

## A Grand Strategy of Restraint?

by

Colonel David M. Knych  
United States Army



United States Army War College  
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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

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Colonel David M. Knych  
United States Army

Dr. Michael Spangler  
United States Army Peace Keeping and Stability Operations Institute  
Project Adviser

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U.S. Army War College  
CARLISLE BARRACKS, PENNSYLVANIA 17013



## **Abstract**

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Strategy observers and pundits increasingly argue that the current United States grand strategy of maintaining its position of Primacy through an activist foreign policy, robust overseas military presence, and vast network of alliances and security commitments is proving disastrous to American interests. This cohort argues that America is overstretched and in decline, and can no longer afford to maintain its ambitious global reform agenda or meet its security obligations abroad. As such, they advocate for a grand strategy of Restraint, also known as Retrenchment, as way of preserving a narrower, but vital set of security interests by reducing its presence overseas, reducing its security commitments abroad, and shifting burdens to allies and partners. This paper questions 'Restraint' as a viable alternative to the current United States approach in grand strategy and refutes the key arguments and assumptions made by 'Restraint' advocates. In reality, the United States must remain engaged in the world and provide leadership, as it is the only sure way of securing its vital, national security interests.



## **A Grand Strategy of Restraint?**

Grand strategy scholar Barry Posen argues that the current United States grand strategy, what he refers to as *Liberal Hegemony*, has been disastrous to the United States' security interests, calling it "wasteful, costly, and counterproductive."<sup>1</sup> It perpetuates an unnecessarily large and disproportionate military, and a self-interested industrial complex to support it. An advanced and expensive military makes it easy for United States policymakers to resort to force or threat of force when other instruments of national power might be better suited for the circumstances. Thus, says Posen, billions of dollars are spent on unnecessary wars and military interventions.<sup>2</sup> He adds, "The strategy makes enemies almost as quickly as it dispatches them. The strategy encourages less-friendly states to compete with the United States more intensively, while encouraging friendly states to do less than they should in their own defense, or to be more adventurous than is wise."<sup>3</sup> Lastly, Posen argues that the strategy actually induces soft, counter-balancing—"low grade diplomatic opposition"—by some states rather than encouraging those states to bandwagon with the United States.<sup>4</sup> These countries, notably Russia and China, cooperate to constrain the United States and limit its influence in Posen's estimation.

Similarly minded scholars and pundits suggest that a growing inability for the United States to exercise influence in the world warrants a new, less robust grand strategy to cope with a new multipolar world and alleged American decline.<sup>5</sup> It is not just the "rise of China" or the "decline of America", but the overall diffusion of power to growing regional powers such as India, Brazil, and Turkey. While these regional powers will not necessarily overtake American power and influence, their willingness and ability to push back against perceived American interference continues to grow. New emerging

powers will create new opportunities for states to cooperate and limit or counter the influence of the United States.

In light of these observations, Posen and his cohort have outlined a case for a new United States grand strategy based on the tenets of *Restraint*, also known as *Retrenchment*. A grand strategy of *Restraint* would, according to advocates, seek to reduce or eliminate the United States military's overseas presence, scale back or cut its international security commitments, and restrict its efforts to advance a liberal institutional order.<sup>6</sup> The United States would give up on a global reform agenda, significantly reduce the size of its military, and focus on narrow, vital national security interests, which would help the country to preserve its prosperity and security over the long run.<sup>7</sup>

This paper will examine the tenets of *Restraint* and the key arguments proponents use to support their case for its use. Part 1 looks at the purpose of grand strategy and the current U.S. approach. Part 2 assesses the key tenets of *Restraint* and the arguments made by advocates of this strategy.

## Part 1: Background

### Grand Strategy

Grand Strategy can be defined as “a set of ideas for deploying a nation’s resources to achieve its interests over the long run.”<sup>8</sup> “It orchestrates ends, ways, and means,” and aligns a State’s relative power with its interests throughout both peacetime and war.<sup>9</sup> Grand Strategy incorporates not just military power but all elements of national power such as economic, diplomatic, and information. Grand strategic instruments include “diplomacy, propaganda, cultural subversion and demoralization, trade embargoes, espionage and sabotage” according to Colin Gray.<sup>10</sup> Grand strategy

provides guiding, foundational principles which serve to inform and drive the policy decisions of the state over a longer term time horizon, providing “a coherent statement of the concepts” the state utilizes to deal effectively with the full spectrum of national security threats it faces.<sup>11</sup>

The absence of a guiding grand strategy leaves policymakers to respond reactively to problems as they develop. Without a grand strategy, policymakers and leaders must resort to expedient policies which merely provide short term solutions at long term expense. William Martel adds that it is also important that a grand strategy articulate a positive vision and positive principles. It is necessary to assert that vision continuously and publicly, helping to prevent states or armed groups from manipulating “the image of the United States for their own ends.”<sup>12</sup>

The central importance of Grand Strategy is clear. Yet, despite Posen’s exhortation on the negative results of the present United States approach outlined in this paper’s introduction, there appears to be no clear consensus on exactly what the U.S.’ grand strategy currently is or how to best describe it.

### The U.S. Approach

Patrick Porter defines the current grand strategy as *Primacy or Leadership*—a preservation of the United States as the unipolar guardian of an international order, spreading a democratic and market ideology, which seeks to “remake the World in America’s image.”<sup>13</sup> According to Porter, this grand strategy of *Primacy* survived the Cold War and endures today. He claims that while political factions may differ on the ways, the end objective of preserving American *Primacy* has endured since World War II.<sup>14</sup>

Barry Posen describes it more starkly, labelling the current strategy *Liberal Hegemony*. It is hegemonic in that the United States seeks to preserve its “great power advantage” relative to other nations. The United States does this through significant and sustained investment in military power designed to dissuade adversaries or potential challengers from attempting to compete. It is liberal in the sense that the United States attempts to promote its liberal, western values—democratic governance, individual rights, free market economics, a free press, and the rule of law. The promotion of these liberal values abroad is seen as essential to United States security.<sup>15</sup> In this sense, he shares the view with Porter that America seeks to model other nations within its own image.

William Martel contends that the United States really has not had a guiding grand strategy since its Cold War strategy known as *Containment*. He claims current United States policies towards Iran, Russia, and China are the “residue” of Cold War *Containment* strategy.<sup>16</sup>

Meanwhile Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth claim the opposite, arguing that United States grand strategy has actually remained quite consistent since World War II, throughout the Cold War, and remains unchanged to this day. They define the strategy as:

managing the external environment to reduce near- and long-term threats to U.S. national security; promoting a liberal economic order to expand the global economy and maximize domestic prosperity; and creating, sustaining, and revising the global institutional order to secure necessary interstate cooperation on terms favorable to U.S. interests.<sup>17</sup>

In order to guard its security and prosperity, the United States has promoted a liberal economic order and developed close defense relationships with allies and partners in Europe, the Middle East and Asia—building American military bases all over the globe,

patrolling the global commons, and stationing thousands of its troops overseas. They label this strategy *Deep Engagement*. This “fundamental decision to remain deeply engaged abroad” has remained remarkably consistent in their opinion, despite minor differences in policies and approaches between administrations and despite the shifting rationale for the strategy over the years.<sup>18</sup> Further, Brooks, Ikenberry and Wohlforth dismiss the term *Primacy* to describe the current grand strategy, claiming that Primacy (or Leadership) is a descriptive condition, not a strategy.

## Part II: Assessing *Restraint*

### The Concept of *Restraint*

*Restraint* seeks to bridge the gap between the two poles of *Hegemony* and *Isolationism*. It is the retraction of grand strategic commitments of the United States while continuing to maintain at least some engagement and pursuing interests vital to its security.

*Restraint* advocates question whether the United States can continue to bear the costs of its long-pursued, ambitious, activist foreign policy, and its propensity to engage in military interventions abroad. In their estimation, these interventions are not necessarily made to protect vital United States security interests and actually make it less secure. The call for a new approach grows louder in the wake of two costly and exhaustive wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the 2008 global economic crisis, the rise of China and the Asia-Pacific region, and increased instability in a number of regions (e.g. Ukraine, Syria, Libya, Iraq and Yemen).

The tenets of this strategy include, #1: the idea that the United States should give up its agenda focused on global reform and stick to protecting and advancing only a narrow set of national security interests, including: countering terrorism, countering

proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and preventing another power from upending the international order. The military should be downsized and should only be sent to war when truly necessary. And, #2, the United States should reduce its security commitments overseas and remove the large numbers of its military personnel from forward bases.

These appear on the surface as reasonable concepts, yet these two principles possess inherent flaws. Indeed, the arguments used to justify the case for a *Restraint* grand strategy contain non-sequiturs. Plus, as William Martel points out, *Restraint* as a grand strategy is lacking in at least one crucial area. It does not provide a positive set of principles on which to base American decision-making:

The exercise of self-restraint can never be a grand strategy itself. Indeed, a common refrain among scholars and policymakers for some time has been that the United States should exercise greater self-restraint in foreign policy. However, this characteristic alone does not constitute a grand strategy. To be effective a grand strategy must advance positive principles.<sup>19</sup>

Self-restraint cannot provide a coherent basis for grand strategy by simply stating what the United States is against. It must advance the ideas for which the United States stands.

The first component of the *Restraint* case is the idea that the United States should at least reduce, if not give up entirely, its ambitious agenda of global reform. Posen believes that Washington's ambitions have led it to attempt to rescue failing states by intervening militarily in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Libya. These actions were variously undertaken "to defend human rights, suppress undesirable nationalist movements, and install democratic regimes" in his opinion.<sup>20</sup> His conclusion is debatable as these interventions had clear humanitarian components to them as well.

His premise is that to be an effective strategy, *Restraint* merely requires the United States to suspend its values, in particular, defending and advancing human rights. The suggestion is that the United States should simply stand by and do nothing while innocent people are victimized by corrupt regimes, or fall victim to civil war or genocidal policies even when the United States has the capacity to intervene. He draws a hard and fast line here and ignores the fact that there may be times when the United States should or will want to intervene because defending freedom and human rights helps to forestall a greater humanitarian catastrophe. If left unchecked, the ensuing instability may not be in the United States' interests.

United States Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland has warned, "We must avoid the false choice between our values and our interests."<sup>21</sup> In a democracy, it is the values held by the state and its citizens that help define its interests, and sometimes our values are our interests. The United States has an interest in advancing democracy and stability, market economies based on free market principles, and human rights because it helps to preserve its own prosperity and security by combatting instability abroad. If the United States has the capacity (e.g. resources, reliable partners, and domestic and international legitimacy) then there are times when it should intervene, militarily or otherwise, or at least hold open the possibility that it might. To base a grand strategy on the principle that the United States will not intervene except under only the most threatening circumstances, as *Restraint* advocates propose, is simply not realistic for our long-term interests or acceptable to the American public.

Rather than attempting to promote a liberal democratic image, Posen suggests that the United States focus its strategy on just three key areas: "preventing a powerful

rival from upending the global balance of power, fighting terrorists, and limiting nuclear proliferation.”<sup>22</sup> However, bringing stability to unstable regions, and advancing democracy and respect for human rights may be the most effective, least bloody, and least costly means of achieving these very objectives in the long-run. Again, the expansion of democratic and liberal values to other regions of the globe benefits United States interests by making it less likely that these democratic, stable states will rival the United States, but rather they will cooperate with it to combat terrorism and proliferation.

The second component of the Restraint strategy is the idea that the United States should eliminate or significantly reduce its security commitments and presence overseas. Supporters of *Restraint* claim that the present United States grand strategy encourages allies to “free-ride” by dis-incentivizing them to provide for their own defense. Further, these allies put the United States in a precarious position of defending them in the event they provoke a conflict.<sup>23</sup> Some suggest that the United States actually intervenes militarily to defend allied interests rather than its own. Evidence for these claims is scant, and they also ignore the benefits the United States gains from its leadership position. Most importantly, they represent fundamental misunderstandings in the nature of the United States’ relationships with allies and partners in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East.

Let us begin with Europe. *Restraint* advocates call for the removal of all United States forces from Europe, citing the overall wealth and security of the European continent. However, Europe shares many of the same values the United States seeks to promote: human rights, rule of law, democratic governance and free markets. It possesses significant military capabilities relative to the rest of the world, and it is an

economic powerhouse that wields significant soft power. Europe includes the United States' most capable and willing allies and partners. A key reason for this support and cooperation is precisely because the United States is *in Europe*. Presence provides the United States with access, influence, basing rights, and opportunities to train with allies and partners to preserve security. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization has effectively worked to bring stability to central Europe, parts of the Balkans, and potentially to Afghanistan. The Allies did not go to these places of their own volition, they went because the United States led them there in pursuit of common interests. Lastly, the only time the Alliance actually ever invoked Article V (e.g. its obligation to come to the common defense of an ally), was when the United States was attacked on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, making the United States a beneficiary of transatlantic security as well as a guarantor of it.

As one of our largest trading partners, but a continent heavily dependent on Russian energy resources, imagine the potential negative impact on the United States economy if Putin's Russia had a dominant influence in Europe. Incidentally, Posen includes in his list of three focus areas the goal of preventing a regional power from upending the global balance of power. A Russian-dominated Eurasia is clearly not in the interest of the United States, yet if it pulled-out of Europe it might cede greater leadership and influence to Russia, especially as the European Union is distracted by internal economic problems and periodic bouts in which political cohesion is lacking.

With respect to Asia, the United States has managed to build a lasting security order in the region cementing bilateral treaties with Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Thailand. It has managed to incorporate these

partners into an increasingly liberal world economic framework.<sup>24</sup> This benefits the United States economically as well as enhancing its security. The United States' relationships with both Japan and South Korea are of special importance, providing a foothold for the United States' presence and influence in the region. Nye observes that from that position of strength, the United States and its allies Japan, Australia, India and others can engage China and incentivize it to play a responsible role, "while hedging against the possibility of aggressive behavior as China's power grows."<sup>25</sup>

Returning to Posen's argument that the United States should focus narrowly on preventing a rival from upending the global balance of power, fighting terrorists, and limiting nuclear proliferation; it is hard to imagine how it will achieve these vital interests without strong partnerships abroad and without an overseas presence that provides it with basing, access, influence, and opportunities to build the capacities of partners and allies in critical regions. Historically, and not without good reason, a key component of the United States' strategy to counter threats such as these has been its overseas presence and alliances.

Presence and engagement with partners and allies engenders their confidence in the United States and enhances their own capabilities. This, in return, produces *reliable* and *capable* partners. The United States cannot do everything alone, and advocates of *Restraint* engage in wishful, unproven thinking when they suggest that the United States can counter 21<sup>st</sup> Century threats and maintain strong, reliable, and capable partnerships without a presence in these key regions.

### The Case against *Restraint*

In addition to unproven claims, proponents of *Restraint* also use several flawed arguments to justify their proposed shift in strategy. These include:

- The United States is overstretched and can no longer afford its activist foreign policy.
- America is in decline and the world is heading towards multi-polarity.
- A less activist foreign policy prevents Soft-Counter balancing by the likes of Russia and China, who are provoked into impeding the United States' interests through aggressive United States policies.
- The American public favors less presence overseas and less internationalism.

The first argument advocates of *Restraint* make is that the United States is reaching a point of imperial overstretch, and its ambitious grand strategy of *Primacy* and activist foreign policy agenda will only serve to hasten America's decline. International relations scholar Christopher Layne warns of America's "ballooning budget deficits" and argues that the United States' "strategic commitments exceed the resources available to support them."<sup>26</sup> The United States is out of money and can no longer afford to be the hegemonic power and world's policeman. Thus, a grand strategy of *Restraint* is necessary to slow the coming decline and position America to better manage its interests. Charles Kupchan says the United States must be guided from its current state of "overextension" toward a balance "between foreign policy ends and its economic and political means."<sup>27</sup>

However, Joseph Nye points out that defense and foreign policy expenditures over the past several decades have actually declined as a percentage of GDP (See Figure 1).<sup>28</sup> Brooks, Ikenberry and Wohlforth point out that even in 2012 as the United States was still deeply involved in Afghanistan and conducting global counter terrorism operations, the Department of Defense was still only spending 4.5% of Gross Domestic

Product (GDP). This is in essence the historical average over the last 60 years. By comparison, the Soviet Union was spending nearly a quarter of its GDP on defense in its final decades.<sup>29</sup>

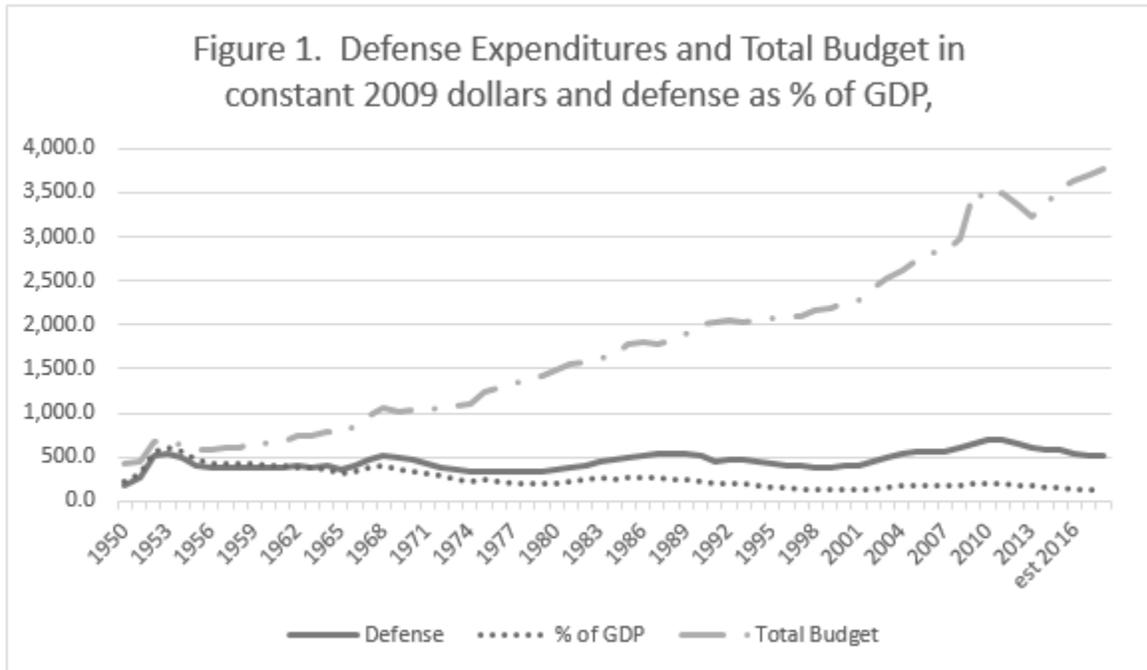


Figure 1. Source: Composition of Outlays: 1940 to 2018, “Historical tables of the Budget of the United States, Fiscal Year 2015 (Washington, D.C.: Office of Management and Budget), Table 6.1: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/Historicals>. (Accessed January 29, 2015).<sup>30</sup>

While the growing national debt is of concern, the above graph illustrates that it is not necessarily defense and foreign policy expenditures that are culprits in producing this debt, at least by historical comparison. The vast majority of the growth in the national debt comes from obligated, not discretionary spending. The United States’ inability to spend within its means and raise revenue commensurate with its desire to spend is the real culprit. Slashing the defense budget will have an impact no doubt, but much greater reform will be necessary to truly get the fiscal house in order.

The claim that *Restraint* will forestall the decline in American power and influence in the world is at best unproved. The suggestion ignores the real possibility that it is the United States' forward leaning, leadership role which produces its relative power and influence globally. A case can be made that the United States' security commitments with allies and partners reduce competition in key regions, secure an open world economy, provide leverage in economic trade, and foster cooperation to counter threats to its interests.<sup>31</sup> If the United States eschewed its active foreign policy and retreated to the relative safety of its borders, it could just as easily hasten the decline of American influence and leadership as forestall it.

A third argument used by supporters of *Restraint* is the contention that as the world becomes ever more multipolar and United States relative power wanes; as globalization erodes the power of States and outdated multilateral institutions; and as the world becomes a messier, more competitive environment; the United States will not be able to afford to be everywhere, influence every outcome or lead in every crisis. And, if the United States continues to pursue an ambitious strategy, it will actually harm its security rather than preserve it. Yet, the United States never has been everywhere, influenced every outcome or led in every crisis. Nye explains,

After World War II, the United States had nuclear weapons and a preponderance of economic power, but nonetheless was unable to prevent the 'loss' of China, to roll back communism in Eastern Europe, to overcome the stalemate in the Korean War, to stop the 'loss' of North Vietnam, or to dislodge the Castro regime in Cuba.<sup>32</sup>

To be sure the world is in a transformative period, but it always been a messy place.

In assessing the current security environment, Brent Scowcroft highlights the role globalization has played in the post-Cold War world, pointing out that it has eroded national borders and will increasingly disrupt the Westphalian, State-centric system.

States will be challenged by outside forces unconstrained by boundaries such as the growth of trans-border Islamic extremism, resource shortages, criminal networks, and identity and cultural conflict.<sup>33</sup> The United States Army's Operating Concept warns that the proliferation of technology and high-tech weaponry will increasingly allow state and non-state actors to employ hybrid strategies to challenge the United States' competitive and technological advantages.<sup>34</sup> Joseph Nye observes, "for all the fashionable predictions of China, India and Brazil surpassing the United States in the next decades, the greater threat may come from modern barbarians and non-state actors."<sup>35</sup> He believes that in an increasingly information-based world, the diffusion of power to non-state actors will be much more dangerous than power transition between states. If this picture of the future security environment is accurate, then there is a strong indication that the world will require more United States leadership, engagement and presence, not less. Cooperation among states as well as international institutions and frameworks will become increasingly important in the years ahead and the United States' network of allies, partners, and multilateral fora will play critical roles.

Proponents of *Restraint* put far too much stock in the idea of America-in-Divide, using the foreign policy "folly" of the 2003 Iraq War and the Economic Recession of 2008 as the primary evidence. According to Stephen Walt, "the twin debacles of Iraq and Afghanistan only served to accelerate the waning of American dominance and underscore the limits of United States power."<sup>36</sup> The role and reputation of the United States as the global economic leader took a severe hit in 2008 when the world economy was brought to its knees by an American economic crisis. This decline necessitates a retrenchment strategy according to its proponents. Indeed, research by MacDonald and

Parent support the argument that states can forestall decline by “paring back military expenditures, avoiding costly conflicts, and shifting burdens on to others.”<sup>37</sup>

However, the argument that America is in a state of terminal decline is thin and appears to be getting more so the further removed the economic crisis and Iraq War become. In comparison to other powers the U.S. remains in an enviable position. The United States has by far the best demographic profile when compared with China, Russia, Europe and Japan, as those countries age much more rapidly than the United States. India is confronted by a youth bulge that will likely prove difficult to manage.<sup>38</sup> Geo-strategically, the United States is relatively secure. The dynamic, free enterprise system enjoyed by the United States is unmatched. Just a few years ago before United States entrepreneurs developed and perfected Hydraulic Fracturing, commonly referred to as “fracking,” nobody could imagine it would be standing on the verge of energy independence and becoming a net exporter of energy resources. Nye points out that even after the 2008 financial crisis and resultant recession, the World Economic Forum still ranks the United States fourth in economic competitiveness, with China ranking 27<sup>th</sup>. The United States is the leader in developing new technology sectors such as information technology, biotechnology, and nanotechnology and American inventors routinely register as many patents per year as the rest of the world combined.<sup>39</sup> While the Iraq War proved costly and the economic recession was a major setback, Nye points out that there was no collapse in confidence in the dollar and bond yields actually rose during the crisis (suggesting confidence in the United States economy). Even now, the United States remains on a steady path towards economic recovery while the

European economy is stagnant and dealing with the Greek debt crisis, and as China's growth is slowing,

A third argument partisans of *Restraint* use to support their case is the idea that the United States provokes other countries into counter-balancing its power. Posen highlights that the United States enjoys an enviable geo-strategic position in the world, protected by two large oceans, two friendly countries bordering north and south, and an arsenal of nuclear weapons to deter any potential rival from invading. "Ironically, however, instead of relying on these inherent advantages for its security, the United States has acted with a profound sense of insecurity, adopting an unnecessarily militarized and forward-leaning foreign policy. The Strategy has generated predictable pushback."<sup>40</sup> This pushback from the likes of Russia and China largely comes in the form of soft counter-balancing, also known as low-grade diplomatic opposition, to thwart United States actions. Posen cites Chinese and Russian interference in the 1999 Kosovo Campaign, 2003 invasion of Iraq, and efforts to slow the West's attempt to isolate Syria as examples. He adds that the United States' activist foreign policy incentivizes Russian and Chinese collusion despite the "long history of border friction, and hostility between the two countries."<sup>41</sup> Additionally, Russia sells modern, high-tech weapons to Beijing.

The counter-balancing claim is easy to make if one ignores the very real possibility that even if the United States had a less aggressive posture and smaller presence overseas, Russia and China might still work to counter United States interests in order to protect and pursue their own agendas. Stephen Walt observes, "If China is like all previous great powers—including the United States—its definition of 'vital'

interests will continue to grow as its power increases, and it will try to use its growing muscle to protect an expanding sphere of influence.”<sup>42</sup> The argument also ignores the likelihood that as the United States retreats from key regions and becomes less supportive towards allies and partners, China, Russia and others might seek to fill the void that is left behind.

Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth dismiss the counter-balancing argument, pointing out that since the end of the Cold War no major powers have attempted to balance against the United States, either by building military alliances or by attempting to match United States military might. Further, the soft-counter balancing cited by Posen is hard to distinguish from normal diplomatic competition and no country is better than the United States at employing soft counter-balancing leverage. The international legal norms and institutions created under its leadership appear tailor-made for use by the United States and its allies and partners.<sup>43</sup>

A final argument made by advocates is that a strategy of *Restraint* is what the United States public desires. Proponents of *Restraint* cite a war-weary public that is increasingly looking inward to problems here at home. According to Charles Kupchan:

The U.S. public—which should not determine foreign policy, but should inform it—is turning inward; a recent Pew survey found that 46 percent of Americans believe the country ‘should mind its own business’ and 76 percent of Americans want us to ‘concentrate more on our own national problems’ rather than problems far afield, by historical standards very high measures of isolationist sentiment.<sup>44</sup>

It is not surprising that after 13 years of war, trillions of dollars spent, and thousands of lives lost, that the public is interested in peace and more focused on solving problems here at home. However, such responses are likely only temporary and similar spikes in public opinion were seen in 1976 following the Vietnam War.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, the

messages of the polls are mixed. In assessing the results of this survey, Lindsay and Krauss of the Council on Foreign Relations point out that although the public may be frustrated with foreign policy, “it isn’t ready to abandon internationalism or to embrace unilateralism.” For instance, when asked about “the role the U.S. should play in the world,” 72 percent opted for one of leadership, and 56 percent of those polled believe the “U.S. should remain the sole military superpower.”<sup>46</sup> Additionally, *Restraint* advocates conveniently forget that Pew research polls showed 72 percent of the American public believed in 2003 that use of military force in Iraq was “the right decision.” Public opinion only gradually moved in the other direction over several years.<sup>47</sup> Lastly, recent polls show that more than 60 percent of Americans believe the United States should send combat troops to Iraq to fight the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).<sup>48</sup>

### Conclusion

Proponents of *Restraint* Grand Strategy are convinced the United States will be more secure under a less ambitious, less activist foreign policy and if it were to close its overseas bases, reduce its security commitments and bring its military forces back home. As outlined in this paper, the pro-*Restraint* crowd makes several arguments to support their case. First, the United States is overstretched and can no longer afford its activist foreign policy. Second, America is on the decline and the world is becoming multi-polar. Third, a less activist foreign policy would prevent countries such as Russia and China from attempting to counter-balance the United States and, overall, would be less provocative towards others. And, fourth, the American public supports fewer presence and interventions overseas and less internationalism. Yet, the concept of *Restraint* and the arguments used to advance them seem to be specious and unproven.

Damagingly, proponents of this strategy often overstate the costs of the current grand strategy and understate its benefits.<sup>49</sup>

Contrary to claims, the United States is not bankrupting itself through its overseas presence, security commitments, and foreign policy. It is securing its economic and security interests, much of it on the cheap, by leveraging its commitments and relationships with an array of allies and partners. The growth in, and size of the United States defense budget has remained remarkably consistent and is relatively low in comparison to the Cold War years. While growing United States debt and deficit spending is a concern, especially long-term, the real problem is in the growth of non-discretionary spending and entitlement programs. Joseph Nye astutely points out that great powers generally crumble or rot from within, as ancient Rome did.<sup>50</sup>

Advocates of *Restraint* rely far too heavily on the idea that the United States is in terminal decline and that the world is becoming multipolar. Even if America does decline, it is likely to be only relative. And, even as the world becomes multipolar, the United States will likely remain the most dominant of those poles. Everything we currently know about the future security environment—diffusion of power to non-state actors, greater proliferation of technology and weaponry, growing trans-border threats—suggests that greater United States leadership and presence overseas, not less, will be needed to lead multilateral, cooperative security efforts to counter them.

Hegemonic powers do not succumb to counter-balancing by others, especially soft-counter-balancing. In fact, the United States mitigates this possibility through the United Nations and numerous multilateral institutions, as well as the use of international law and agreements. Much of these were established under United States leadership

since World War II and have served it well in preserving its interests and advancing its liberal values. The idea that Russia and China would stop attempting to soft-counter balance the United States if it pursued a less activist foreign policy is not plausible. To the extent that other countries try to soft counter-balance is more likely the result of their inability to compete with or balance against the United States.

Finally, the American citizenry must inform United States policy and strategy. Recent polling suggests that Americans are tired of war and would prefer greater emphasis placed on problems here at home. However, that is often the case after prolonged periods of American conflict. It is not hard to find those who believe that Iraq and to some extent Afghanistan were unwise strategic choices. However, the United States could avoid large scale military operations bent on nation building without necessarily adopting a posture of *Restraint*. Moreover, American public opinion can prove fickle and there are already indications that a majority of Americans see merit in sending military forces back to Iraq to fight ISIL.

Proponents of *Restraint* correctly understand that the world is in a transformative period and the strategic security environment is becoming less predictable and increasingly complicated, ambiguous and volatile. This environment will challenge and test American leadership. Their prescription for it is a retraction and retrenchment of American leadership and presence abroad and to forego leading a more liberal world order based on institutions and common values. This is an untested theory at best and based on flawed reasoning. The United States must remain engaged in the world and continue to provide leadership, thereby securing its interests and those of its allies and partners.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Barry Posen, *Restraint: A new foundation for U.S. grand strategy* (Cornell University Press, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition, 2014), 24.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Barry R. Posen, "Pull Back: The Case for a Less Activist Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, (January-February 2013): 2, in Proquest (Accessed February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Stephen M. Walt, "The End of the American Era," *National Interest*, Vol. 116, (Nov/Dec 2011): 7, in Proquest (Accessed February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, "Don't Come Home America: the Case against Retrenchment," *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Winter 2012/13): 7, in Proquest (Accessed February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Posen, "Pull Back: The Case for a Less Activist Foreign Policy," 2.

<sup>8</sup> Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth, "Don't Come Home America: the Case against Retrenchment," 11.

<sup>9</sup> Patrick Porter, "Sharing Power? Prospects for a U.S. Concert-Balance Strategy," Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, April 2013, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy*, (Oxford University Press, 1999): 162.

<sup>11</sup> William C. Martel, "Grand Strategy of 'Restraint,'" *Orbis*, (Summer 2010): 357.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 372.

<sup>13</sup> Porter, "Sharing Power? Prospects for a U.S. Concert-Balance Strategy," 6-7.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>15</sup> Posen, *Restraint: A new foundation for U.S. grand strategy*, 5-6.

<sup>16</sup> Martel, "Grand Strategy of 'Restraint,'" 357.

<sup>17</sup> Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth, "Don't Come Home America: the Case against Retrenchment," 11.

<sup>18</sup> Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, "Lean Forward: In Defense of American Engagement," *Foreign Affairs*, (January-February 2013): 130.

<sup>19</sup> Martel, "Grand Strategy of 'Restraint,'" 367.

<sup>20</sup> Posen, "Pull Back: The Case for a Less Activist Foreign Policy," 1.

<sup>21</sup> Transcript of Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland's comments to the Atlantic Council, November 13, 2013. <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/news/transcripts/transcript-toward-a-transatlantic-renaissance-ensuring-our-shared-future> (Accessed 25 January 2015)

<sup>22</sup> Posen, "Pull Back: The Case for a Less Activist Foreign Policy," 4.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>24</sup> Walt, "The End of the American Era," *National Interest*, Vol. 116, (Nov/Dec 2011): 7.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph S. Nye Jr., "The Future of American Power: Dominance and Decline in Perspective," *Foreign Affairs*, (November/December 2010): 3, in Proquest (Accessed February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

<sup>26</sup> Christopher Layne cited in Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth, "Lean Forward: In Defense of American Engagement," 132.

<sup>27</sup> Charles Kupchan, "Grand Strategy: The Four Pillars of the Future," *Democracy Journal.Org*, (Winter 2012): 12.

<sup>28</sup> Nye, "The Future of American Power: Dominance and Decline in Perspective," 3.

<sup>29</sup> Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth, "Lean Forward: In Defense of American Engagement," 133.

<sup>30</sup> Chart originally developed by Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth, "Don't Come Home America: the Case against Retrenchment," 18.

<sup>31</sup> Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth, "Lean Forward: In Defense of American Engagement," 132.

<sup>32</sup> Nye, "The Future of American Power: Dominance and Decline in Perspective," 2.

<sup>33</sup> Brent Scowcroft, "A World in Transformation," *National Interest*, Vol 119, (May-June 2012): 8.

<sup>34</sup> U.S. Army Operating Concept, Win in a Complex World 2020-2040, October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2014, 15: 2-6.

<sup>35</sup> Nye, "The Future of American Power: Dominance and Decline in Perspective," 1.

<sup>36</sup> Walt, "The End of the American Era," 9.

<sup>37</sup> Paul K. Macdonald and Joseph M. Parent, "Graceful Decline? The Surprising Success of Great Power Retrenchment," *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 4, (Spring 2011): 19.

<sup>38</sup> Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., "The Pentagon's Wasting Assets," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol 88, No. 4, (July-August 2009): 8.

<sup>39</sup> Nye, "The Future of American Power: Dominance and Decline in Perspective," 4.

<sup>40</sup> Posen, "Pull Back: The Case for a Less Activist Foreign Policy," 2.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Walt, "The End of the American Era," 8.

<sup>43</sup> Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth, "Lean Forward: In Defense of American Engagement," 133.

<sup>44</sup> Kupchan, "Grand Strategy: The Four Pillars of the Future," 13.

<sup>45</sup> Pew Research Poll, December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013, <http://www.people-press.org/2013/12/03/public-sees-u-s-power-declining-as-support-for-global-engagement-slips/12-3-2013-2/> (Accessed March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015)

<sup>46</sup> Analysis of the Pew polling data provided by: James M. Lindsay and Rachael Kauss of the Council on Foreign Relations, "The Public's Mixed Message on America's Role in the World," December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013 <http://www.people-press.org/2013/12/03/commentary-by-james-m-lindsay-and-rachael-kauss-of-the-council-on-foreign-relations/> (Accessed March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

<sup>47</sup> Pew Research Poll, March, 19<sup>th</sup> 2008, <http://www.pewresearch.org/2008/03/19/public-attitudes-toward-the-war-in-iraq-20032008/> (Accessed March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015)

<sup>48</sup> Quinnipiac Poll, March 4<sup>th</sup> 2015: <http://www.quinnipiac.edu/news-and-events/quinnipiac-university-poll/national/release-detail?ReleaseID=2171> (Accessed March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015)

<sup>49</sup> Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth, "Lean Forward: In Defense of American Engagement," 130.

<sup>50</sup> Nye, "The Future of American Power: Dominance and Decline in Perspective," 3.

