

What is the Best Grand Strategy for the United States in 2012?

Written by Sean Paul Ashley

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SEAN PAUL ASHLEY, AUG 9 2012

A Critical Examination of Barry Posen and Andrew Ross' "Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy"

A state's grand strategy is defined herein as "its foreign policy elite's theory about how to produce national security"[1]. To this end, it "enumerates and prioritizes threats [to interests] and adduces political and military remedies for them"[2]. In assessing the relative merit of a particular grand strategy therefore, its central premises, vis-à-vis what it defines as interests and threats must be established as accurate. Then, the courses of action it proposes must be demonstrated to protect US interests, neutralize threats, and preserve or enhance the global power position of the United States. Of the four grand strategies proposed by Barry Posen et al. this paper judges selective engagement to be the most appropriate grand strategy the US ought to adopt, given the current state of US power position, on two central grounds. First, selective engagement rightly recognizes the strategic centrality of Eurasia, and correspondingly declares Great Power war to be the central threat to the US power position. Second, selective engagement proposes a relatively parsimonious exercise of US power in protection of US interests, necessarily so given the current erosion of US hard power.

The paper shall be structured as follows. First, of the aforementioned strategic alternatives, this paper will disqualify the options at the extremities of the strategic spectrum – neo-isolationism and primacy– out of hand, as, this paper argues, both hew to unsound conceptions of US power position, and, by extension, the actions necessary to preserve same. Having distilled the debate to one between selective engagement and cooperative security, selective engagements will be defended with respect to its definition, prioritization and proposed defense of critical US interests in view of current US power position, in tandem with a critique of cooperative security with respect to same. Finally, caveats and objections to the thesis proposed will be addressed, rebuttals given, and concluding remarks made.

Neo-isolationism asserts the protection of "the security, liberty, and property of the American people"[3]—is the only vital U.S. interest. According to neo-isolationists the absence of a peer competitor requires minimal projection of American power, and minimal US commitment to global society. The central, and fatal, failing of neo-isolationism, is its assumption of American strategic immunity[4]. While it is indeed correct, that no power possesses the current proportions of military power to menace America directly, without near-certain defeat, by and large, critical American interests lay outside American borders. Specifically, these critical interests are the retention of unimpeded access to both strategic resources, namely oil, and waterways that power US industry and commerce. They shall be addressed in order.

First, the preservation of US oil supply has long been a preeminent US interest, as exemplified by Jimmy Carter's 1980 declaration that "any attempt by hostile powers to cut off the flow of Persian Gulf oil would "be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America"[5]. The United States, the worlds largest oil consumer, "imports 60 percent of the oil it consumes"[6], and maintains a substantial military presence in the Gulf to protect its overseas oil preserves[7]. Second, the fact that "65 percent of all oil travels by sea"[8] including "over 95 percent of [US oil]"[9], highlights the critical importance of US control of the sea lanes. Control of strategic waterways acquires further critical salience, when "90 percent of global commerce"[10] also travels by sea, and "40 percent of world

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trade passes through the Strait of Malacca [and] 40 percent of all traded crude oil passes through the Strait of Hormuz"[11]. Therefore, control of the waterways guarantees the safety of the bulk of US, and global, oil and trade, and by extension, much of American and global, commerce and industry. To this end, the US navy maintains naval supremacy by a wide margin, ensuring freedom of the seas, protection of trade routes from blockade, and, conversely, exerting pressure on powers that attempt to undermine US interests, through blockades. In sum, the foundational premise of neo-isolationism is defeated by oil and water – both requiring protracted US projection of power overseas.

Accordingly, a policy of international withdrawal would effectively be domestic suicide. First, it would come at prohibitive cost to industry and commerce. Second, withdrawing US preservation of "freedom of the seas" would severely compromise the already suspect notion of strategic immunity. With powers such as "China, India, Japan, and Russia [possessing] the economic potential to build large blue-water navies in the same league with the United States"[12], diminishing US naval supremacy would likely cede control over the waterways, and their cargo, to one of said powers. Neo-isolationism is therefore untenable: it would needlessly forfeit critical foundations of US power, at prohibitive cost to the US, and result in significant gain for its rivals

By way of contrast, primacy reverses the neo-isolationist agenda entirely, holding "that only a preponderance of U.S. power ensures peace"[13]. Peace necessitates the preservation of "U.S. supremacy by politically, economically, and militarily outdistancing any global challenger"[14]. Yet, primacy fails for one central reason – the erosion of unipolarity. The unipolar candle is being burnt from both ends – with America suffering decline in both its relative and absolute power. They shall be addressed in order.

First, the global "diffusion of economic and technological capabilities"[15], have fueled the "rest of the rest". The now "globally accepted thesis of American decline"[16] has gained ground alongside prospective American rivals, such as the BRICS. With "the National Intelligence Council, a U.S. government think tank, [projecting] that by 2025, China and India will have the world's second- and fourth-largest economies, respectively"[17], unparalleled US economic dominance seems to be approaching its end. Further, potential peer rivals will likely parlay economic growth into accumulating reserves of military power at an accelerating pace, a claim given credence by India's emergence in 2011, as "the world's largest weapons importer"[18], its substantial naval buildup and its predicted "\$80 billion [expenditure] on military modernization programs by 2015"[19]. The diffusion of military expertise wedded to military might ensure that US rivals will be increasingly able to neutralize US advantages, as in the Chinese deployment of naval anti-access and reconnaissance technology. This has exacerbated the secondary problem of America's absolute decline. Having fallen victim to two "debilitating...wars in Afghanistan and Iraq[20]", and suffering from the "financial meltdown of 2008"[21] and the ensuing recession, the United States is both currently economically ailing and "may find it tougher to mobilize the resources needed to stay ahead"[22]. With US certainty of economically ascendant rivals, and equal uncertainty about its own capabilities, pursuit of primacy appears increasingly futile and unfeasible, respectively

Accordingly, this paper dismisses both primacy and isolationism as appropriate grand strategies. Whereas primacy overrates the scope of US power, neo-isolationism underrates the scope of US commitments. The fixity of US overseas interests – control over oil and waterways – and the erosion of global unipolarity must serve as the central bases for any viable grand strategic proposal. With respect to these criteria, this paper shall defend selective engagement as the most viable US grand strategy, against the alternative of cooperative security.

Selective engagement, proceeding from the premise that US resources are scarce, attempts the preservation of peace among the Eurasian great powers, through the discriminatory exercise of US power. The immediate strength of strategic engagement lies in its recognizing, first, the preeminent strategic significance of Eurasia, with regards to the concentration of resources, and second, the exigency of avoiding conflict within. They shall be addressed in order:

With respect to its strategic centrality, Eurasia is far and away the largest reservoir of resource power and plays host to the world's critical naval chokepoints, through which vast quantities of commerce travel. At its Middle Eastern center, it holds roughly three-fourths of the proven and estimated world oil reserves[23], further eastwards, "between

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Suez and Xianjing, and from the Russo-Kazakh border to southern Afghanistan...it contains 41 percent of the world's proven natural gas reserves"[24]. Further, it commands a position of unparalleled naval strategic significance for a vast number of powers: it houses the Strait of Malacca and the Strait of Singapore, through which "Oil bound for China, Japan, and the West Coast of the United States from the Middle East must...transit"[25], as well as the aforementioned Strait of Hornuz. Logically, therefore, Eurasia ought to serve as the central US focus, given the salience of US control over oil and water, and the concentration of both within the continent.

The strategic centrality of Eurasia is further heightened by the presence of America's predominant peer competitors, and the increased demands for energy on the part of the great powers. The expanding appetites of revisionist powers, namely Russia, India and China, with the latter two accounting for "almost half [the forecasted 45%] growth"[26] in global energy demand, in proximity with increasingly prized resources, are a potent mix. Resource competition between the revisionist Eurasian powers threatens to reopen Eurasia as the preeminent grand strategic chessboard of the future – a prospect that the US cannot greet with equanimity. Master of Eurasia, exercising "decisive influence over two of the world's three most economically productive regions, Western Europe and East Asia"[27], is effectively master of the world, and by extension, capable of exercising control over strategic resources the US holds vital. The prospect of a war between great powers, possessing considerable conventional and nuclear might, is nightmarish. Therefore, the expansion and coincidence of revisionist spheres of interest in Eurasia, a point felt most acutely given Russia's 2008 war in Georgia, ostensibly to secure Russian dominance over its southeast energy corridor[28], and the Pacific military buildup commands increasing concern on the part of the United States. In Eurasia, the US faces its most muscular challenges to the bulk of its vital interests.

By way of contrast, cooperative security hews to an expansive conception of US interests, and threats to same. Proposing "that peace is effectively indivisible"[29], requires that "aggression anywhere, and by anyone, cannot be allowed to stand"[30], and to this end, "places a premium on international cooperation, to deter and thwart aggression"[31]. As an American grand strategy, this is untenable on three distinct grounds. First, it fails to draw a crucial distinction between critical and peripheral interests. Second, the US, as mentioned, does not possess the power projection capacity to adequately police the perimeter. Finally, cooperative security places undue faith in the ability of multilateral international institutions to preserve global peace.

With respect to the first failing, the world absent Eurasia is by and large strategically unimportant. For the United States, South America, with the admittedly notable exception of Brazil, has long been an area of strategic calm and unchallenged control. Africa, while likely resource rich, by and large lacks the infrastructure necessary to extract said resources. Eurasia is the object of global attentions by default – it hosts the lion's share of the world's energy, waterways, and aquifers, "most of the world's politically assertive and dynamic states [including] the next six largest economies and military spenders...after the United States"[32], as well as the world's most intractable conflicts. In short, it is a caldron of critical interests and dangerous threats. The world outside Eurasia however, is one of relatively peripheral interests. This is an admittedly contentious claim, as failed states and transnational terrorism have directed US attentions at barren areas such as Somalia and Afghanistan. The porosity of ill-policed borders, and underground economies, prove attractive to illicit transnational organizations, including terrorists (rebuilding weak), "secure financing, recruit soldiers, and plan attacks"[33]. Nevertheless, this paper asserts that the control over strategic resources outweigh the threats of small wars, terrorism and ethnic conflict, simply because these threats are both overblown and unlikely to permanently alter America's global power position.

First, despite the claim that "any arms race or war can produce a world-class disaster"[34], small wars remain precisely that – small. In 2010, "there were 30 armed conflicts in 25 countries. Of the latter, only four have resulted in at least 1,000 battle-related deaths and can therefore be classified as wars [with] the first decade of this century [witnessing] fewer deaths from war than any decade in the last century"[35]. Small wars have thus claimed few casualties in terms of US lives and interests, which leaves little evidence linking small wars and global apocalypse.

Terrorism serves as the definitive example of an overblown threat. Since 9/11, the war in Afghanistan has deprived al-Qaida, the greatest terrorist threat to the US, of physical safe haven, and has claimed roughly 80 percent of al-Qaida's top leadership. With the bulk of Bin-Laden's assets frozen in 2001 and the destruction of core al-Qaida, terrorism by now has been reduced to "a scourge in localized conflicts"[36], rather than a transnational threat.

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Indeed, in 2010, more than three-quarters of all victims of terrorism... were injured or killed in the war zones of Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and Somalia. Further, only 0.1 percent of all casualties of terrorism in 2010 were American[37]. The terrorist threat has, in short, significantly subsided. Alongside the growing strength of great powers, it seems clear that America ought to undergo, and indeed, is undergoing, a shift in strategic focus towards the great Eurasian powers.

Indeed, distinguishing sharply between the centrality of Eurasian great powers, and the relative peripherality of, say, Afghanistan, is not merely a matter of choice. It is, given America current degree of exhaustion, a matter of necessity. The chickens of America's "undisciplined spending habits and open-ended foreign policy commitments"[38] are coming home to roost, with Secretary of Defense Robert Gates [announcing] cuts to the tune of \$78 billion over the next five years. The fact that "the United States [holds] decisive military superiority" has not lent credibility to the claim that the US is "able to wage speedy low-casualty wars"[39]. The protracted insurgencies of Iraq and Afghanistan, the latter spanning the decade, have invalidated said claim. Further, given the domestic situation of US fiscal austerity, it is impractical and implausible to assert that a broadening of US interests is required. To renew spending on increasingly expensive US military dominance, in order to pursue relatively peripheral interests, is to disadvantage the US "at a moment when it is becoming less expensive for other states and actors to challenge the sole superpower"[40]. In the case of the United States, strength everywhere is ultimately strength nowhere.

Advocates of cooperative security would likely attempt to circumvent above criticism by placing faith in US ability to augment its diminished power projection skills through multilateral institutions. Nevertheless, this places undue store in the ability of international institutions adequate to ensure indivisibility of peace. Simply put, cooperative security attempts to erect a unified global order on a house divided. Divisions within the UN Security Council alone, have proven sufficient to disqualify international intervention in Syria. Further, such divisions are unlikely to dissolve, indeed, quite the reverse. Great power politics is already undergoing motions towards balancing and competition, as in the case of the US helmed "Trans-Pacific Partnership... that will open markets dramatically among a group of Asia-Pacific countries"[41] – to the exclusion of China. Indeed, where there is some truth to cooperative security's premise of international cooperation, it lays in the fact great power peace is a prerequisite of cooperative security. Where great power interests diverge, cooperation collapses. Needlessly broadening the scope of certain multilateral institutions does not alter the fact that ultimately, it is the great powers that cast, quite literally, the deciding vote in matters of international intervention.

Accordingly, selective engagement excels in promoting probity, rather than promiscuity exercising of US power towards maintaining peace among the great powers in Eurasia. It outclasses selective engagement in recognizing the preeminent role of Eurasia, as home to the globe's resources, as well as its political and economic centers of gravity, and also, the constriction of US present power position. Nevertheless, there are two caveats that merit rebuttal. First, US interests are, tied to global economic interests at large. The world outside Eurasia is not simply one of small wars and strategic unimportance – it is one across which American economic interests are spread, even in nonindustrial areas. Thus, as in the case of Nigeria, "among the top ten exporters of crude oil to the United States"[42], instability provoked by anti-US rebels "helped propel global oil prices to more than \$50 per barrel"[43]. Nevertheless, the general point remains salient. Where there are resources and conflict, American interests must be protected proportionally.

In turn, this leads to the second caveat– though Eurasia hosts the preponderance of world resources, are fears of great power conflict warranted? Arguments to the contrary are, to some degree, convincing: China seeks to reassure the world of its peaceable rise. However, as the age of unipolarity draws to a close, the actions of great powers belie their supposed intentions. China is intent upon maximizing its naval power; with the construction of "deep-water ports to its west and east, and a preponderance of Chinese arms sale going to Indian Ocean states"[44] it is clear that between India and China, "overlapping commercial and political interests are fostering competition"[45]. Of course, whether such competition will mature to the point of conflict cannot be ascertained for the present. However, where the Eurasian balance of power may be prejudiced and conflict possible, patience is no virtue. The US cannot set store by China's putatively peaceable intentions. If Chinese actions make their intentions ambiguous; the potential for conflict requires preparation for same. Hence, America's immediate agenda ought to be strengthening bilateral relations with its allies in the Pacific entente. For the present, the balance of power must be maintained, and China's

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regional domination, averted.

In conclusion, the Golden Rule of US foreign policy, and one to which selective engagement adheres, is: where interests are not threatened, force ought not be exercised. The US must prioritize the use of its power according to the centrality of its interests, and necessity of preserving same. Only the great powers have the clout necessary to maintain any measure of global security through coordinated intervention, conflict mediation, and cooperation. The necessity of great power peace, in an era of resource conflict and American retrenchment, is more acute than ever.

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Written by: Sean Paul Ashley
Written at: Princeton University
Written for: Hamil A. Unver
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