Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy

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Barry R. Posen
Sometimes, less is more. “More” may seem the order of the day in U.S. security policy, between ISIS, Ukraine, and other issues, but MIT political scientist Barry Posen offers a powerful cry for “less!” His book *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* calls for doing less, promising less, and spending less than the United States does today. The book is not a plea for isolationism or disarmament, but it makes a convincing case that America's current strategy of “liberal hegemony” is both wasteful and counterproductive, creating more problems than it solves. Posen’s strategy is not entirely novel—it is a form of offshore balancing—but *Restraint* is a worthy contribution. The book offers the most thorough and theoretically grounded rationale for offshore balancing to date, as well as practical diplomatic and defense planning recommendations, in a concise and well-organized monograph.

Posen has not always been in the restraint camp. A long-standing scholar of grand strategy, in the 1990s Posen favored “selective engagement”—maintaining U.S. alliances and forward presence in Europe, Asia, and the Persian Gulf, but eschewing liberal interventionism or pursuit of global primacy. Why should America now pull back? First, Posen argues, the relative economic and military strength of the United States has eroded; supplying security while allies take a free ride is not affordable. U.S. soft power has also been diminished by the excesses of liberal hegemony. The Iraq war, the Kosovo war (the geopolitical consequences of which Americans underestimate), NATO expansion, “color revolutions,” and the like convinced China, Russia, and even democracies like Brazil that America is not a status quo power, and many nations now affirmatively challenge U.S. activism. Third, nationalism remains a potent force—contra the predictions of liberals—meaning that an anti—United States stance is good politics in many countries, and that U.S. meddling in other regions motivates nonstate extremist groups.

Posen recommends two basic changes in U.S. military intervention and military posture. He believes the United States should avoid intervention by force in other nations’ politics—whether preemptive regime change or
“humanitarian” operations in the middle of civil wars. The more fundamental change he advocates is for the United States to withdraw gradually from security guarantees and permanent forward basing of American forces. Pulling back would incentivize allies—NATO, Japan and South Korea, Israel, Saudi Arabia, etc.—to provide more of their own security. Posen recognizes and accepts that some allies might go nuclear in response, but he sees such proliferation as less risky than U.S. entanglement, particularly since some allies treat U.S. support as a blank check for reckless behavior. In Posen’s world, the United States would rely on local power balancing to prevent the rise of regional hegemons in Eurasia, on nuclear deterrence as an ultimate backstop for the United States, and on “command of the commons” both to prevent power projection by others against U.S. interests and to facilitate American involvement in Eurasia if that becomes necessary.

Perhaps the most compelling case against this minimalist approach comes from fellow realists like Robert Art, who would agree with the critique of liberal hegemony but argue that the costs of U.S. alliances and forward basing are better than the risks inherent in letting local powers sort out power relationships on their own. The United States might be safe from attack, but regional wars could damage the global economy, bringing painful recessions to American citizens. Posen does address that argument, responding essentially that there is a great deal of ruin in a global economy (apologies to Adam Smith). True, there is much alarmism on the subject, particularly around oil shocks, but one still wonders about applying past examples of neutral countries doing fine during major wars to today’s tightly coupled supply chains and financial markets.

Posen also offers force structure implications. Many grand strategy proposals leap directly from foreign policy ideas to laundry lists of weapons to purchase or cancel. To his credit, Posen conducts the intermediate linking step of identifying military missions and broad operating concepts (the guidance provided—in theory—by a National Military Strategy). The core recommendation is to design a force for securing “command of the commons,” i.e., sea, air, and space. This is an idea Posen has advocated for some time, but is fully appropriate to offshore balancing. The Navy fares very well in his recommended force structure, e.g., keeping nine carriers, while the Army and Marines take the bulk of cuts. Overall Posen thinks spending 2.5 percent of GDP on defense would suffice, a 25 percent cut from today’s base budget.

While it is suited to his strategy, some might criticize Posen’s proposed force as too conventional in its details—i.e., emphasizing aircraft carriers in the face of growing threats like the Chinese DF-21 missile. There is room for more attention to such emerging challenges. That said, Posen’s strategy would have little requirement for close-in U.S. strikes against the Chinese or Russian homeland versus being able to thwart an adversary’s attempts to project power across open oceans at us.

For those familiar with the grand strategy literature, the broad case in Restraint is in line with those of other offshore balancers, like John Mearsheimer, Steve Walt, and Christopher Layne. What Posen adds is a comprehensive theory-grounded analysis of the problems of liberal hegemony and merits of an offshore approach, backed by forty-five
pages of endnotes. Uniquely, the book also develops practical recommendations for implementing the strategy with serious attention to timelines and regional nuances. Where Layne’s _Peace of Illusions_ traces historical failings of the hegemonic approach, _Restraint_ is a timely, fleshed-out policy proposal.

Ultimately, many policy makers will never get past page 1, where Posen defines American national security interests as the traditional sovereignty, safety, territory, and international power position. Threats to those are modest and Posen makes a compelling case they are best managed through limited overseas commitments. On the other hand, many in Washington believe American hegemony—euphemized as “leadership”—is _in and of itself_ a fundamental interest, and that no economic and physical risks are acceptable. That one televised beheading five thousand miles away can so alarm America suggests this will not change soon. For those willing to think critically about America’s security needs, however, _Restraint_ offers a deeply logical challenge and a thoughtful blueprint.

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Stavridis, James G. _The Accidental Admiral: A Sailor Takes Command at NATO_. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2014. 288pp. $32.95

In the early days of the Second World War, General Eisenhower, the first Supreme Allied Commander of Europe, struggled to keep the alliance together. One of the more interesting anecdotes about this struggle is when he almost fired a member of his staff because the officer was, shall we say, culturally insensitive. The story goes that an American officer, a colonel on Eisenhower’s staff, insulted a British officer by calling him a _British_ bastard. Ike wasn’t pleased. Ike threatened to bust him down to private. Being a bastard, he said, was not a national characteristic. All were equal in the eyes of the allies. But admittedly, handling NATO has not gotten any easier over the years. Secretary Gates, prior to his departure, had some choice words for the alliance, urging more NATO members to meet the required 2 percent of their GDP on defense spending. America, he noted, continues to pick up the slack—from Afghanistan to Libya. Yet the alliance remains.

Admiral James Stavridis, USN (Ret.), most recently Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) and commander of U.S. European Command (EUCOM), and unofficially, the Navy’s advocate of the well-known John Adams quotation—“Let us tenderly and kindly cherish, therefore the means of knowledge. Let us dare to read, think, speak and write”—has written an enjoyable memoir of his time in Eisenhower’s old chair.

Stavridis’s memoir stays away from criticism of U.S. officials and discussions of contentious closed-door meetings. This is in contrast to two other high-profile, former administration officials’ memoirs—those of Ambassador Christopher Hill and Defense Secretary Leon Panetta—which were published around the same time to much hoopla. While Stavridis was dual hatted as SACEUR and EUCOM his reputation around the headquarters was one of civility and intelligence, certainly not a bad combination. Stavridis says he wants to show the reader not what happened during his four years, but rather why it happened. He proceeds to take the reader on a tour