

# US Grand Strategy Options

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LEIGH CROWLEY, JUN 13 2013

### **In the Context of Debates Over US Decline and Rising Powers, Critically Compare and Contrast US Grand Strategy Options. Which One Would You Follow and Why?**

America's *unipolar moment* is arguably at an end. The logic of the statement can be drawn from its rising economic competitor China and its military imperial overstretch in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. However, under American preponderance, Wilsonian notions of liberal order building have boomed and a *pax-Americana* established. As John Ikenberry (2011) notes, American preponderance has allowed the United States to create a liberal order based upon its own identity and interests:

[The United States] had the power not just to pursue its own interests but to shape its global environment. It made strategic choices, deployed power, built institutions, forged partnerships, and produced a sprawling order. It was an order with many parts, features, and layers—global, regional, economic, political, military, social, and ideological.[1]

The piece first argues that the *open door* policy and public goods provided by this liberal order ensures that the United States remains uniquely strong and is ranked first amongst its equals, despite declinist arguments.

Given American power and the apparent demise of the liberal hegemonic order, what grand strategy should the United States pursue? An American grand strategy is a set of coordinated and sustained policies designed to address the long-term threats and opportunities that lie beyond its shores.[2] There are three grand strategies the United States may pursue: *primacy*, *offshore balancing* and *liberal internationalism*. Each will be explored and their strengths and weaknesses highlighted. Finally, the piece will advocate that the best course for the United States to take would be to fuse both *offshore balancing* and *liberal internationalism* grand strategies. The logic of grand strategy fusion is that *liberal internationalism* locks rivals into an open and rules based system, whilst *offshore balancing* allows the United States to maintain an over-the-horizon military posture and use it should the former fail.

Proponents of American decline cite both its failure to win the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq due to imperial overstretch and the rapid economic growth of China relative to that of the United States as their evidence. Though this assessment may be true in part, a sharper analysis shows how the liberal order created by the United States keeps American power unchecked and China locked in. Indeed, the National Intelligence Council Global Trends 2030 report believes there will be a diffusion of power and that there will in fact be no hegemonic power in 2030; power will shift to create a multipolar world.[3] Nevertheless, the report also states strategy that:

The multifaceted nature of US power suggests that even as its economic weight is overtaken by China – perhaps as early as the 2020's based on some forecasts – the US most likely will remain "first among equals" alongside the other great powers in 2030.[4]

The source of American power is in part due to its construction of the liberal order. The United States has used its preponderance since 1945 to be the driving force behind the construction of an open and loosely rules-based liberal order. Openness is created when states reciprocally engage in trade and exchange based upon mutual gains.[5] Rules and institutions act as a loose system of governance and are in part autonomous from the exercise of state power.[6] The stability and longevity of the liberal order is sustained through mutual consent rather than a power

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hierarchy, and the United States subjects itself to operate within the rules like any other member state. Restricting its own power even within its post-Cold War *unipolar moment*, the United States has been able to successfully lock rival powers into its liberal order.

Despite economic projections showing China's GDP overtaking that of the United States as early as the 2020s and the apparent blunting of the American military machine in Afghanistan and Iraq, United States declinists should be cautious using these scenarios when supporting their arguments. The multifaceted nature of American power can be found in its preponderant place in the liberal order, dollar hegemony[7] and its unrivalled military capability. Though China's economy is set to eclipse that of the United States in the 2020s, the Global Trends 2030 global power index forecast, which takes into account a multi-component forecast consisting of GDP, population size, military spending, technology health, education and governance, does not project China overtaking the United States until the 2040s.[8] Given that the United States will remain an unrivalled power until the 2040s, and beyond that, the first amongst its equals, it still possesses the capacity to read and respond to the international system with any grand strategy of its choosing.

A grand strategy of *primacy* is firmly placed in the realist school of thought. John Mearsheimer's structural analysis (2001) offers an offensive realist lens to view how the actions of great powers are largely dictated by the international system in which they find themselves.[9] Mearsheimer outlines three features of the international system that combine to cause great powers to fear one another:

The absence of a central authority that sits above states and can protect them from each other, 2) the fact that states always have some offensive military capability, and 3) the fact that states can never be certain about other states' intentions. Given this fear... states recognise that the more powerful they are relative to their rivals, the better chance of survival. Indeed, the best guarantee of survival is to be a hegemon, because no other state can seriously threaten such a mighty power.[10]

Where *primacy* strategists depart from Mearsheimer's assessment is the stability of *unipolarity*. Neorealists are concerned with both overstretch in the creation of a global hegemony and the balancing actions of rival powers in response. Kenneth Waltz (1997) argues that unbalanced unipolarity produces uncertainty in the international order, making the system more war prone.[11] The *primacy* theorist William Wohlforth (1999) contests that a 'unipolar system is one in which a counterbalance is impossible'.[12] Wohlforth's argument follows that if the United States was to seek a grand strategy of primacy, unipolarity would be perpetually stable and peaceful for two reasons: 1) the outdistancing of American power relative to its closest competitor prevents hegemonic rivalry, and 2) unipolarity reduces the salience and stakes of balancing of power.[13]

Primacy grand strategy is underpinned by the American military capability to act unilaterally, and, if its perceived national interests are at stake, act outside of the liberal order's rules. In the build up to the Iraq war, the George W. Bush administration retreated from international institutions. Secretary of State Colin Powell said that the Bush administration would bring the Iraq case before the United Nations, but that does not mean that 'we lose our option to do what we might think is appropriate to do'.[14] The maintenance of the liberal order has a dark side and is sometimes messy. The United States must be able to intervene efficiently militarily and promote all aspects of the liberal order; a United States acting as a global policeman increases the durability of the liberal order and is preferable to the alternatives that might arise.[15]

With imperial overstretch in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars and enormous domestic fiscal pressures, neorealist scholars are increasingly advocating that the United States abandons *primacy* and adopts a grand strategy of *offshore balancing*. Stephen Walt (2011) outlines that 'offshore balancing isn't just a strategy for hard times; it is also the best available strategy in a world where the United States is the strongest power'.[16] Walt's assessment recognises that the United States has what Christopher Layne (2009) calls a 'hegemony problem'.[17] Offshore balancers argue that hegemonic primacy increases American vulnerability to geopolitical backlash, countervailing great power coalitions, aggregates Islamic terrorism, and alienates public opinion including within European allies.[18]

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Whereas *primacy* is based on the belief that the United States is best served by defending its allies rather than having them doing it for themselves, offshore balancers believe a balance of power approach distributes the costs and risks of defending allies.[19] An offshore balancing strategy would permit the United States to withdraw from its current global military commitments and assume an over-the-horizon military posture.[20] The rationale being that withdrawal resolves many issues associated with the problem of hegemony, but allows the United States to re-insert its military should a regional balance structure fail.

With the winding down of operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, and a peace in Europe that is set to continue for the foreseeable future, the 2011 'Strategic Pivot' to Asia sees the United States retreat from Europe and the Middle East (though keeping a watchful eye) while recalibrating its focus towards Asia. The expansion of the liberal order across Asia has seen it become a key driver in the global economy. Aside from Asia's economic importance, stability in the region remains fragile as a result of the recent ramping up of nuclear rhetoric from North Korea and the Chinese-Japanese tensions surrounding ownership of the Senkaku Islands. The 'Strategic Pivot' not only marks a pivot towards Asia, but marks a pivot away from a grand strategy of primacy to one of offshore balancing. US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton argued that the 'strategic turn to the region fits logically into our overall global effort to secure and sustain America's global leadership'.[21] American multifaceted alliances in the region foster the promotion of the liberal order and leverage its external hegemony in the region in a time of evolving security challenges.[22]

Much of the power the United States has today is in large part thanks to *liberal internationalism*, though Ikenberry (2011) argues that this *liberal internationalism* has been fused with *primacy*. [23] Ikenberry argues that the ideal form of *liberal internationalism* grand strategy 'creates a foundation in which states can engage in reciprocity and institutionalised cooperation'.[24] The liberal international order can be defined as an order which is open and rules based, and sustained through consent rather than balance or command.[25]

Despite the public goods provided by the United States in its unipolar moment, support for its authority has eroded. Critics of America's preeminent role in the world, such as former French President Jacques Chirac, are quick to show displacement with American involvement in Iraq without a United Nations resolution.[26] In order for the United States to regain support for its authority, it must renegotiate its place within the liberal international order, which will involve the voluntary granting of authority from other states:[27]

For this to happen, the United States again needs to search for and champion practical and consensual functioning global rules and institutions. In the twenty-first century, this will involve sharing among a wider coalition of liberal democratic states... it is this liberal complex of states that is the ultimate guardian of the rules, institutions, and progressive purposes of the liberal order.[28]

The Project for a Strong and United America forcibly argues that that the United States not only has the unique ability to lead, 'but an imperative to do so – for the protection of its own interests and values, as well as for the advancement of democratic values, human development, and security around the world'.[29] Advocates of *primacy* grand strategy argue that *liberal internationalism* fails to understand the real nature of the international system; they believe the international system is far from benign – it is a dangerous place where states compete for power. Furthermore, the only way to protect your interests from competing powers is to carry a *big stick*.

It would be a misguided assumption that *liberal internationalism* requires the United States to relinquish its preeminent position in the international system. Rather, it calls for all states to work within the frameworks of international institutions and the United States taking a lead role by promoting democracy, human rights and other liberal values. [30]

The fusion of *liberal internationalism* and *offshore balancing* is the best grand strategy option available to the United States. As argued by Ikenberry, the United States has lost its authority to lead the liberal order and therefore must renegotiate its place.[31]

Widespread disapproval of American intervention outside of the rules-based system, as seen in the 2003 invasion in Iraq coupled with the rapid economic rise of China, has seen its unipolar moment elapse, though it remains first

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amongst equals. The United States must now adjust to a new multipolar world despite still possessing great power. This power should be used to promote the liberal order. As it has done since 1945, the United States will still possess the power to shape the liberal order in its own interests, but the point of departure from previous grand strategies is that it should become fully immersed in international institutions and operate within the rules. Leading by example and operating within the rules-based system draws and locks in rival powers to the liberal order. Locking in rivals into the liberal order underwrites American security, as the costs of leaving the liberal order are so high that rivals will not seek to counter balance a preeminent United States.

Though *liberal internationalism* should remain the preferred grand strategy for the United States, *offshore balancing* allows it to retreat whilst maintaining an over-the-horizon military posture. The uncertainty and unpredictability of the international system necessitates that the United States always has at its disposal a big stick in order to defend itself. Moreover, the liberal international order requires the United States to have a big stick in order to protect the very order in which they live.

The economic realities within the United States have called in to question the sprawling American involvement in the liberal order. Declinists claim that the United States is in inexorable decline: they cite both the imperial overstretch in Afghanistan and Iraq, and America's relative decline relative to that of China. Despite this fair analysis, declinists should proceed with caution: the United States still wields unrivalled multifaceted power and this is set to continue. Accepting the claims of the Global Trends 2030 report that the United States will maintain its preponderant position in the international system until the 2040s, and beyond that the first among its equals,[32] the piece proceeded to explore three forms of grand strategy the United States may pursue.

Though the United States still possess the capability to choose any grand strategy, *primacy* was dismissed as an option. The United States, under the George W. Bush administration's grand strategy of *primacy*, has lost its authority to be the preeminent leader in the international order. Future power is likely to become widely distributed, and primacy will evoke a counter balance of power led by China. The best option open to the United States will be to fuse both the *liberal internationalism* and *offshore balancing* grand strategies, using the latter strategy only if the former fails. The piece follows the Ikenberry argument that the United States should first seek to renegotiate its position in the liberal international order.[33] All states operating within the open and rules-based system promote the longevity of the order, and the longevity of the order serves to underwrite American security. Nevertheless, the United States must maintain an over-the-horizon military posture; *offshore balancing* allows the United States to militarily protect its vital interest should *liberal internationalism* fail. If the United States follows the fusion strategy as suggested, the longevity and stability of the liberal order is protected, whilst it maintains a *big stick* to protect the order in which it lives.

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[4] *Ibid.*, 160

[5] Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, 18.

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[33] Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, 10.

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