

Can Any Realists do P.R. Anymore?

Written by Zachary Keck

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ZACHARY KECK, MAY 10 2012

Steve Walt has an interesting blog post over at *Foreign Policy* envisioning how post-Cold War U.S. foreign policy might have been different had realists been in charge of things. Like his sometimes co-author John Mearsheimer, Walt contends that a “coalition of neoconservatives and liberal internationalists” have run U.S. foreign policy since the Cold War, and that both of these groups favor the active and frequent (mis)use of American power, differing only in terms of the importance they place in multilateral institutions. “By contrast,” Walt continues, “realists have been largely absent from the halls of power,” much to the detriment of U.S. foreign policy.

American realists frequently lament that, despite their impressive record on key foreign policy issues in the past, they remain an endangered species inside the Beltway. Indeed, Daniel Drezner has complained that “it’s impossible to have a conversation with John Mearsheimer longer than 15 minutes without him bringing up this point.” And this was hardly the first time Walt has argued this point himself.

Although some have questioned whether realists are really as wise as they claim, I think the point generally holds at least with regards to the most prominent realists’ views on the most important issues of the day.

Hans Morgenthau and George Kennan, for instance, were among the earliest proponents of containing the Soviet Union in Europe and Japan and, along with Waltz, were among the earliest and fiercest critics of the Vietnam War. Similarly, Mearsheimer not only supported the first Gulf War but was one of the few that predicted a quick and decisive routing of Saddam’s forces. Similarly, mere days after the U.S.-supported invasion of Afghanistan began, Mearsheimer warned in the *New York Times* that “Guns Won’t Win Afghanistan,” advice that the White House has still yet to fully grasp.

Additionally, along with their fellow realist ideologues, Mearsheimer and Walt were some of the only American elites opposing the 2003 invasion of Iraq before it commenced, and before then Mearsheimer had identified China as the greatest long-term threat to the United States. His policy prescriptions for containing China back in 2001 so closely resembled the Obama administration’s Asia pivot a decade later that one keen observer termed the latter the “Mearsheimer Imperative.”

In short, all the realists can be credited with is consistently spouting the conventional wisdom a few years or decades before it becomes the conventional wisdom.

Nonetheless, I find myself agreeing with Drezner in being, “fed up with realists whining that everyone is against them” albeit for different reasons than Professor Drezner. My biggest gripe with contemporary American realists is their refusal to frame their policy prescriptions in terms the American people and their politicians might find acceptable, and then complaining when these policies aren’t pursued.

This sets them apart from their predecessors. As Morgenthau chronicled, from the early days of the Republic through WWI, Presidents spoke in terms of values while acting in terms of power. Although Morgenthau himself believed this tradition ended with Woodrow Wilson, even as he wrote this Harry Truman was hard at work finding a way to sell his preferred policy of containment to Congress and the American people. As Christensen has documented, this was an arduous task that required framing the threat as “evil” worldwide Communism instead of “powerful” Soviet Union.

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This compromise was not without its costs—most notably in Korea and Vietnam—but it seems unlikely that containment would've had the support of the American people and Congress for most of the Cold War had it not been "Americanized."

In the post-Cold War era, however, American realists have proved far less adept at couching their policies in language that might appeal to the American electorate. Take, for instance, offshore balancing, which is the preferred foreign policy of today's leading realists. To simplify greatly, under offshore balancing the U.S. would focus on maintaining the balance of power in the three key regions of the world—Europe, East Asia, and the Persian Gulf. Instead of using forward deployed U.S. troops to achieve this task, however, Washington would rely on regional powers to do the bulk of the heavy lifting, while the U.S. military would loom just over the horizon waiting to intervene if the balance breaks down.

Especially in an era of fiscal imbalances and mounting domestic challenges, offshore balancing is a sensible option. Indeed, as Walt likes to point out, these days leading Liberal Interventionists are jumping on the offshore balancing bandwagon.

Nonetheless, the American public is unlikely to rally behind offshore balancing when it is presented in these terms for two reasons. First, it borders too closely on isolationism, which has become a political taboo in American society ever since WWII. Proponents of offshore balancing understand this and are at pains to contrast the two. These distinctions are too nuanced for today's average politician to grasp, much less explain to their constituents.

Furthermore, offshore balancing lacks a larger purpose for the country to rally behind. Since the founding of the Republic, the American people have always wanted their foreign relations to stand for some larger purpose (usually American/liberal values). Successful policymakers have understood this and tailored their preferred policies accordingly. It mattered little what these policies actually were; whereas John Quincy Adams argued that America's liberal character demanded an isolationist foreign policy, Wilson and Truman said these same values demanded a globalized presence.

So the question becomes, can offshore balancing be couched in terms of American exceptionalism? Indeed, I believe it can and realists needn't look any further than their favorite subject: the global balance of global power.

A novel feature of the current international system is that in most regions of the world there is at least one rising power: Brazil in LATAM, Turkey in the Middle East, South Africa in Africa, India in South Asia, and Indonesia in Southeast Asia. Equally important, almost all of these powers are budding democracies that, while not necessarily liberal democracies in the Western mold, are close enough for the American people to empathize with.

Moreover, after living with the scourge of European imperialism and being dogged by years of internal weakness, these powers are eager to take on a larger role on the world stage. This stands in stark contrast to America's traditional allies in Europe and Japan, who have/are all too content with bandwagoning for social welfare systems. Finally, with the exception of India none of these rising democracies appear capable of becoming regional hegemons because of counterbalancing forces and/or geographical barriers.

This seems like an easy sell to the American people. One can even think of a Kennan-like declaration going something like, "In today's globalized world, the purpose of American power is to empower rising democracies to take the lead in promoting our shared interests and values in their respective neighborhoods. While remaining active in world affairs, and standing both willing and able to intervene in support of our interests, these beacons of hope and democracy are uniquely qualified to spread peace and prosperity in their respective regions. The U.S. looks forward to engaging our partners in peace on a basis of mutual interest and mutual respect, and helping forge a better tomorrow for all mankind."

To be sure, this would not translate into a pure form of offshore balancing. But neither did America's "strategies of containment" ever conform all that well to Kennan's vision. Just as containment in practice got us through the Cold War, this policy would be a lot closer to offshore balancing than what we currently have today. And, after all, it was on

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Professor Walt's blog that I first heard William Arthur Ward's famous remark, "[Whereas] the pessimist complains about the wind; [and] the optimist expects it change; the realist adjusts the sails." For too long realists have played the role of both the pessimist and optimist in Ward's hymn. It's time to get real.

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Zachary Keck is a Deputy Editor of *e-International Relations*. You can follow him on Twitter @ZacharyKeck. Read more from the *e-IR* editors' blog [here](#).

About the author:

Zachary Keck is assistant editor of *The Diplomat*. He Tweets from @ZacharyKeck and can be contacted through his website.