

Europe and Asia (and China) in U.S. Grand Strategy

Joshua Shiffrin

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Introduction

The United States is undergoing its most intense grand strategy debate since after the Cold War.¹ For the first time in a generation, scholars and policymakers are debating the scope and content of the United States' engagement in world affairs.² It remains unclear how the debate will resolve. Amid the noise, however, it is increasingly clear that secular trends in world politics – particularly the rise of China – are spurring a substantial change in U.S. priorities. Regardless of what emerges, American grand strategy – its foundational 'theory' over how to create security for itself using the political, economic, and military tools at its disposal - will be substantially different than over preceding.

This trend becomes clear when considering the respective roles of Europe and Asia in U.S. grand strategy. As Eurasia's primary cluster of economic and military potential, Europe traditionally enjoyed priority in U.S. policy. Motivated to contain the Soviet Union and Germany – and later with ensuring that the United States could shape European affairs – the U.S. invested vast economic (e.g., the Marshall Plan), military (e.g., stationed military forces), and political resources (e.g., creating and expanding, NATO) in the region after World War Two.³ China's rise, however, is pulling American strategy towards East Asia.⁴ Having previously sought to “engage”

¹ An overview of the debate can be found in Paul C. Avey, Jonathan Markowitz, and Robert J. Reardon, “Disentangling Grand Strategy,” *Texas National Security Review* 2, no. 1 (November 2018): 29-50.

² For a range of strategies, see Loren Schulman, ed., *New Voices in Grand Strategy* (Washington: Center for a New American Security, April 2019).

³ Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁴ Thomas J. Christensen, “Obama and Asia,” *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 5 (October 2015): 28–36.

China, a growing chorus now holds that the U.S. should prepare to repeat the post-1945 European experience and contain a rising PRC.⁵ Of course, not everyone is yet sold on a hawkish stance, with many analysts in the academy and think tank worlds questioning the necessity of Chinese-American competition.⁶ Still, even these alternatives allow that China and East Asia will take precedence in future decades.

Building on this debate, this paper investigates four questions. First, what are the main divides on the respective roles of Europe and China/Asia in U.S. grand strategy? Second, how significant are the envisioned adjustments to U.S. policy in each region? Third, to what extent are the proposed strategies strategically coherent: to what degree do they represent a coherent approach to international relations that accords with what scholars know of international behavior while knitting U.S. ends and means together in integrated fashion? Finally, what circumstances would favor one strategy over another?

Paralleling existing research, I identify four main positions argument in the grand strategy debate. I refer to these as Second Generation Primacy; Deep Engagement; Offshore Balancing; and Restraint. Except for Second Generation Primacy, these labels should be familiar to those following U.S. security discussions.⁷ Further in keeping with existing research, I argue that each option envisions some adjustments to U.S. strategy, though Restraint and Offshore Balancing propose more fundamental changes. The regional focus adopted in this paper, however, also

⁵ On the turn from engagement see Kurt M. Campbell and Ely Ratner, “The China Reckoning: How Beijing Defied American Expectations,” *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 2 (April 2018): 60–70; Peter Mattis, “From Engagement to Rivalry: Tools to Compete with China,” *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 4 (August 2018).

⁶ for overviews, see Barry R. Posen, “The Rise of Illiberal Hegemony: Trump’s Surprising Grand Strategy Letting Go,” *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 2 (April 2018): 20–27; John Glaser, Christopher Preble, and A. Trevor Thrall, *Fuel to the Fire: How Trump Made America’s Broken Foreign Policy Even Worse* (Washington: Cato Institute, 2019), conclusion.

⁷ For use of these terms, see Alexander Kirss et al., “Does Grand Strategy Matter?,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (2018): 116–32; Hal Brands, “Choosing Primacy: U.S. Strategy and Global Order at the Dawn of the Post-Cold War Era (February 2018),” *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 2 (February 2018): 7–33.

highlights underappreciated elements of overlap in several of the strategies. Most importantly, Second Generational Primacy and Offshore Balancing embrace similar recommendations for East Asia and China. A regional approach, moreover, showcases internal contradictions and potential problems for each option. These problems loom largest for Second Generation Primacy, which loses coherence when its implications are considered in detail but each of the others also confronts problems. I return to these points below.

The remainder of this paper proceeds in five sections. Following this Introduction, I briefly describe the evolution of the United States' postwar grand strategy. Next, I identify the main contours in the strategy debate. I subsequently classify the envisioned the scope of the envisioned adjustments, and use international relations theory and current U.S. policy debates to dissect the coherence of the envisioned strategies. Finally, I conclude by identifying the strategic conditions that would aid or undermine each strategy's appeal.

Postwar U.S. Grand Strategy: A Brief Review

Since 1945, the United States has effectively had two grand strategies. During the Cold War, U.S. policy centered on containing the Soviet Union.⁸ Owing to its economic and military potential, Europe – especially *Western* Europe – was central to this struggle. Indeed, despite occasional excursions in Asia, Latin America, and Africa, U.S. policy focused on the security of Western Europe to foreclose the possibility of Soviet gains in a region that (so the argument went) might shift the balance of power against the United States.

This strategy changed after the Cold War. Following a brief debate inside the H.W. Bush and Clinton administrations, American policymakers quickly embraced a primacist grand

⁸ John L. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War*, Rev. and expanded ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

strategy.⁹ Different policymakers pursued primacy using different means: members of the Clinton and Obama administrations, for instance, were more willing to seek U.S. dominance by working with multilateral organizations, whereas the George W. Bush administration sought a muscular unilateralism.¹⁰ Regardless, American leaders resolved to sustain the U.S. as the world's sole great power.

The scope of American efforts expanded accordingly. Western Europe remained important, but the U.S. increased its footprint by enlarging NATO while variously engaging or isolating Russia.¹¹ It also devoted additional attention to Asia, driven by the region's mounting importance with – first – the region's economic growth and – subsequently – China's rise as a near-peer competitor. To this end, the 1990s-2010s saw the United States expand regional ties via revamped alliances with Japan and South Korea, alignment with India, and attempts to engage China.¹² The U.S. then backed these commitments with an expanded military presence as policymakers aimed to cap the U.S. presence in Europe for the sake of East Asia.¹³ This trend continues today: despite efforts following the 2014 Russian intervention in Ukraine to revitalize the U.S. presence in Europe, Asia continues to receive the lion's share of new equipment, funding, and attention.¹⁴

The Contemporary Strategy Debate

⁹ On the post-Cold War debate, see Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, "Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy," *International Security* 21, no. 3 (Winter, -1997 1996): 5–53.

¹⁰ Barry R. Posen, "Stability and Change in U.S. Grand Strategy," *Orbis* 51, no. 4 (October 2007): 561–67; Brands, "Choosing Primacy."

¹¹ An overview of these efforts is in William Hill, *No Place for Russia: European Security Institutions Since 1989* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

¹² See, e.g., Joseph S. Nye, "The Case for Deep Engagement," *Foreign Affairs* 74, no. 4 (1995); Ashley J. Tellis, "Unity in Difference: Overcoming the U.S.-India Divide," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, January 21, 2015, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2015/01/21/unity-in-difference-overcoming-u.s.-india-divide>.

¹³ Nina Silove, "The Pivot before the Pivot: U.S. Strategy to Preserve the Power Balance in Asia," *International Security* 40, no. 4 (April 2016): 45–88; Robert S. Ross, "The Problem With the Pivot," *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 6 (December 2012).

¹⁴ Thanks go to Elbridge Colby for assistance on this point.

As the above suggests, the primacist consensus has proven remarkably resilient.¹⁵ Even recognition starting around 2015 that U.S. efforts had largely failed and the country faced ostensible “revisionist” great powers in China and (to a lesser extent) Russia has not affected the impulse, as strategists call for confronting said challengers to sustain U.S. preeminence.¹⁶ Still, the growing mismatch between the ends sought in U.S. policy and the means available to do so – coupled with costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and growing domestic demands – has spurred a debate over the future of U.S. grand strategy. Four positions are present in this conversation; I refer to these as Second Generation Primacy, Deep Engagement, Offshore Balancing, and Restraint. Each envisions different roles for Europe and Asia in U.S. policy, but consistent across all is acknowledgment that East Asia should take precedence over Europe in U.S. priorities.

Second Generation Primacy

Second Generation Primacy derives from the United States’ post-Cold War efforts. However, where post-Cold War primacy sought (and failed) to simply *maintain* American unipolarity, Second Generation Primacy looks to *reclaim* American preeminence.¹⁷ The effort thus contains aspirational elements that post-Cold War primacy lacked. To achieve these ends, proponents argue the U.S. must (1) prevent further losses to its power position, and (2) compete

¹⁵ Patrick Porter, “Why America’s Grand Strategy Has Not Changed: Power, Habit, and the U.S. Foreign Policy Establishment,” *International Security* 42, no. 4 (May 2018): 9–46.

¹⁶ Donald Trump, “National Security Strategy of the United States of America” (Washington: The White House, 2017), 27, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>. For broader recognition, see Emma Ashford and Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, “Trump’s National Security Strategy: A Critics Dream,” *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 2 (February 2018): 138-144.

¹⁷ As a group of policy analysts and former policymakers recently argued, the United States must focus on regaining the ability to “reverse its rivals’ momentum across [. . . a] spectrum of competition;” National Defense Strategy Commission (NDSC), *Providing for the Common Defense: The Assessments and Recommendations of the National Defense Strategy Commission* (Washington: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2018), vii.

with Russia and China building up and containing them to the point of their surrender or collapse;¹⁸ some also advocate utilizing international institutions and diplomacy to legitimate U.S. efforts, curtailing Russian and Chinese growth, and/or seeking regime change.¹⁹

Although often framed as a strategy aimed at both China and Russia, most analysts agree that China presents the larger problem.²⁰ As the 2018 National Defense Strategy declared, China “seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future,” whereas Russia primarily challenges Europe’s periphery.²¹ Reflecting this emphasis, the United States is redeploying air and naval forces from Europe to Asia, developing new military platforms and operational concepts optimized for the Asia-Pacific region, courting new allies, and attempting to coordinate the activities of existing partners such as South Korea and Japan.²² The objective seems to be to erect a sufficiently robust containment perimeter that China is hemmed in and either overawed or exhausted. This is not to

¹⁸ Analysts use different terms to capture the trend, but the basic idea is the same. Thus, Zach Cooper and Hal Brands argue the U.S. should “build a coalition of allies and partners strong enough to deter or simply hold the line against Chinese revisionism until such a time as the Chinese Communist Party modifies its objectives or loses its grip on power [. . .] It would lead the coalition in efforts to reduce China’s geopolitical, economic, and ideological influence; weaken its power potential; and exacerbate the strains under which Beijing operates;” Hal Brands and Zack Cooper, “After the Responsible Stakeholder, What? Debating America’s China Strategy,” *Texas National Security Review* 2, no. 2 (February 2019): 80. Similarly, Thomas Wright proposes that the United States “is in a competition with Russia and China for the future of the international order” in which “it is not possible to fashion win-win outcomes”: defending U.S. interests means triumphing over Russia and China; Thomas Wright, *All Measures Short of War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 189. Meanwhile, the U.S. National Defense Strategy echoes these proposals in asserting that the U.S. will compete with Russia and China until the states are ready to cooperate on the basis of “a [U.S.] position of strength and based on our national interests;” Department of Defense, “*National Defense Strategy 2018*, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf> 4. See also Aaron Friedberg, “Competing with China,” *Survival* 60, no. 3 (2018): 38; Wright, *All Measures*, chap. 7; NDSC, *Providing for the Common Defense*, ix.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Aaron Friedberg, “Competing with China,” *Survival* 60, no. 3 (2018): 26-27; Wright, *All Measures*, 206.

²⁰ See, e.g., Hal Brands, “The Lost Art of Long-Term Competition,” *The Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (Winter 2019): 47; NDSC, *Providing*, 7.

²¹ *National Defense Strategy*, 2.

²² Congressional Research Service, “China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities – Background and Issues for Congress,” August 30, 2019, RL33153, 19; Sam LaGrone, “Work: Sixty Percent of U.S. Navy and Air Force Will Be Based in Pacific by 2020,” *USNI News*, September 30, 2014; Department of Defense, *Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy* (Washington: Department of Defense, 2015), 20-29.

argue Europe is ignored by Second Generation Primacy.²³ Rather, proponents call for deploying infantry and armor units to Eastern European states threatened by Russia; The calculation seems to be that the U.S. can allocate *ground* forces to Europe, while otherwise sending *air and naval* power to Asia.²⁴ Reflecting the inversion of Europe and Asia in U.S. priorities, however, strategists are also exploring ways for the United States' European allies to assist against China.²⁵ Combined, Second Generation Primacy thus blends Cold War-era containment with post-Cold War primacy, leveraging existing U.S. military capabilities and political ties in an attempt to reclaim unipolarity.

Deep Engagement

Where Second Generation Primacy seeks to overcome Russia and China to dominate Europe and Asia, Deep Engagement calls for a more limited exercise in maintaining “stability” in those regions. Put differently, where primacists look to garner U.S. preeminence, Deep Engagement focuses more on preventing crises and major power conflict in geopolitically important regions.²⁶ The strategy therefore implicitly accepts that U.S. power may erode, but does not view these losses as inherently problematic. To do so – as Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth offer – the United States is advised to maintain existing alliances; forward deploy

²³ As Wright argues, East Asia and China should be given equal weight to Europe and Russia; see Wright's comments in Sergey Aleksashenko et al., *Restoring Equilibrium: U.S. Policy Options for Countering and Engaging Russia* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2018), 7.

²⁴ Aleksashenko et al., *Restoring Equilibrium*, 8; Alexander Lanoszka and Michael Hunzeker, *Conventional Deterrence and Landpower in Northeastern Europe* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2019); NDSC, *Providing*, ix, 3n1.

²⁵ Matthew Karnitsching, “For NATO, China is the new Russia,” *Politico*, April 5, 2019.

²⁶ The canonical statement on Deep Engagement remains Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, *America Abroad: The United States' Global Role in the 21st Century* (Oxford University Press, 2016); for earlier treatment, see Robert J. Art, “Geopolitics Updated: The Strategy of Selective Engagement,” *International Security* 23, no. 3 (1999): 79–113.

military forces to reassure partners and deter adversaries; and use the resulting security ties to craft institutional and economic relationships that reinforce U.S. oversight.²⁷

What does this mean at the regional level? As U.S. goals are primarily defensive, Deep Engagers suggest that Europe is basically secure: with Russia a shadow of the former Soviet Union, the United States can focus on sustaining ties to the area via NATO, deploy rotational military assets to backstop states immediately threatened by Russia, and invest limited sums in acquiring additional military assets to deter Russia in peacetime and which could aid in wartime resupply.²⁸

China, in contrast, merits additional attention. For sure, Deep Engagers break with Primacists in arguing that unipolarity is not yet dead; hence, competing with China loses its urgency. Nevertheless, Deep Engagement proposes a gradual military build-up to (1) contain China within its existing security perimeter while reassuring nervous regional actors like Japan, and (2) deter any Chinese efforts at military expansion.²⁹ Still, where Second Generation Primacists view this effort as a way of winnowing down China's position, Deep Engagers present these steps as maintaining a status quo that is only slowly changing. Hence, where Second Generation Primacists often marry their political-military plans with calls for strategic competition, Deep Engagement implies sustaining existing economic and institutions relationships even if they

²⁷ Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad*, chap. 5; see also Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, "Lean Forward," *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 1 (February 2013): 136–39; Bryan McGrath and Ryan Evans, "American Strategy and Offshore Balancing by Default," *War on the Rocks*, August 27, 2013, <https://warontherocks.com/2013/08/the-balance-is-not-in-our-favor-american-strategy-and-offshore-balancing-by-default/>.

²⁸ Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, "Don't Come Home, America: The Case against Retrenchment," *International Security* 37, no. 3 (December 2012): 35; for related discussion, see Michael Beckley, *Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World's Sole Superpower* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 138–52.

²⁹ In addition to the sources above, see Kurt Campbell and Jake Sullivan, "Competition with Catastrophe," *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 5 (September/October 2019): 96–110.

disproportionally benefit China (and/or Russia).³⁰ In sum, Deep Engagement accepts the potential loss of U.S. dominance provided world politics remain free of major conflicts in the interim.

Offshore Balancing

Despite differences, Second Generation Primacy and Deep Engagement advocate an activist U.S. grand strategy. In contrast, Offshore Balancing represents a less forward-leaning approach. Offshore Balancing shares with Deep Engagement the argument that the United States should prevent great power threats to Europe or Asia. Unlike Deep Engagement, however, it proposes that the U.S. should first rely on local actors to check potential threats, only intervening if local efforts fail.³¹

In Europe, this represents broadly good news for the United States since – as John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt write – “no potential hegemon” is around³² That said, Asia is a potential problem owing to China’s economic and military growth. Mearsheimer and Walt, for instance, argue that “if China continues its impressive rise, it is likely to seek hegemony in Asia;” Sebastian Rosato and John Schuessler allow that “if China were to continue to grow economically, convert its wealth into military power, and show any sign of wanting to use that power [. . .] we would recommend that the United States balance against it;”³³ Christopher Layne argues that

³⁰ Along similar lines, see Paula Dobriansky, Andrzej Olechowski, Yukio Satoh, and Igor Yurgens, “Engaging Russia: A Return to Containment?” *Trilateral Commission Task Force Report 2013-2014*, May 15, 2014, http://www.trilateral.org/download/doc/TF_Russia_for_WEBSITE_final_15_May_2014.pdf, 17

³¹ John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, “The Case for Offshore Balancing,” *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 4 (August 2016): 70-83; Christopher Layne, “Offshore Balancing Revisited,” *The Washington Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (June 2002): 233-48; Reginald McClam, *Balancing on the Pivot: How China’s Rise and Offshore Balancing affect Japan’s and India’s Roles as Balancers in the Twenty-First Century* (Montgomery, AL: School of Advanced Air and Space Studies, 2017).

³² Mearsheimer and Walt, “The Case for Offshore Balancing,” 81.

³³ Mearsheimer and Walt, 81; Sebastian Rosato and John Schuessler, “A Realist Foreign Policy for the United States,” *Perspectives on Politics* 9, no. 4 (December 2011): 813.

China's rise is pushing the United States' to counterbalance.³⁴ After all (as Walt separately explains) China may be poised to surpass other Asian actors in power potential and swamp local counter-balancing options. Likewise, organizing a regional alliance against China may be difficult as potential counter-balancers "do not always get along." It therefore falls to the United States to offset China's rise.³⁵

Accordingly, Offshore Balancing advocates an American exit from Europe to free-up resources for use against China and an expanded U.S. presence through Asia.³⁶ This does not mean abandoning Europe entirely: Offshore Balancing recognizes the importance of retaining a residual diplomatic presence to monitor developments and ensure that local actors indeed uphold regional balances. Still, the locus of American activities would move east. In particular, the United States may need to undertake a military build-up in Asia to reassure partners, contain further Chinese expansion, and ultimately prevent China from dominating the region.³⁷ The net effect could be an open-ended American commitment to the region, potentially resulting in a Cold War-esque standoff that might continue until if and when a regional balance was restored.

Restraint

The last grand strategy discussed is Restraint.³⁸ Although often conflated with Offshore Balancing, Restraint actually represents a separate approach built on distinct assumptions

³⁴ Christopher Layne, "The (Almost) Triumph of Offshore Balancing," *The National Interest*, January 27, 2012, <https://nationalinterest.org/commentary/almost-triumph-offshore-balancing-6405>.

³⁵ Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 269.

³⁶ Walt, *Hell of Good Intentions*, 269; Layne, "(Almost) Triumph."

³⁷ Drawing down in Europe might indirectly help this policy by dividing Russia from China and potentially enabling U.S.-Russian partnership against the PRC; Rosato and Schuessler, "Realist Foreign Policy," 813.

³⁸ See Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Cornell University Press, 2014); Eugene Gholtz, Daryl G. Press, and Harvey M. Sapolsky, "Come Home, America: The Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation," *International Security* 21, no. 4 (Spring 1997): 5-48.

regarding world politics and judgments of the contemporary security environment.³⁹ In particular, while Restraint advocates acknowledge China's rise in line with Offshore Balancers, they differ in concluding that local states threatened by China's rise can go a long ways towards providing for their – and, by extension, regional – security even without American assistance; in a phrase, the system is defense-dominant. Hence, as Posen writes, “a very great shift in China's regional and global influence is necessary to affect the United States,” in large part because local actors can and will balance any Chinese threat.⁴⁰ As for Europe, Restrainers recognize tensions with Russia, but counter that a rough balance exists among Russia, Germany, Britain, and France. None is poised to dominate the continent, just as defense dominance – combined with the presence of nuclear weapons – mean deterrence and stability should be viable indefinitely.⁴¹

Restraint thus calls for the United States to draw down in both Europe and Asia.⁴² In Europe, the United States would winnow down its commitment to little more than a vestigial pledge to consult in a crisis while empowering the European Union to handle hard security tasks. As for Asia, the United States would encourage states like India and Japan to act in line with their natural interest and balance China's rise. American alliances would therefore be reduced, and their terms adjusted to give local actors primary responsibility for regional developments. The United States might pair this with limited military commitments to, for instance, maintain the sea lines of communication, but would stop far short of the military effort envisioned even by Offshore

³⁹ Among works conflating the strategies are James Holmes, “Why Offshore Balancing Won't Work,” *The National Interest*, July 18, 2016, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-offshore-balancing-wont-work-17025?page=0%2C1>; Evan Montgomery, “Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific,” *International Security* 38, no. 4 (Spring 2014): 118-121; Brands, *Limits of Offshore*, 1-2.

⁴⁰ Posen, *Restraint*, 96.

⁴¹ Joseph Parent and Paul MacDonald, “The Wisdom of Retrenchment: America Must Cut Back to Move Forward,” *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 6 (December 2011): 42; Posen, *Restraint*.

⁴² Glaser, Preble, and Thrall, *Fuel to the Fire*, 174-175.

Balancers.⁴³ Restraint, in short, is just that: a plan for the United States to curtail engagement in Europe and Asia, relying on and incentivizing regional actors to craft local balances of power.

Continuity and Change in U.S. Grand Strategy

Again, it remains unclear whether and which of these grand strategies will triumph in the contemporary debate. Nevertheless, one overarching theme is clear: across the debate, the respective roles of Europe and Asia have inverted in terms of U.S. priorities. Offshore Balancers and Second Generation Primacists are most explicit on this point, but even Restraint acknowledges the issue in recommending East Asia as the one region where a limited U.S. security presence continues.

The primary driver of this trend is also clear: although the gradual shift of economic power from Europe to Asia would have reoriented U.S. priorities to some degree, China's economic-military growth makes it the most likely candidate to seek regional hegemony and so the most sustained threat to U.S. security.⁴⁴ Europe, in contrast, lacks a comparable threat. Baldly stated, China's rise means that, for the first time in modern history, American efforts are moving away from Europe and towards East Asia.

Still, the strategies under discussion suggest different degrees of policy change and continuity. For sure, classifying strategic adjustment is difficult: as Colin Dueck observes, the best one can often do is make rough judgments over the relative scope of different adjustments on

⁴³ Posen, *Restraint*, 98–100; Parent and MacDonald, “The Wisdom of Retrenchment,” 42–43; Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin and Sameer Lalwani, “It’s a Commons Misunderstanding: The Limited Threat to American Command of the Commons,” in *A Dangerous World?: Threat Perception and U.S. National Security*, ed. Christopher A. Preble and John Mueller (Cato Institute, 2014), 223–44.

⁴⁴ Even analysts skeptical of China's rise acknowledge this potential Stephen G. Brooks and William C Wohlforth, “The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-First Century: China's Rise and the Fate of America's Global Position,” *International Security* 40, no. 3 (Winter 2015-2016): 7–53.

issues such as defense spending and strategic commitments.⁴⁵ Building on Dueck's insight, the envisioned adjustments can be compared by asking three questions of the proposed U.S. course in both across Europe and Asia. First, are alliances expanded or contracted? Second, are military forces added to or withdrawn from different regions? Finally, does the United States seek to maintain, increase, or decrease the influence it exerts over key geopolitical actors? However, where Dueck assesses changes qualitatively, I evaluate and classify the envisioned adjustments on a four-value scale ranging from "minimal/none" (i.e., maintaining current U.S. efforts), "moderate" (seeking mid-range changes to extant policies), "substantial" (calling for substantial shifts in U.S. policy), and foundational (advocating novel or seminal adjustments to U.S. strategy).

⁴⁵ Colin Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders: Power, Culture, and Change in American Grand Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 11–12.

Table 1: Comparing Envisioned Adjustments per U.S. Grand Strategy Options

		Strategy							
		Second Generation Primacy		Deep Engagement		Offshore Balancing		Restraint	
		<i>Europe</i>	<i>Asia</i>	<i>Europe</i>	<i>Asia</i>	<i>Europe</i>	<i>Asia</i>	<i>Europe</i>	<i>Asia</i>
Categories	Alliances	<u>Minimal-Moderate</u> : maintain NATO and continue its expansion	<u>Moderate-Substantial</u> : accelerate and expand efforts at creating anti-China coalition	<u>Minimal</u> : maintain existing NATO alliance	<u>Minimal</u> : maintain and consider expanding alliances in Asia	<u>Foundational</u> : eliminate existing alliances in Europe	<u>Moderate-Substantial</u> : accelerate and expand efforts at creating anti-China coalition	<u>Foundational</u> : eliminate existing alliances	<u>Substantial</u> : reduce and adjust to encourage local states to provide for security
	Military Presence	<u>Substantial</u> : deploy significant forces into Europe to overmatch Russia	<u>Substantial</u> : accelerate military buildup against the PRC	<u>Minimal</u> : maintain limited military presence	<u>Moderate</u> : begin gradual military build up against China	<u>Foundational</u> : withdraw U.S. forces from Europe	<u>Substantial-Moderate</u> : accelerate military buildup against the PRC using resources reallocated from Europe	<u>Foundational</u> : withdraw U.S. forces	<u>Foundational</u> : withdraw most U.S. military forces, keeping at most residual presence
	Control	<u>Minimal</u> : maintain U.S. efforts to shape behavior of European partners and allies; isolate Russia	<u>Moderate</u> : maintain efforts to shape behavior of Asian allies and partners; continue efforts to prevent Chinese aggrandizement; increasing European presence in Asia to augment U.S. capabilities	<u>Minimal</u> : continue present efforts to act as organizer of European security	<u>Minimal</u> : maintain efforts to shape behavior of Asian allies; continue efforts to prevent Chinese aggrandizement	<u>Foundational</u> : turn European security over to local actors	<u>Moderate</u> : direct activities of anti-China coalition to assuage intra-coalition tensions and maximize U.S. oversight	<u>Foundational</u> : turn European security over to local actors	<u>Foundational-Substantial</u> : minimize U.S. involvement in regional politics

Table 1 reports the results. Overall, Deep Engagement seeks the least change to existing policies: although proposing a moderate military build-up against China, it otherwise aims to accept current commitments and military balances. Conversely, other options suggest significant strategic adjustments. Insofar as post-Cold War primacy failed to maintain unipolarity, Second Generation Primacy paradoxically demands substantial shifts in U.S. military, alliance, and political efforts in both Europe and Asia; in pursuing dominance, the United States would commit itself to even costlier and more expansive policies. Strikingly, Offshore Balancing shares some similarities with Second Generation Primacy as, in advocating reorienting U.S. policy from Europe towards Asia, both camps advocate a fundamental increase in U.S. efforts in the Asia-Pacific.

Where Offshore Balancers and Second Generation Primacists differ, however, is Offshore Balancers' call for limiting U.S. efforts in Europe. In this, they dovetail with Restrainers – who, however, additionally call for fundamentally reducing U.S. activities in Asia. Indeed, by these metrics, Restraint is the most radical of all the grand strategies as it seeks fundamental changes to U.S. policy in both Europe and Asia.

Assessing the Options

To what extent do the strategies present coherent, logical, and well-integrated approaches to guide U.S. policy? At root, grand strategy attempts to knit together the ends and means of a state's security efforts. This requires not only setting objectives, but working within fiscal, military, diplomatic, and strategic limitations.⁴⁶ Any judgment of the respective coherence of the strategic options is necessarily speculative. Still, a combination of international relations theory and the terms of the strategies themselves highlight problems – though they vary in scope and extent – with each option.

Second Generation Primacy

Second Generation Primacy is the least coherent of the options. The strategy is poised to be very expensive, requiring the United States to spend substantially more on defense than at present. Considering the United States already runs large budget deficits – with the military constituting the largest portion of discretionary spending – it is unclear where the needed funds

⁴⁶ Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), chap. 1; Hal Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy?: Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

should come from.⁴⁷ As importantly, the strategy risks generating severe geopolitical problems. The competitive policies at the strategy's core are largely aspirational, with advocates lacking a logic explaining how U.S. pressure will lead targeted states to decline or surrender. Indeed, states tend to balance when facing threats, and the United States – in seeking to reclaim its unipolar position – would effectively declare itself a threat to highly capable countries: Russia and China for sure, and potentially even American allies worried of being dragged into conflicts of limited interest.⁴⁸ In response, Russia and China may adopt competitive policies of their own, just as allies may loosen the bonds tethering them to the United States and so hinder the United States' ability to mobilize for action in Europe or Asia.⁴⁹ Ultimately, the prospective tensions inherent in this approach would put American security at risk. It is a recipe for open-ended competition for unclear ends, using contradictory means, and which is likely to undermine the security the United States already enjoys.

Deep Engagement

Deep Engagement performs better than Second Generation Primacy but also contains potential problems. Unlike Second Generation Primacy, the strategy may be fiscally sustainable.⁵⁰ As it essentially calls for cooperation among states favoring the status quo in Europe and Asia, it also has a natural constituency. That said, Deep Engagement contains three potential dilemmas.

⁴⁷ As the Government Accountability Office notes, already “by 2028 the government will spend more on net interest than it will spend on either defense or nondefense discretionary outlays.” Increasing defense spending will only exacerbate this problem, ironically creating long-term pressure to cut spending overall; Government Accountability Office, *The Nation's Fiscal Health: Action is Needed to Address the Federal Government's Fiscal Future*, June 2018, GAO-18-299SP, 24.

⁴⁸ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co, 1979); Eric J. Labs, “Do Weak States Bandwagon?,” *Security Studies* 1, no. 3 (1992): 383–416.

⁴⁹ On efforts by American allies to limit their exposure to US actions, see Christopher Layne, “The Unipolar Illusion Revisited: The Coming End of the United States' Unipolar Moment,” *International Security* 31, no. 2 (Autumn 2006): 7–41.

⁵⁰ Again, though, long-term deficits may limit what the U.S. can spend on security.

First, despite the strategy's emphasis on "stability," this focus elides that one state's stability is another state's revisionism.⁵¹ Consider contemporary Asia: despite linking Japan to the United States to limit a China-Japan security spiral, the result joins U.S. power to Japan's and requires the United States to take many Japanese interests as its own.⁵² As a result, it changes regional conditions and can appear threatening to actors such as China. Stability seeking, in other words, is not value-neutral. Along the way, U.S. policy – second – gives allies leverage over its behavior, potentially entrapping it in disputes that the United States might otherwise avoid.⁵³

Finally, there is a question over long-term viability. Although Deep Engagement rejects that China is soon to be an American peer competitor, even supporters of the strategy acknowledge that China's rise is real and ongoing.⁵⁴ If so, however, then American efforts to "stabilize" Asia by reassuring allies and dampening local security spirals may become increasingly expensive and politically risky. This problem also interacts with the first issue noted above: insofar as Deep Engagement injects the United States into regional politics in ways that threaten China, it encourages counterbalancing that makes these risks more likely to be realized. Combined, Deep Engagement may be effective in the near-term yet lose coherence as the distribution of power shifts.

Offshore Balancing

What of Offshore Balancing? Although advocating a military buildup against China, the strategy is likely affordable given the calls for drawing down in Europe. In doing so, it also reduces

⁵¹ Robert Jervis, "Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective," *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (January 2009): 200.

⁵² See, e.g., Justin McCurry and Tania Branigan, "Obama Says US Will Defend Japan in Island Dispute with China," *The Guardian*, April 24, 2014;

⁵³ On entrapment, see Glenn H. Snyder, "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics," *World Politics* 36, no. 4 (July 1984): 461–95.

⁵⁴ Brooks and Wohlforth, "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-First Century."

the likelihood of competition with Russia, thus avoiding one of the problems with Second Generation Primacy. Still, problems come from two directions. First, the risks involved with a large-scale military build-up against China - noted in the discussion of Second Generation Primacy – apply to Offshore Balancing as well. Second, although the strategy’s proposal for a withdrawal from Europe assumes the region will remain stable, stability is not guaranteed. To be sure, there are reasons for optimism: a rough balance of power holds in the region, key states have nuclear weapons, and economic and institutional ties are robust. Still, multipolarity – as would obtain following an American withdrawal – often generates miscalculation.⁵⁵ Crises may be less likely in Europe even without the United States than at any time before the postwar era, but there is some risk it will be greater than Offshore Balancers allow.

Restraint

Finally, by drawing down in Europe and Asia, Restraint has the advantage of minimizing the United States’ economic costs and political risks. A second advantage follows: by removing the U.S. from Europe and Asia, it reduces bilateral tensions with notional adversaries like China and Russia, opening up the possibility of more or less explicit bargains to advance U.S. security. Moreover, by building on the proposition that states tend to balance proximate threats, and the empirical observation that many capable states have incentives to balance Russia and (especially) China, Restraint is anchored in both theory and practice.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ On miscalculation in multipolarity, see Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder, “Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity,” *International Organization* 44, no. 2 (Spring 1990): 137–68.

⁵⁶ On the tendency to balance proximate threats, see Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); on local tensions in the China case, see M. Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China’s Territorial Disputes* (Princeton University Press, 2008).

Despite these advantages, Restraint – like Offshore Balancing – carries the risk that its expectations regarding local behavior may be off-base. States may balance inefficiently: internal buildups may lag threats, and coalitions may be hard to form. This can be a particular problem in East Asia, where water barriers may increase states’ incentives to buckpass, and historical tensions impede alignment.⁵⁷ Furthermore, although Restraint expects the defense to dominate, defense may still prove inadequate if the distribution of power sharply favors one side over another;⁵⁸ in context, China may eventually be able to seek regional dominance despite local efforts. How the United States could position itself to hedge against such possibilities is unclear.

Conclusion: Paths and Prospects

In sum, none of the envisioned strategies is unproblematic – each contains internal contradictions and/or may confront difficulties when applied to contemporary world affairs. This raises one final question: if none makes a dispositive case, what might cause the United States to adopt one strategy over another?

Any strategy ultimately emerges from a combination of domestic and international compromises and bargains. Within this, however, the international security environment tends to play a decisive role.⁵⁹ It is no accident, for instance, that the United States embraced containment when Cold War bipolarity presented the U.S. with an obvious threat, nor surprising that post-Cold

⁵⁷ For illustration, see Jennifer Lind, “The Japan-South Korea Dispute Isn’t Just About the Past,” *Washington Post (The Monkey Cage)*, August 30, 2019, <https://beta.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/08/30/japan-south-korea-dispute-isnt-just-about-past/>.

⁵⁸ Still, even analysts skeptical of Restraint allow that local actors should be able to obtain substantial security on their own; see Michael Beckley, “The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia: How China’s Neighbors Can Check Chinese Naval Expansion,” *International Security* 42, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 78–119; Lanoszka and Hunzeker, *Conventional Deterrence*.

⁵⁹ Posen, *Sources*; Brendan Rittenhouse Green, “Two Concepts of Liberty: U.S. Cold War Grand Strategies and the Liberal Tradition,” *International Security* 37, no. 2 (October 2012): 9–43; Rosato and Schuessler, “A Realist Foreign Policy for the United States.”

War unipolarity allowed American ambitions to expand; shifts in the international environment did not *cause* containment or primacy, but they made the result far more likely.

This logic suggests that shifts in the security environment are likely to take centerstage in shaping U.S. strategy. The implication of this, however, is less than clear-cut given that analysts remain divided over the shape of the contemporary international environment: given China's rise, some predict the return of bipolarity, some multipolarity, and others – irrespective of arguments that unipolarity is over – continued U.S. dominance.⁶⁰ Indeed, the absence of agreement may help to explain why, despite acknowledging China's rise, U.S. grand strategy has largely continued along the same primacist course that has guided American efforts since the 1990s.⁶¹ Still, as the security environment clarifies, we can expect certain grand strategies to become more or less likely to be adopted.

Table 2 summarizes the basic expectations. All things being equal, Second Generation Primacy is poised to gain traction the longer proponents can plausibly argue American unipolarity (or something close to) it endures. After all, only with American dominance at hand or nearby can analysts make a credible case that the strategy's benefits outweigh the risks. Conversely, the strategy is poised to lose salience in bipolar or multipolar conditions: the more China and/or other actors can impose costs on ambitious U.S. policies, the more likely U.S. strategists are to decide that game is not worth the quid.

An analogous situation holds for Deep Engagement. In aiming for stability in key geopolitical locales, Deep Engagement assumes U.S. power is able to foster the stability sought.

⁶⁰ Illustrating the disagreement are Barry Posen, "From Unipolarity to Multipolarity: Transition in Sight?," in *International Relations Theory and the Consequences of Unipolarity*, ed. G. John Ikenberry, Michael Mastanduno, and William C. Wohlforth (New York: Cambridge, 2011); Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion Revisited"; Øystein Tunsjø, *The Return of Bipolarity in World Politics: China, the United States, and Geostructural Realism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); Joshua Shiffrin, "The Rise of China, Balance of Power Theory and US National Security: Reasons for Optimism?," *Journal of Strategic Studies* (online first view): 1–42; Beckley, *Unrivaled*.

⁶¹ To return to an earlier point, hence why the U.S. may be building up military forces in both Europe and Asia.

This assumption, however, is less plausible if bipolarity and/or multipolarity return in full-force: facing real external challengers, U.S. power may prove insufficient to create stability in all desired theaters. Like the Cold War, policymakers may need to pick and choose their regional contests (e.g., retrenching in Europe for the sake of Asia). On the other hand, the longer it takes multipolarity or bipolarity to emerge – and/or the more defenders have strategic advantages over aggressors – the longer Deep Engagement can appeal.

Table 2: International Conditions Affecting U.S. Grand Strategic Options

	Strategy			
	Second Generation	Deep Engagement	Offshore Balancing	Restraint
Conditions Favoring the Argument	Unipolarity or near-unipolarity	Unipolarity or near-unipolarity	Bipolarity or offense-dominant multipolarity	Unipolarity or multipolarity
Conditions Challenging the Argument	Multipolarity or bipolarity	Multipolarity or bipolarity	Unipolarity or defense-dominant multipolarity	Bipolarity or offense-dominant multipolarity

Offshore Balancing and Restraint, on the other hand, gain traction the more the world shifts from unipolarity – albeit under different conditions. Designed to draw down in stable regions to balance a looming regional hegemon, Offshore Balancing becomes more plausible the more the world moves towards bipolarity and/or China appears poised to dominate East Asia. The inverse is also true: the more we see continued U.S. dominance, multipolarity, and/or regional actors able to offset the PRC, the less compelling the argument. In contrast, Restraint gains salience under those conditions: continued American dominance despite China’s rise would justify less American strategic activism (as some proposed in the early-mid 1990s), whereas the return of multipolarity and/or an Asia with actors capable of containing China would justify greater American buckpassing and retrenchment. If, however, China’s rise precipitates true bipolarity and China’s emergence as a potential hegemon – or if states prove unable or unwilling to balance China – then Restraint arguments would suffer accordingly.

In short, just as the U.S. grand strategy debate is itself in flux, so too are the international conditions that will drive the appeal of the different strategies. Still, the bottom line is clear: China and Asia are increasingly the focus of U.S. strategy debates. As international conditions change, analysts therefore need to proceed judiciously to accurately assess strategic circumstances and tailor the tools and solutions embraced in response. Given the stakes involved, only clear-eyed analysis of current and expected future developments can chart a path forward in a changing world.