



THE STRATEGY OF RETRENCHMENT AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

By Colin Dueck



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Over the past decade or more, leading academic foreign policy realists have argued for US strategic retrenchment. Retrenchment is a strategy designed to reduce a country's international and military costs and commitments.¹ This can be done by cutting defense spending, withdrawing from certain alliance obligations, scaling back on deployments abroad, or reducing international expenditures. Retrenchment does not necessarily involve the avoidance of all strategic commitments. But the desired direction with retrenchment is one of lowered cost and reduced commitment.

One especially stark version of strategic retrenchment, championed by political scientists such as John Mearsheimer, Stephen Walt, Robert Pape, and Christopher Layne, is the concept of offshore balancing.² According to its leading advocates, a strategy of offshore balancing would still try to ensure that no one major power dominates Europe, Northeast Asia, or the Persian Gulf. But it would make others assume the main burden, and rely on local powers to balance one another, while stationing US military forces over the horizon, either offshore or within the United States. An offshore balancing strategy would embrace sharp reductions in the size of the US Army and Marines, avoid counterinsurgency operations altogether, and abstain from international projects involving the military occupation or governance of developing countries. For the most part, it would avoid foreign wars. American forces would come onshore only if local powers proved unable to maintain regional balance of powers on their own. With the threat checked, US troops would then exit and go back over the horizon. According to Mearsheimer, offshore balancing would allow the United States to disband existing alliance commitments in Europe and East Asia, and cut defense spending to about 2 percent of America's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The scaled-back US military presence overseas would further undercut support for anti-American terrorism, and reduce the need for other powers to develop their own weapons of mass destruction. At least, these are some of the benefits claimed for offshore balancing by its proponents.³

Retrenchment Tested

The Obama years provide an interesting test case for the consequences of an incremental and partial strategic retrenchment.

¹ Peter Trubowitz, *Politics and Strategy: Partisan Ambition and American Statecraft* (Princeton University Press, 2011), 13, 36-37.

² Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions* (Cornell University Press, 2007), 159-203; John Mearsheimer, "Imperial By Design," *The National Interest*, January-February 2011, 16-34, available from: <http://mearsheimer.uchicago.edu/pdfs/A0059.pdf>; *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (WW Norton, 2014 edition), 236-264, 387-390; Robert Pape and James Feldman, *Cutting the Fuse: The Explosion of Global Suicide Terrorism and How to Stop It* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 12-13, 333-335; Stephen Walt, "Offshore Balancing: An Idea Whose Time Has Come," *Foreign Policy*, November 2, 2011, available from: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/11/02/offshore-balancing-an-idea-whose-time-has-come/>.

³ Layne, *Peace of Illusions*, 160-191; Mearsheimer, "Imperial By Design," 18, 31; Pape and Feldman, *Cutting the Fuse*, 12-13, 333-335.

To be sure, American grand strategy under Obama has multiple aspects, and sometimes contains assertive elements. After all, this is the president who hunted down Osama Bin Laden, announced a US pivot to Asia, and escalated the use of unmanned drone strikes against Al Qaeda and its affiliates. Nor has Obama adopted anything like a pure strategy of offshore balancing. Advocates of offshore balancing would have neither surged into Afghanistan in 2009-2010, nor toppled Qaddafi, nor maintained in the end so much of the George W. Bush institutional legacy in counter-terrorism. The United States today still operates a worldwide alliance system far beyond what offshore balancers would want. Still, a modest form of strategic retrenchment has been a major component and aspiration of American grand strategy under Obama, even in cases where the US asserts itself rhetorically or temporarily, and on this the President has repeatedly made his priorities very clear.

The move toward retrenchment in recent years is visible for example in patterns of US military spending, force posture, and security strategy. The Budget Control Act of 2011 in particular, together with subsequent sequestration, resulted in roughly \$1 trillion in defense cuts over a ten-year period currently underway. This was on top of previous cuts from Obama's first two years under then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. The cuts showed up in reduced numbers of weapons, personnel, soldiers, Marines, ships and aircraft since 2010. In real terms, defense spending has gone down significantly as a proportion of the US federal budget since that year, while domestic spending has gone up.⁴ This shift away from defense is also true in relation to national economic activity. In 2010, defense spending constituted almost 5 percent of GDP. By the time Obama leaves office, that number is projected to be roughly 3 percent. So there has been a striking decline in the proportion of national effort devoted to military affairs, just as intended and called for by the President. In terms of explicit security strategy, the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance helped clarify key assumptions of retrenchment, abandoning the pretense that the United States be able to fight two major regional contingencies simultaneously. That document de-emphasized heavy-footed counterinsurgency or ground campaigns, stating that the US armed forces would "no longer be sized to conduct large-scale prolonged stability operations." The call instead was for "innovative, low-cost and small-footprint" approaches.⁵ One leading scholarly advocate of offshore balancing, Christopher Layne of the George H.W. Bush School at Texas A&M, rightly noted that the 2012 Strategic Guidance represented a significant move in an offshore direction.⁶ The 2015 National Security Strategy does not reverse the President's demonstrated preference for a retrenched approach, but instead claims it is working, and calls for "strategic patience" in its continuation.⁷

Is Retrenchment Working?

In truth, retrenchment in US military spending, force posture, and security strategy under President Obama has had several consequences he probably did not intend. First, while there is less immediate expense in maintaining a smaller-sized force, sized to handle only one major regional contingency at a time – and with no intention of engaging in large-scale ground campaigns – there is obviously a trade-off here in terms of cost and risk. Naturally, when the United States downsizes its presence overseas, this tends to unnerve allies and encourage adversaries. Allies depend upon believable, material indicators of American commitment, including a strong military presence together with a credible readiness to use it. Adversaries are deterred by the same. Some leading strategic statements issued by the administration, such as the new National Security Strategy, do not really spell out or concede any such trade-off between cost and risk. Instead, they simply take it for granted that the increased risk is manageable. In effect, current plans assume or perhaps hope that international adversaries will not take advantage of America's scaled-back ability to handle a range of possible challenges. US adversaries may not be so forgiving. They might also misperceive the true extent of American commitment and resolve, under the impression the US won't respond. Indeed this is how many of America's wars have begun in the past. So a smaller force, together with indicators of limited US capabilities, is hardly a guarantee of peace, either for the United States or for others. On the contrary, it has often preceded the outbreak of war.⁸

Second, as pointed out by a wide range of American officials, independent panels, and congressional leaders from both parties, even the current and relatively modest force posture outlined in the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance is incompatible with actual levels of defense spending since sequestration entered into force. In this very basic sense, capabilities and commitments are not at all aligned in American grand strategy today. The Defense Strategic Guidance was written under the assumption of

⁴ Congressional Budget Office, *The Budget and Economic Outlook: 2015 to 2025* (January 2015), 158-167.

⁵ Department of Defense, *Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* (January 2012), 3-4,

⁶ Christopher Layne, "The (Almost) Triumph of Offshore Balancing," *The National Interest*, January 27, 2012, available from: <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/almost-triumph-offshore-balancing-6405>.

⁷ The White House, *National Security Strategy* (February 2015). See also Michael Noonan, "The National Security Strategy of Strategic Patience and Persistence?" Foreign Policy Research Institute, February 9, 2015, available from: <http://www.fpri.org/geopoliticus/2015/02/national-security-strategy-strategic-patience-and-persistence>.

⁸ Robert Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (Knopf, 2014), 546-551, 590.

roughly \$500 billion in military cuts. The actual cuts in effect are twice that number. One practical implication of this shortfall, according to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, is that the US armed forces may be incapable of handling even one major regional contingency with confidence.⁹ How this could be productive for the security and stability of democratic order internationally remains something of a mystery.

The administration's preference for retrenchment, and the unintended consequences of such a preference, have also been visible in numerous regional cases over the past six years. Take the handling of US disengagement from Iraq in 2011. The Obama administration's position was, and is, that negotiations with Baghdad regarding a continued US base presence in Iraq broke down that year over the issue of legal immunity for American troops. No doubt this was a major issue in some very difficult negotiations. But in truth, as even sympathetic chroniclers such as James Mann have documented, the Obama White House really had no desire to maintain a significant number of troops in Iraq – and the Iraqis knew it. In Mann's words:

US military leaders had worried about the impact of a complete withdrawal from Iraq. But in political terms, making a clean break was much better for Obama than leaving some American troops in the country. Getting out of Iraq had been the central theme in the campaign that brought him to the White House....Any decision to extend the American troop presence there would be portrayed as a violation of these promises and of the "dumb-war" views on which Obama's career in national politics had been based.¹⁰

In other words, Obama clearly favored US retrenchment from Iraq, apart from legal immunity issues. This meant that a 2011 base security agreement was improbable, because Iraqi leaders were not inclined to invest their own political capital in an agreement without clear support from Washington.¹¹ Toward the end of 2011, consequently, US troops left Iraq in a hurry. Far from considering this a setback, the Obama administration celebrated the outcome in 2012 as a fulfilled promise to "end the war in Iraq."¹² Retrenchment won the day. One unintended consequence was that Al Qaeda affiliates and splinter groups, notably ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) were able to stage a violent resurgence inside Iraq once US forces had left. The world saw this most vividly during the summer of 2014, when the Iraqi army collapsed throughout large parts of the country in the face of the ISIS advance. Of course, the continuing inability or unwillingness of Iraq's central government to manage internal sectarian resentments had a great deal to do with these shocking developments. But so did the absence of US forces. President Obama seems to have concluded during 2011 that the United States possessed little ability to shape events inside Iraq, and to a certain extent that assumption of American powerlessness became self-fulfilling.¹³

Sometimes, Obama emphasizes his overarching desire for retrenchment, even when he temporarily asserts US military power. This has certainly been true in Afghanistan. In December 2009, after a lengthy policy review, Obama announced an escalated US troop surge to that country, but at the same time indicated strict limits on that escalation, including a start date for American withdrawal. After the death of Osama Bin Laden in the spring of 2011, the Obama administration took the opportunity to argue for American retrenchment from Afghanistan, on the argument that Al Qaeda was finally on its last legs. Claiming that "the tide of war is receding," Obama announced a series of US troop withdrawals for 2011-2012. The impression of then-Secretary of Gates was that the President remained set on retrenchment from Afghanistan, apart from any military arguments: "for him, it's all about getting out."¹⁴ Washington has since signed a basing security agreement with Kabul, and the number of American troops in Afghanistan for next year has been tweaked, but US combat forces remain set to exit that country by the end of 2016. Clearly, the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and sympathetic forces look to take advantage of American withdrawal through escalating attacks on the existing government. Preventing a safe haven for terrorism was the excellent reason for US intervention into Afghanistan in the first place. Yet President Obama has often signaled profound ambivalence regarding a continued US presence there. The unintended consequence of US retrenchment would naturally be and is an Afghan ally both weaker and more unnerved in the face of jihadist attacks.

Other examples of recent American retrenchment and its unintended consequences abound. Predictably, the combination of

⁹ Colin Clark, "US Military Could Not Handle One Major Theater Operation If Sequestration Sticks," *Breaking Defense*, September 18, 2013, available from: <http://breakingdefense.com/2013/09/us-military-could-not-handle-one-major-theater-operation-if-sequester-sticks/>.

¹⁰ James Mann, *The Obamians* (Penguin, 2012), 331-332.

¹¹ Vali Nasr, *The Dispensable Nation* (Doubleday, 2013), 149-150.

¹² National Public Radio online, "Transcript: President Obama's Convention Speech," September 6, 2012, available from: <http://www.npr.org/2012/09/06/160713941/transcript-president-obamas-convention-speech>.

¹³ Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, *The Endgame: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq, from George W. Bush to Barack Obama* (Pantheon, 2012), 523-683, 688-691; Leon Panetta, *Worthy Fights* (Penguin, 2014), 392-394.

¹⁴ Gates, *Duty*, 557.

verbal assertions with material retrenchment or de facto non-intervention has produced some especially incoherent and disturbing policy outcomes at regional levels.

- President Obama announced a pivot or rebalance of American power toward Asia, but at the same time has overseen deep cuts to the US Navy, the armed service most responsible for giving that pivot some teeth. In absolute terms, the Navy's presence in the Asia-Pacific is not much stronger than it was six years ago, and in relative terms compared to China the American naval presence is considerably weaker. It seems unlikely that the Chinese have not noticed this material reality, in contradiction to US rhetoric.
- The President supported US intervention in Libya to topple Muammar Qaddafi during 2011, but followed a de facto policy of American disengagement after that. Libya is now a failed state and a playground for militias, organized crime, and jihadist forces including ISIS.
- Obama embraced the goal of regime change in Syria by calling on Bashar al-Assad to "step aside," drew a "red line" suggesting US military action against the regime's use of chemical weapons on civilians, and announced American support for non-jihadist rebels in Syria, but then refused to enforce or implement any one of these three demands in a serious way.

Altogether, and in spite of rhetorical assertions to the contrary, the reality of American strategic retrenchment under President Obama - together with his persistent search for diplomatic accommodation with Iran, China, and Russia - have disconcerted numerous US allies in East Asia, the Middle East, and Central-Eastern Europe. The question on everyone's mind is whether the US will actually support its allies in a crisis situation. To be sure, the President says that it will. But since these words exist alongside powerful indicators of American retrenchment, together with repeated presidential declarations that the US must focus on domestic priorities, there is frequent confusion abroad as to whether the United States is coming or going. The consequent feeling in allied capitals is that America is stepping back from its traditional international role. This may actually encourage violent conflict. In a way, it already is. In the case of core allies such as NATO, Israel, and Japan, the US will have to act to defend those allies should it come to that. But if the US gives the impression of endless ambivalence or disengagement, this could cause serious misunderstandings, whereby adversaries believe the US will never act forcefully, when in fact it eventually will.

The Alternative to Retrenchment

Overall, US foreign policy under Obama has been characterized by a clearly declared unwillingness to engage in further large-scale ground campaigns overseas; relatively deep cuts in defense spending; a deep aversion to putting boots on the ground; and a keen preference for US allies to take the lead in facing pressing security challenges. The goal has been to retrench US military power overseas without undue risk to basic American interests, and to refocus on domestic policy priorities, or as the President puts it: "nation-building right here at home."¹⁵ This approach has achieved some of its intended consequences, but it has held unintended ones as well. Specifically, American retrenchment has left multiple international security threats to germinate in ways dangerous to US interests. Leading actors including the governments of Russia, China, and Iran, together with Islamist militants inside the Arab world and beyond, have naturally interpreted the long-term trend as one of American disengagement, creating power vacuums they are happy to fill. President Obama for his part has never fully appreciated the possible costs, risks, and downsides of strategic retrenchment, and there is little indication he ever will.

The unintended negative consequences of US retrenchment under Obama ought to raise questions about the case for offshore balancing. Academic proponents of offshore balancing do not dispute that Obama's regional and functional foreign policy strategies have frequently been incoherent in their specifics. Nor do advocates of offshore balancing dispute that current spasmodic attempts at retrenchment have often been half-hearted and poorly executed. But notice what the offshore balancers argue next: that the answer to any unexpected downsides of existing American strategic retrenchment, must be *further and more profound retrenchment*.

Traditionally, foreign policy realists have recognized that a strategy of retrenchment is not in itself a guarantee of success. Like any other strategy, retrenchment must be implemented with considerable skill, prudence, and rigorous self-awareness, and in the arena of international power politics this is no small thing. Moreover there are certain inherent risks to retrenchment, even

¹⁵ Remarks by the President on Afghanistan, June 22, 2011. *Office of the Press Secretary, White House*, available from: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/06/22/remarks-president-way-forward-afghanistan>.

at the best of times. There are tradeoffs. Scholars of grand strategy have long understood that strategies with less immediate cost may also involve greater eventual risk, and vice-versa.¹⁶ When a great power retrenches, this is easily taken as a sign of growing weakness. The desire to reduce short-term costs may trigger increased strategic and international risk, eventually imposing even greater costs. To put it bluntly, retrenchment doesn't always work out as planned. In one of the great realist scholarly works of the past half-century, *War and Change in World Politics*, Princeton University Emeritus Professor Robert Gilpin discussed the inevitable downsides of strategic retrenchment. Here is what he said:

Retrenchment by its very nature is an indication of relative weakness and declining power, and thus retrenchment can have a deteriorating effect on allies and rivals. Sensing the decline of their protector, allies try to obtain the best deal they can from the rising master of the system. Rivals are stimulated to "close in," and frequently they precipitate a conflict in the process. Thus World War I began as a conflict between Russia and Austria over the disposition of the remnants of the retreating Ottoman Empire.¹⁷

This recognition of inevitable tradeoffs with *any* strategy remains a central insight of classical foreign policy realism. Yet today, the word "realism" is often attached to a proposed course of endless American retrenchment, with little explicit recognition of any possible downside. At the very least, we ought to recognize that offshore balancing is only one possible strategy with a realist or geopolitical logic. Another option, less commonly articulated within the academy but not entirely absent, would be a kind of forward realism, based upon the understanding that in the end a forward strategic presence on the other side of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans is very useful for American interests. Indeed one might say this has been a consistent theme in US grand strategy since the 1940s, and rightly so. Now if America's relative international capabilities were really in steep and inevitable decline, then a grand strategy of deep retrenchment or offshore balancing might be most appropriate. But the US still holds unmatched capabilities, and their imminent demise is hardly inevitable.¹⁸ If anything, the risk today is that excessive and ill-managed American retrenchment in recent years feeds into a perception of US decline unnecessarily. And this is exactly what has happened under President Obama.

¹⁶ See especially John Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment* (Oxford University Press, 2005 edition.)

¹⁷ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1983), 194.

¹⁸ Regarding the continued extent of American capabilities from a comparative international perspective, see Michael Beckley, "China's Century? Why America's Edge Will Endure," *International Security* 36:3 (Winter 2011-2012), 41-78; Stephen Brooks, John Ikenberry, and William Wohlforth, "Lean Forward," *Foreign Affairs* (January-February 2013), 130-142; Eric Edelman, *Understanding America's Contested Primacy* (Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010); Josef Joffe, *The Myth of America's Decline* (Liveright, 2013); and Robert Lieber, *Power and Willpower in the American Future* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).