions advice or material aid.

Other defenders of liberal hegemony argue that U.S. leadership is necessary to deal with new, transnational threats that arise from failed states, terrorism, criminal networks, refugee flows, and the like. Not only do the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans offer inadequate protection against these dangers, they claim, but modern military technology also makes it easier for the United States to project power around the world and address them. Today's "global village," in short, is more dangerous yet easier to manage.

This view exaggerates these threats and overstates Washington's ability to eliminate them. Crime, terrorism, and similar problems can be a nuisance, but they are hardly existential threats and rarely lend themselves to military solutions. Indeed, constant interference in the affairs of other states—and especially repeated military interventions—generates local resentment and fosters corruption, thereby making these transnational dangers worse. The long-term solution to the problems can only be competent local governance, not heavy-handed U.S. efforts to police the world.

Nor is policing the world as cheap as defenders of liberal hegemony contend, either in dollars spent or in lives lost. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq cost between \$4 trillion and \$6 trillion and killed nearly 7,000 U.S. soldiers and wounded more than 50,000. Veterans of these conflicts exhibit high rates of depression and suicide, yet the United States has little to show for their sacrifices.

Defenders of the status quo also fear that offshore balancing would allow other states to replace the United States at the pinnacle of global power. On the contrary, the strategy would prolong the country's dominance by refocusing its efforts on core goals. Unlike liberal hegemony,



offshore balancing avoids squandering resources on costly and counterproductive crusades, which would allow the government to invest more in the long-term ingredients of power and prosperity: education, infrastructure, and research and development. Remember, the United States became a great power by staying out of foreign wars and building a world-class economy, which is the same strategy China has pursued over the past three decades. Meanwhile, the United States has wasted trillions of dollars and put its long-term primacy at risk.

Another argument holds that the U.S. military must garrison the world to keep the peace and preserve an open world economy. Retrenchment, the logic goes, would renew great-power competition, invite ruinous economic rivalries, and eventually spark a major war from which the United States could not remain aloof. Better to keep playing global policeman than risk a repeat of the 1930s.

Such fears are unconvincing. For starters, this argument assumes that deeper U.S. engagement in Europe would have prevented World

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War II, a claim hard to square with Adolf Hitler's unshakable desire for war. Regional conflicts will sometimes occur no matter what Washington does, but it need not get involved unless vital U.S. interests are at stake. Indeed, the United States has sometimes stayed out of regional conflicts—such as the Russo-Japanese War, the Iran-Iraq

War, and the current war in Ukraine—belying the claim that it inevitably gets dragged in. And if the country is forced to fight another great power, better to arrive late and let other countries bear the brunt of the costs. As the last major power to enter both world wars, the United States emerged stronger from each for having waited.

Furthermore, recent history casts doubt on the claim that U.S. leadership preserves peace. Over the past 25 years, Washington has caused or supported several wars in the Middle East and fueled minor conflicts elsewhere. If liberal hegemony is supposed to enhance global stability, it has done a poor job.

Nor has the strategy produced much in the way of economic benefits. Given its protected position in the Western Hemisphere, the United States is free to trade and invest wherever profitable opportunities exist. Because all countries have a shared interest in such activity,

Washington does not need to play global policeman in order to remain economically engaged with others. In fact, the U.S. economy would be in better shape today if the government were not spending so much money trying to run the world.

Proponents of liberal hegemony also claim that the United States must remain committed all over the world to prevent nuclear proliferation. If it reduces its role in key regions or withdraws entirely, the argument runs, countries accustomed to U.S. protection will have no choice but to protect themselves by obtaining nuclear weapons.

No grand strategy is likely to prove wholly successful at preventing proliferation, but offshore balancing would do a better job than liberal hegemony. After all, that strategy failed to stop India and Pakistan from ramping up their nuclear capabilities, North Korea from becoming the newest member of the nuclear club, and Iran from making major progress with its nuclear program. Countries usually seek the bomb because they fear being attacked, and U.S. efforts at regime change only heighten such concerns. By eschewing regime change and reducing the United States' military footprint, offshore balancing would give potential proliferators less reason to go nuclear.

Moreover, military action cannot prevent a determined country from eventually obtaining nuclear weapons; it can only buy time. The recent deal with Iran serves as a reminder that coordinated multi-lateral pressure and tough economic sanctions are a better way to discourage proliferation than preventive war or regime change.

To be sure, if the United States did scale back its security guarantees, a few vulnerable states might seek their own nuclear deterrents. That outcome is not desirable, but all-out efforts to prevent it would almost certainly be costly and probably be unsuccessful. Besides, the downsides may not be as grave as pessimists fear. Getting the bomb does not transform weak countries into great powers or enable them to blackmail rival states. Ten states have crossed the nuclear threshold since 1945, and the world has not turned upside down. Nuclear proliferation will remain a concern no matter what the United States does, but offshore balancing provides the best strategy for dealing with it.

## **THE DEMOCRACY DELUSION**

Other critics reject offshore balancing because they believe the United States has a moral and strategic imperative to promote freedom and protect human rights. As they see it, spreading democracy will largely

rid the world of war and atrocities, keeping the United States secure and alleviating suffering.

No one knows if a world composed solely of liberal democracies would in fact prove peaceful, but spreading democracy at the point of a gun rarely works, and fledgling democracies are especially prone to conflict. Instead of promoting peace, the United States just ends up fighting endless wars. Even worse, force-feeding liberal values abroad can compromise them at home. The global war on terrorism and the related effort to implant democracy in Afghanistan and Iraq have led to tortured prisoners, targeted killings, and vast electronic surveillance of U.S. citizens.

Some defenders of liberal hegemony hold that a subtler version of the strategy could avoid the sorts of disasters that occurred in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya. They are deluding themselves. Democracy promotion requires large-scale social engineering in foreign societies that Americans understand poorly, which helps explain why Washington's efforts usually fail. Dismantling and replacing existing political institutions inevitably creates winners and losers, and the latter often take up arms in opposition. When that happens, U.S. officials, believing their country's credibility is now at stake, are tempted to use the United States' awesome military might to fix the problem, thus drawing the country into more conflicts.

If the American people want to encourage the spread of liberal democracy, the best way to do so is to set a good example. Other countries will more likely emulate the United States if they see it as a just, prosperous, and open society. And that means doing more to improve conditions at home and less to manipulate politics abroad.

### **THE PROBLEMATIC PACIFIER**

Then there are those who believe that Washington should reject liberal hegemony but keep sizable U.S. forces in Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Persian Gulf solely to prevent trouble from breaking out. This low-cost insurance policy, they argue, would save lives and money in the long run, because the United States wouldn't have to ride to the rescue after a conflict broke out. This approach—sometimes called “selective engagement”—sounds appealing but would not work either.

For starters, it would likely revert back to liberal hegemony. Once committed to preserving peace in key regions, U.S. leaders would be sorely tempted to spread democracy, too, based on the widespread

belief that democracies don't fight one another. This was the main rationale for expanding NATO after the Cold War, with the stated goal of "a Europe whole and free." In the real world, the line separating selective engagement from liberal hegemony is easily erased.

Advocates of selective engagement also assume that the mere presence of U.S. forces in various regions will guarantee peace, and so Americans need not worry about being dragged into distant conflicts. In other words, extending security commitments far and wide poses few risks, because they will never have to be honored.

But this assumption is overly optimistic: allies may act recklessly, and the United States may provoke conflicts itself. Indeed, in Europe, the American pacifier failed to prevent the Balkan wars of the 1990s, the Russo-Georgian war in 2008, and the current conflict in Ukraine. In the Middle East, Washington is largely responsible for several recent wars. And in the South China Sea, conflict is now a real possibility despite the U.S. Navy's substantial regional role. Stationing U.S. forces around the world does not automatically ensure peace.

Nor does selective engagement address the problem of buck-passing. Consider that the United Kingdom is now withdrawing its army from continental Europe, at a time when NATO faces what it considers a growing threat from Russia. Once again, Washington is expected to deal with the problem, even though peace in Europe should matter far more to the region's own powers.

## **THE STRATEGY IN ACTION**

What would offshore balancing look like in today's world? The good news is that it is hard to foresee a serious challenge to American hegemony in the Western Hemisphere, and for now, no potential hegemon lurks in Europe or the Persian Gulf. Now for the bad news: if China continues its impressive rise, it is likely to seek hegemony in Asia. The United States should undertake a major effort to prevent it from succeeding.

Ideally, Washington would rely on local powers to contain China, but that strategy might not work. Not only is China likely to be much more powerful than its neighbors, but these states are also located far from one another, making it harder to form an effective balancing coalition. The United States will have to coordinate their efforts and may have to throw its considerable weight behind them. In Asia, the United States may indeed be the indispensable nation.

In Europe, the United States should end its military presence and turn NATO over to the Europeans. There is no good reason to keep U.S. forces in Europe, as no country there has the capability to

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dominate that region. The top contenders, Germany and Russia, will both lose relative power as their populations shrink in size, and no other potential hegemon is in sight. Admittedly, leaving European security to the Europeans could increase the potential for trouble there. If a conflict did arise, however, it would not threaten vital U.S. interests.

Thus, there is no reason for the United States to spend billions of dollars each year (and pledge its own citizens' lives) to prevent one.

In the Gulf, the United States should return to the offshore-balancing strategy that served it so well until the advent of dual containment. No local power is now in a position to dominate the region, so the United States can move most of its forces back over the horizon.

With respect to ISIS, the United States should let the regional powers deal with that group and limit its own efforts to providing arms, intelligence, and military training. ISIS represents a serious threat to them but a minor problem for the United States, and the only long-term solution to it is better local institutions, something Washington cannot provide.

In Syria, the United States should let Russia take the lead. A Syria stabilized under Assad's control, or divided into competing ministates, would pose little danger to U.S. interests. Both Democratic and Republican presidents have a rich history of working with the Assad regime, and a divided and weak Syria would not threaten the regional balance of power. If the civil war continues, it will be largely Moscow's problem, although Washington should be willing to help broker a political settlement.

For now, the United States should pursue better relations with Iran. It is not in Washington's interest for Tehran to abandon the nuclear agreement and race for the bomb, an outcome that would become more likely if it feared a U.S. attack—hence the rationale for mending fences. Moreover, as its ambitions grow, China will want allies in the Gulf, and Iran will likely top its list. (In a harbinger of things to come, this past January, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited



Tehran and signed 17 different agreements.) The United States has an obvious interest in discouraging Chinese-Iranian security cooperation, and that requires reaching out to Iran.

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.

### **THE BOTTOM LINE**

Taken together, these steps would allow the United States to markedly reduce its defense spending. Although U.S. forces would remain in Asia, the withdrawals from Europe and the Persian Gulf would free up billions of dollars, as would reductions in counterterrorism spending and an end to the war in Afghanistan and other overseas interventions. The United States would maintain substantial naval and air assets and modest but capable ground forces, and it would stand ready to expand its capabilities should circumstances require. But for the foreseeable future, the U.S. government could spend more money on domestic needs or leave it in taxpayers' pockets.

Offshore balancing is a grand strategy born of confidence in the United States' core traditions and a recognition of its enduring advantages. It exploits the country's providential geographic position and recognizes the powerful incentives other states have to balance against overly powerful or ambitious neighbors. It respects the power of nationalism, does not try to impose American values on foreign societies, and focuses on setting an example that others will want to emulate. As in the past, offshore balancing is not only the strategy that hews closest to U.S. interests; it is also the one that aligns best with Americans' preferences. 🌐

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