

Stability and Change in U.S. Grand Strategy

by Barry R. Posen

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Abstract: Since the Global War on Terror (more recently termed the Long War) emerged as the centerpiece of U.S. grand strategy in 2001, the post-Cold War U.S. debate has narrowed significantly. Essentially three alternative strategies now compete for pride of place. Two are variants of a “primacy” strategy; one is a variant of “restraint,” sometimes termed “offshore balancing.” All three strategies take globalization as a given and as a positive development. None specifically connects U.S. military power to globalization. To the extent that globalization can be argued to have negative consequences, restraint offers a different remedy than either version of primacy. This article offers a brief characterization of globalization and speculates on its positive and negative results. The three grand strategies that remain visible in the U.S. public policy debate, and their suggested remedies, are then discussed. Finally, the U.S. military strengths and weaknesses are evaluated in order to gauge which strategy’s remedies are most feasible.

Globalization

In this article, globalization is the umbrella term that captures the current worldwide extent of capitalism and the material facts that have enabled this extension. Today, we see voluminous international trade and investment, as well as extensive global supply chains. This activity is enabled by redundant, reliable, high-capacity, and inexpensive global transportation networks—mainly sea transport, but also air and land. It is also bolstered by capacious, real-time, global means of communication. The positive results of globalization are clear. Labor, capital, and talent have been mobilized on a massive scale. An intense international division of labor has permitted significant efficiencies and high productivity. This has made for high growth in many countries, and remarkably high growth in a few.

Globalization also has produced some negative results. In particular, it has disrupted traditional societies drastically.¹ The general improvement in the welfare of people worldwide has permitted a massive population explosion, which has not yet subsided. Many of these people are moving into large urban areas. Wealth is distributed unevenly in most of these societies, so cities fill up with the poor and the insecure. Millions of people are thus “socially mobilized” for participation in politics. They demand security and good governance, but existing state structures are often overwhelmed. Thus, millions of people are vulnerable to appeals by extremists of every type. The most common sort of appeal mixes traditional nationalist and religious themes and harks back to a better past.

As globalization creates new political demands, the international transportation and communication linkages that facilitate international trade and investment also offer opportunities for organized “antisystem” groups to move people and resources around the globe. These groups may organize domestic opposition to particular governments, as the Tamil Tigers are doing in Sri Lanka. Globalization also provides opportunities for transnational antisystem parties such as Al Qaeda.

The Global Distribution of Military Power

Any grand strategy must address the global distribution of military power. Typically this is measured in terms of gross domestic product, defense spending, military manpower, and major items of military equipment. By most indicators, the United States is by far the greatest military power in the system and arguably has the longest global reach of any power in history. This situation, a result of the Soviet Union’s collapse, quickly came to be seen as natural by many in the U.S. political elite, so much so that reflection on the remaining limits to U.S. military power was rarely seen.²

A qualitative assessment of U.S. military power relative to others is also necessary. Broadly speaking, the United States enjoys what I have called “command of the commons.”³ The United States commands the sea, the air at altitudes above 10,000 feet, and space. If it wishes, it can drive others from these media. There is little that others can do about it. Competition in this realm

¹ Jonathan Kirshner, “Globalization, Power, and Prospect,” ch. 11, pp. 321–38, in Jonathan Kirshner, ed., *Globalization and National Security* (New York: Routledge, 2006), argues that globalization has these disruptive effects. See also Michael Mousseau, “Market Civilization and Its Clash with Terror,” *International Security*, Fall 2003.

² Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, “Competing Visions of U.S. Grand Strategy,” *International Security* (Winter 1996/1997), pp. 5–53, summarizes the immediate post–Cold War grand strategy debate in the United States. In that article the term “neo-isolationism” was used instead of “restraint.” More recently the term “offshore balancing” has gained popularity.

³ Barry R. Posen, “Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony,” *International Security*, Summer 2003, pp. 5–46.

depends on areas of great U.S. superiority—military research and development, extensive economic resources, highly skilled military professionals. It is plausible that U.S. command of the commons has been an important enabler of globalization.

That said, the military advantages of the United States and other western powers diminish in the “contested zones”—the littorals; the skies below 10,000 feet, where cheap anti-aircraft weapons are effective; and on land—wherever the use of infantry is more appropriate than armored vehicles. Though the United States certainly can fight effectively in these zones, the engagements undoubtedly, will be more demanding, and many more nation-states are likely to challenge U.S. forces. The contested zones remain contested because in these areas, the quantity of foot soldiers matters as much—or more—than their quality; background noise reduces the effectiveness of U.S. intelligence-gathering technologies; and the weapons necessary to do damage are cheap and plentiful.

The Two Variants of Primacy

Both mainstream Republican strategic thinkers and mainstream Democratic strategic thinkers have learned to love the preeminent material power position that the collapse of the Soviet Union bequeathed to the United States: primacy has captured the hearts of both parties. For this discussion, I will term the current Bush administration’s strategy “national liberalism” and that of the former Clinton administration “liberal internationalism.” Both agree that the United States faces no peer competitor and that it is difficult, for many reasons, for the other consequential powers to coordinate a coalition to truly “balance” American power—especially American military power. Both strategies are committed to maintaining this preeminent power position for as long as possible.

Both strategies are predisposed to use U.S. power for a variety of positive purposes abroad. Of interest to both parties are failed or failing states or particularly illiberal states, with meaningful military capabilities, in sensitive geostrategic regions (often called “rogues”). To the extent that globalization is partly responsible for these problems, both the national liberals and the liberal internationalists still seem inclined to deal with them in the places they emerge. Democrats came to these beliefs in the 1990s, while most Republicans then demurred.⁴ After 9/11 showed that the perpetrators had profited from Al

⁴ See the final strategy document of the Clinton administration, “A National Security Strategy for a Global Age,” The White House, December 2000. Among other things, the document is noteworthy for its frequent references to globalization. Echoing many of these themes is G. John Ikenberry and Anne-Marie Slaughter, co-directors, “Forging a World of Liberty Under Law: U.S. National Security in the 21st Century,” Final Paper of the Princeton Project on National Security, Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University, Sept. 27, 2006.

Qaeda's cozy relationship with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, Bush administration strategists came to share the view that these kinds of threats are important.⁵ Neoconservatives within the Republican Party were the strongest advocates of this view. Both schools of primacy believe that weak, failing, or rogue states are hatcheries of terrorism, fanaticism, bloodshed, crime, and weapons of mass destruction. These problems in one place are expected to spread to other places. Containment is not an option; failed states or illiberal militant ones, should, if at all possible, be turned into successful democratic states through U.S. advice, cajoling, pressure, and occasionally direct intervention.

The main issue that national liberals and liberal internationalists disagree about in international politics relates to legitimacy. What is legitimacy worth relative to capability? Where does legitimacy come from? For purposes of this discussion, legitimacy means that an action taken by the United States, alone or with its allies, is acceptable to others, regardless of whether they agree with all or even most of the specific reasons for the action. Liberal internationalists believe that legitimacy is worth quite a lot in international politics, and that loss of legitimacy is the same as the loss of material power. Liberal internationalists believe that legitimacy derives from liberal processes in international politics, which means that key U.S. actions, especially large ones, emerge from a process of give and take within distinctly international institutions. The United States typically will have more power than others within these institutions and can usually drive decisions in the direction it wants, if it is clever, patient, and willing to compromise. These small costs are expected to produce large dividends in political support, or at least toleration.

National liberals believe that legitimacy matters less than material power. U.S. interests should not be amended, and U.S. actions should not be delayed to generate legitimacy. Legitimacy is nice to have, but not necessary. In any case, national liberals see legitimacy as arising from American distinctiveness. The United States is seen as the key liberal democratic power. Other states are simply expected to understand this. U.S. actions in international politics enjoy inherent legitimacy. In any case, U.S. actions are intended to produce more liberal democratic states, and this too makes the action more legitimate. Legitimacy matters less to the current crop of Republican strategists than it does to Democratic strategists, and liberal international institutions are not seen as key contributors to legitimacy in any case.

For any future U.S. naval strategy, the similarities across the two parties matter more than the differences. The likely trajectory for U.S. grand strategy is more of the same, but with substantial caution introduced by the Iraq experience. Both versions of primacy need command of the commons, including command of the sea, to preserve the United States as the predominant global

⁵ "The National Security Strategy of the United States of America," The White House, March 2006; and the "Quadrennial Defense Review Report," U.S. Department of Defense, Feb. 6, 2006.

power—this allows the United States to keep the power of other states divided. Both versions of primacy need command of the sea in order to travel where they wish to go to affect failed states or problem states, and that could be anywhere. Both versions of primacy will remain committed, at least in theory, to regime change, which means an enduring requirement for “forcible entry” capability. Finally, both strategies need the U.S. Navy to have the ability to serve as the focus of a large coalition. Republican Party strategists have nothing against military cooperation with other states in a traditional alliance mode—the United States leads and others follow. They value alliances as traditional tools of power.

To the extent that both versions of primacy retain their interest in the internal makeup of other states, both will need to confront the “contested zones.” Iraq ought to have taught a lesson about how difficult these areas can be for the United States. It is too early to tell, however, whether or not this experience will cause a revision of the inclination inherent in both primacy strategies for direct military intervention on land to organize failing or failed states, or to reorganize rogue states.

Democratic party strategists, with their interest in institutions and legitimacy, will be willing to pay some costs in military efficiency to ensure that others participate in agreed military actions. They may need a military that is more willing to “wait” for international institutions to sort out decisions, and more capable of integrating disparate, perhaps even ineffectual, national militaries into a multinational effort in order to ensure legitimacy going into an action. The former would put a higher premium on the ability to enforce sanctions, embargoes, and blockades, and the latter more of a premium on “plug and play” command and control, as well as diverse understanding of other navies and other cultures.

Restraint

Advocates of “restraint” differ significantly from the mainstream views in the two parties.⁶ Many of these people are academics, realist theorists of international politics. Politically they run the gamut from Republicans to Democrats to Libertarians. They are the intellectual heirs of the British Empire’s “offshore balancing” strategy. Advocates of restraint tend to believe that the United States is quite secure, due to its great power, its weak and agreeable neighbors, and its vast distance from most of the world’s trouble, distances patrolled by the U.S. Navy. They see the risk of a global anti-U.S. coalition as small. They see an enduring U.S. interest in ensuring that no great Eurasian superstate emerges through conquest that could rival U.S. power. And they

⁶ Eugene Gholz, Daryl G. Press, and Harvey M. Sapolsky, “Come Home America: The Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation,” *International Security*, Spring 1997, pp. 5–48, offers the clearest statement of this grand strategy, and the most systematic argument supporting it.

would argue that the United States should, through its own internal efforts, match the internal efforts that others make to grow their own power. If this proves impossible, offshore balancers would join with other powers affected by such growth to form a balancing coalition.

These thinkers do not share the view that failed states, or illiberal states with some military power, constitute great threats to the United States, threats that need to be dealt with proactively. To the extent that globalization plays a role in fostering domestic and international radical movements, these strategists are loath to intervene directly in the internal politics of other states to manage these problems. These strategists understand why and how the contested zone is a major enduring military problem for the United States. Rather, they would leverage U.S. command of the sea, air, and space to limit the freedom of movement of troublesome actors. They acknowledge that terrorism is a problem, but the first rule should be to do no harm. They accept that “national-ism” is at least as powerful as “liberal-ism.” Liberal practices and institutions may have universal appeal, but each culture must find its own way to these practices. The surest way for the United States to slow this development is to attach a “Made in the U.S.” label on it, which energizes nationalist resistance. Restraint advocates do not want the United States to confront local nationalisms, if this can be avoided.

The main military capability that advocates of restraint wish to protect is the ability to use the sea lanes to assist allies, in order to protect regional balances of power. On this matter they have no essential disagreement with primacists of either stripe. These strategists believe that strong states are frightened of their immediate strong neighbors, so there is a tendency for regional power balances to form. If they need a little push, the United States should have the capability to provide that push. Countries striving to balance powerful neighbors and desirous of U.S. help will have a strong interest in protecting their own waters and their own ports. Thus, from the point of view of traditional security concerns, the U.S. Navy would concentrate on the open oceans. Given the state of technology, this means the defense of civilian and military transport shipping against submarine threats and against long-range aviation armed with anti-ship missiles.

Conclusion

U.S. naval power is a key enabler of either primacy strategy that the United States could choose. Given the trends in U.S. politics, the capabilities on hand will likely prove as attractive to the next administration as they are to the present one. The trouble in Iraq has put the primacy strategies under an unflattering light, but there is still little evidence that U.S. elites have learned much. Continuity is more likely. We will be able to see, however, the likely direction of U.S. grand strategy in the event of higher costs in Iraq, or reverses elsewhere—restraint.

A strategy of restraint would also include many familiar roles for the U.S. Navy. That said, presuming that future administrations maintain a positive view of globalization, the Navy will also have to deal with some of its negative consequences. Globalization is socially disruptive and makes enemies for the United States. These enemies can take advantage of the relative improvement in the ease of moving people and materiel around the world to do real, if limited, harm to the societies of democratic countries. The Navy may find a crucial mission in watching over the peacetime sea lines of communication to reduce the prospects for those who would use them to harm us and our friends.

