

Hanging in the Balance: Reassessing U.S. Foreign Policy toward Europe

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1. **Introduction**

During the Cold War, U.S. foreign policy toward Europe was interventionist and committed to actively opposing the Soviet threat; it focused on rebuilding Western Europe with the Marshall Plan and using the NATO alliance to balance against the USSR. However, although the USSR has since fallen and new challenges have risen to take its place, U.S. foreign policy toward Europe has not substantially changed. The aforementioned new challenges include the resurgence of Russia, which invaded Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 in order to prevent NATO expansion and is currently engaging in disinformation campaigns to disrupt Western elections (Zakem 1-2). The U.S. response to the resurgence of Russia is complicated by another challenge—the willingness of U.S. allies in Western Europe, namely France and Germany, to freeride off U.S. military guarantees and insufficiently provide for their own security (Szoldra 1-2).

This paper will debate two of the most prominent potential foreign policy approaches that the U.S. could adopt in response to these challenges: Offshore Balancing and Neoconservatism. Offshore Balancing, which argues that the U.S. should pursue a balance of power strategy and intervene internationally only when necessary, maintains that these new challenges are the result of the U.S. continuing outdated Cold War policy and that the U.S. should reduce its military commitments to Europe to allow the system to balance naturally, which will reduce Russia's resurgent actions and discourage freeriding (Walt, "Time for Europe's Militaries" 2-3). Neoconservatism, which holds that the U.S. should pursue a hegemonic policy and actively spread democracy, argues that the U.S. should double down on its Cold War policy and increase its military commitments to Europe to oppose Russia's attempts at projecting power in Eastern Europe (Kagan, "Backing into World War III" 17).

This paper will argue that the Neoconservative democratic and hegemonic policy contains critical logical and practical flaws that render the grand strategy unworkable as a U.S. policy toward Europe. Instead, the U.S. should adopt a policy of Offshore Balancing, which, by maintaining U.S. insularity except for in cases of last resort, will preserve U.S. interests of preserving primacy and allowing Europe to balance naturally, thereby discouraging freeriding and ending Russia's destabilizing policies (Mearsheimer and Walt 73-74).

Neoconservatism is built on two major precepts: that the U.S. should pursue a hegemonic policy and that the U.S. should actively spread democracy. The former precept is based on the Realist Hegemonic Stability Theory, which "rests on the assumption that states gain security not through a balance of power, but by creating a power imbalance in their favor" (Layne, "Rethinking American Grand Strategy" 10). The ultimate goal of any state is to reach the status of a global hegemon, meaning that a state has gained enough power to be capable of imposing a global order of international norms and rules; currently, the U.S. is in this privileged position. Of course, it is imperative that the U.S. has not just the power, but the will to maintain this global order, because, as foreign policy commentator Robert Kagan and journalist Irving Kristol acknowledge, "If we refrain from doing so, we can be sure that others will shape it in ways that reflect neither our interests nor our values" (qtd. in Vaïsse 5). By enforcing these rules and policing the international system to provide international stability, the U.S. acts as a non-threatening, "benevolent hegemon" that provides public goods, like free trade, to benefit all other states (Vaïsse 6; Layne, "Rethinking American Grand Strategy" 10; Kagan, "The Benevolent Empire" 26). Because the global hegemon is the only state in the international system that is capable of enforcing this global order, Neoconservatives argue that its actions must not be constrained by institutions or other limits to its power; the global hegemon must be willing to act

unilaterally, preemptively, and with hard power methods in order to police the international system effectively (Vaïsse 5-6).

The second precept of Neoconservatism is that the U.S. should actively spread democracy in accordance with the Democratic Peace Thesis, which is in itself a central component of the Liberal Theory. Like Realists, Liberals argue that the state is the most important actor in international politics, but unlike most Realists, they maintain that the internal characteristics of states directly influence their behavior in the international system and that states can escape the chaotic world of power politics and substantially increase cooperation and peace (Mearsheimer, *Great Power Politics* 15-16). Some branches of Liberalism argue that the best way for states to accomplish this is by increasing economic interdependence or by encouraging cooperation through international institutions. Other Liberals argue for the Democratic Peace Thesis, which states that the best way to promote peace in the international system is to spread democracy because democracies are unwilling to go to war with each other (Mearsheimer, “Morgenthau and the Iraq War” 3). Neoconservatives subscribe to this democracy-focused branch of Liberalism, advocating for a hegemonic U.S. policy that spreads democracy as a public good that will in turn increase peace in the international system and promote stability. As writer and foreign policy commentator Charles Krauthammer articulates, “The spread of democracy is not just an end but a means, an indispensable means for securing American interests...Democracies are inherently more friendly to the United States...and generally more inclined to peace” (18).

Together, these two major precepts form the foreign policy approach of Neoconservatism and inform its strategy toward the aforementioned new challenges in Europe. Concerning these challenges, Neoconservatives understand Russia’s invasions of Georgia and

Ukraine as an aggressive attempt by an illiberal, quasi-authoritarian state to reassert its Soviet-era sphere of influence (Kagan, “Backing Into World War III” 3). According to Kagan, Russia “regard(s) the United States as the principal obstacle to their ambitions, and therefore...seek(s) to weaken the American-led international security order” (“Backing Into World War III” 3). As the protector of this global order, the U.S. must not be dissuaded by the freeriding tendencies of its allies in Western Europe and should double down on its Cold War-era, interventionist foreign policy by resisting Russian aggression. Prominent neoconservatives like Senator John McCain and the former UN Ambassador John Bolton argue that the U.S. should impose additional sanctions on Russia and continue the expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe, which would extend an unconditional Article 5 security guarantee to the developing democracies that are most vulnerable to Russian aggression (Shelbourne 1, Patterson 2). If the U.S. does not firmly protect these small democracies, its credibility as a protector of the global order will deteriorate, serving only to further encourage revisionist states like Russia to continue their aggression (Kagan, “Backing into World War III” 6).

2. **Offshore Balancing: Precepts, Theoretical Foundations, and European Policy**

Offshore Balancing, like Neoconservatism, is built on two major precepts: Offshore Balancing argues that the U.S. should pursue a balance of power strategy in an increasingly multipolar world and that the U.S. should maximize its relative power position in this paradigm by dominating its own sphere of influence and only intervening in others when it is necessary. The first of these precepts is founded on the theory of Realism, which contains three core assumptions: Great powers are the most important actors in world politics, all states—from democracies to autocracies—act rationally and in their own self-interest to gain security, and in acting in their self-interest, states ensure their security by gaining power

(Mearsheimer, *Great Power Politics* 17-18). Because all states are concerned with preserving their security, they are especially concerned with maximizing their power in relation to other states and tend to balance against states that are more powerful than they are. In light of the competitive realities of this zero-sum international environment, which is becoming increasingly multipolar, Offshore Balancers argue that the U.S. should pursue a balance of power strategy (Layne, “Future Grand Strategy” 112). Offshore Balancers like the international relations theorist Christopher Layne insist that the U.S. shouldn’t focus on policing the international system, which is costly and counterproductive, but should instead look to “maximize its relative power position in the international system” (“Rethinking American Grand Strategy” 21).

The specifics of an American grand strategy that maximizes its relative power are addressed by the second precept of Offshore Balancing: The U.S. can best maximize its power by successfully dominating its own sphere of interest—the “offshore” component of its strategy—and by intervening in other great powers’ spheres of influence only when necessary—the “balancing” component of the strategy. Concerning the “offshore” component, Offshore Balancers assert that the U.S. can take advantage of its isolated position as the sole great power in the Western Hemisphere and, by ensuring that no state in the hemisphere becomes powerful enough to challenge the U.S., remain impregnable to attack and aloof from other great power conflicts around the world (Layne, “Future Grand Strategy” 116). Essentially, by ensuring that it remains an insular great power—one without close regional peers—the U.S. can use its geographically privileged position to maximize its power relative to other states and “effectively insulate itself from the future great power war” (Layne, “American Grand Strategy” 22).

Despite the privileged insularity of the U.S., theorists acknowledge through the “balancing” component of Offshore Balancing that there are certain regions of the world in which the U.S. must maintain the capacity to intervene (Mearsheimer and Walt, “Offshore Balancing” 72). Prominent international relations theorists like John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt contend that the U.S. must ensure that no state becomes powerful enough to dominate its respective region in the same way that the U.S. dominates the Western Hemisphere; a state that becomes this powerful could become a peer competitor—a potential hegemon—to the U.S that may have the potential to eclipse American power (“Offshore Balancing” 74). For the U.S., the most efficient way to prevent peer competitors is to refrain from frequently intervening internationally and by buck-passing the role of quashing potential threats to other, weaker states that are closer to and more threatened by the potential hegemon. (Mearsheimer and Walt, “Offshore Balancing” 73-74). This policy forces states in threatened regions to cease relying on U.S. military guarantees and to look out become more responsible for for their own security. If a potential hegemon was to arise, these threatened states would act swiftly to resist it (Layne, “Future Grand Strategy” 113). If the threatened states’ collective power was insufficient to contain the potential hegemon, only then would it be necessary for the U.S. to step in as a balancer of last resort, preventing the rise of a peer competitor. Essentially, as Mearsheimer and Walt aptly put it, “The aim is to remain offshore as long as possible, while recognizing that it is sometimes necessary to come onshore” (“Offshore Balancing” 74).

Europe is one of the most important regions in which the U.S. must ensure no potential hegemon emerges, because it is full of great powers and has historically been rife with great power conflict. Although the USSR has long collapsed and no other potential European hegemon has emerged, the U.S. is currently continuing its Cold War-era policy of maintaining

high troop levels and expanding NATO (Layne, “American Grand Strategy” 21). Offshore Balancers believe that the continuation of this policy is the primary cause of rampant freeriding among American allies and the Russian invasions of Georgia and the Ukraine (Mearsheimer and Walt, “Offshore Balancing” 76). Walt argues that continued expansion of NATO has threatened Russia by encroaching on its traditional sphere of influence and “has done more to poison relations with Russia than any other single Western policy” (“Arming Kiev” 2). In fact, Russia’s aggression toward the Ukraine and Georgia is a fear-based reaction to American aggression (Walt, “Arming Kiev” 2). Additionally, Russia’s policies have caused U.S. allies to rely on U.S. security guarantees instead of looking out for their own security, which is the direct cause of freeriding in Western Europe (Walt, “Time for Europe’s Militaries” 2-3). Instead of advocating for continuing this outdated Cold War-era policy in Europe, Offshore Balancers argue that the U.S. should reduce its military commitments in Europe and “abandon the dangerous and unnecessary goal of endless NATO expansion,” even to the point of allowing Russia to maintain its old sphere of interest (Walt, “Arming Kiev” 4). By disengaging in this way, the U.S. would be able to step back from costly entanglements, allowing Europe to balance naturally and without interference (Mearsheimer and Walt, “Offshore Balancing” 82).

3. The Logical and Practical Flaws of Neoconservatism

Offshore Balancing theorists rightly argue that Neoconservatism is rife with logical and practical flaws that make it unworkable as a foreign policy toward Europe. Neoconservatism’s embrace of the Democratic Peace Thesis as a major tenet is one of the theory’s most glaring problems. After having studied a number of historical crises between democracies that almost resulted in war (including the Trent Affair and the Fashoda Crisis), Layne concludes that there

is little evidence to support the idea that democratic processes or values contribute to the avoidance of war (“Kant or Cant” 38). Furthermore, the notion that if democracy is spread to enough regions, then war will become unthinkable—liberal thinker Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history” theory—is inherently flawed; as Layne argues, “this ‘zone of peace’ is a peace of illusions. There is no evidence that democracy...negates the structural effects of anarchy” (Mearsheimer, “Morgenthau and the Iraq War” 3; “Kant or Cant” 48). Offshore Balancers correctly adhere to the Realist principle that states’ calculations on war revolve around self-interest and security and aren’t impacted by internal characteristics like democracy (Mearsheimer, *Great Power Politics* 17-18).

Beyond the flaws of the Democratic Peace Thesis, Offshore Balancers identify logical and practical problems with the policy of hegemony. Offshore Balancers argue that the policy of hegemony contains four drawbacks that render it impractical. The first two of these drawbacks are military overreach and domestic political resistance. The former is the result of an active, militaristic U.S. foreign policy that attempts to police the system and entangles the U.S. in geographically distant, strategically insignificant conflicts. As the hegemonic United States attempts to maintain its credibility as the protector of global order and commits to defending democracy, no matter how small or insignificant, it inevitably becomes engaged in a myriad of draining conflicts that oftentimes only increase enmity against the U.S.; as Mearsheimer succinctly puts it, “Occupation stokes nationalism, which leads to insurgency...which undermines big-stick diplomacy” (“Morgenthau and the Iraq War” 7). The American public will only tolerate overreaching interventions to a point, and as the U.S. continues to engage in interventions against the will of the public, domestic political resistance builds. Domestic resistance, which is the second major drawback to

Neoconservatism, create rifts in U.S. policy-making that constrains U.S. policy and, as U.S. policy begins to splinter, can further undermine U.S. credibility (Callahan 36).

In addition to overreach and domestic political resistance, Offshore Balancers argue that Neoconservatism ignores a key aspect of the international system: that power is dynamic on an international level, and new challengers will always be rising as hegemonic power wanes.

Perhaps no country is a better example of this phenomenon than China; its economy is growing at a pace that will outstrip the U.S., and Mearsheimer and Walt already identify China as a new challenger that could one day achieve regional hegemony in Asia (“Offshore Balancing” 81). Indeed, there may not be much that the U.S. can do to prevent the rise of China short of war. As Callahan points out, the U.S.’s status of preponderance is largely based upon its level of industrialization and size, but “as technology, knowledge, and modern organization diffuse to China and India, they will overtake the United States” (37).

Hegemonic policy can be flawed by ignoring the temporary nature of hegemony; even in light of the rise of new challengers—which is the third drawback to Neoconservative policy—Neoconservatives advocate for a hegemonic policy that increases overreach and domestic resistance, which ultimately does nothing more than to ensure that the U.S.’s power wanes faster.

The final major problem with the logic of hegemony is its overlooking of counter-hegemonic balancing. Neoconservatives argue, in a major break from most Realists, that states will bandwagon with a global hegemon like the U.S. because they recognize that it has benign intentions and provides public goods (Mearsheimer, “Morgenthau and the Iraq War” 5). In refuting this idea, Offshore Balancers argue that bandwagoning is an illusion: When states are

confronted with an overwhelming power, they balance against it, attempt to constrain it, and don't pause to consider whether or not the hegemon's intentions are benign. As Layne points out, "Hegemons are threatening precisely because they have too much power" ("American Grand Strategy" 13). Mearsheimer puts it more colorfully in his remark that "when one state puts its fist in another state's face, that target usually does not throw its hands in the air and surrender" ("Morgenthau and the Iraq War" 4). History is rife with examples of empires that have been laid low by counter-hegemonic balancing, including the Hapsburg Empire, Victorian Britain, Hitler's Germany, and Napoleonic France (Layne, "American Grand Strategy" 13). In failing to grasp the reality of counter-hegemonic balancing, Neoconservatives fall short of comprehending the limits of American power and hegemony and ignore the necessity to conserve American power through insularity, instead choosing to continue policies that only increase U.S. overreach and domestic resistance.

4. The Superiority of an Offshore Balancing Approach to Europe

Offshore Balancing strategy is superior to the Neoconservative approach to freeriding in Europe for two reasons: Offshore Balancing would maximize U.S. relative power in the international system, and it would allow the region to balance naturally, thereby ending Russia's retaliatory actions and discouraging freeriding. To address the first of these benefits, the U.S. could take advantage of its status as an insular power and withdraw from the European continent, allowing itself to stand aloof from great power conflict and retreat from entrapping alliances and costly European engagements like NATO (Layne, "American Grand Strategy 22). Currently, in its attempt to maintain these engagements, the U.S. spends nearly 4% of its GDP on its military, which amounts to an enormously draining defense budget of over \$600 billion dollars; by withdrawing from engagements across the world and in Europe, Layne estimates

that the U.S. could afford to cut its defense budget in half (“Future Grand Strategy” 112). Essentially, by laying down its self-imposed mantle as the world’s policeman, the U.S. could maximize its relative power and withdraw from costly engagements; instead of continuing to drain U.S. power through a Neoconservative policy, “offshore balancing would preserve U.S. primacy far into the future” (Mearsheimer and Walt, “Offshore Balancing” 72).

The second major benefit of an Offshore Balancing strategy is that the U.S. withdrawal from Europe would lead to the region balancing naturally and refraining from freeriding. Without the U.S. security umbrella to defend them, states in Western Europe would provide for necessary military expenditures that the U.S. has been supplementing for decades through NATO (Mearsheimer and Walt, “Offshore Balancing” 74). Additionally, if the U.S. limited its engagement in NATO and ensured that the alliance stopped expanding into Eastern Europe, Russia would no longer have an incentive to participate in aggressive actions like its invasions of Georgia and Ukraine and its more recent attempts to destabilize Western elections. After all, these aggressions were reactions to what Russia perceived as U.S. expansionism into its sphere of influence; once the U.S. retreats from that sphere, Russia will be pacified (Walt, “Arming Kiev” 3).

5. **Conclusion**

Although the Cold War ended nearly thirty years ago, U.S. foreign policy hasn’t sufficiently adapted to the collapse of the Soviet Union. The U.S. has continued its policy of maintaining high troop levels in Europe and remained committed to strengthening and expanding NATO. In the absence of the Soviet threat, new challenges have risen in Europe that have caused many theorists to question the traditional, Cold War-era U.S. policy. The continuation of this policy has served only to entrench Russian animosity toward the West and

encourage freeriding among U.S. allies in Western Europe. It is clear that offshore balancing provides the best remedy to this situation. Indeed, by strategically reducing U.S. involvement in Europe according to the precepts of offshore balancing, the U.S. would be able to maximize its power relative to other states while de-incentivizing Russian aggression and discouraging freeriding.

For all its promise, offshore balancing is still unlikely to be adopted by as a U.S. foreign policy. Since the election of President Clinton, U.S. presidents have remained firm in their commitment to the international promotion of democracy. Furthermore, they have all proven willing to use hard power methods to spread democracy (e.g. President George W. Bush in Iraq and President Obama in Libya) and protect fledgling democracies, including those in Eastern Europe. The election of President Trump in 2016 might have been a turning point in this aggressive tradition; during his campaign, he was very willing to question the customary U.S. policy of protecting democracy abroad, and there were a number of indications that he wished to improve U.S. relations with Russia. These were admirable goals, but they have yet to be realized – in fact, it appears that President Trump has been somewhat convinced by the hawkish U.S. establishment to retain a confrontational stance toward non-democracies like Russia and to continue to assert U.S. power abroad. As things currently stand, offshore balancing is certainly a promising strategy which could maximize U.S. power in an increasingly multipolar world, but its prospects for realization remain unfortunately slim.

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