

Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy

By Barry R. Posen
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REVIEWED BY LTC JOSEPH BECKER

Grand strategy is an often controversial term in the vocabulary of United States foreign policy. Competing visions of the U.S. role in global affairs lead to watered-down policy pronouncements which must be evaluated in hindsight by their manner of implementation for a clear interpretation. In his latest book, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Barry Posen makes such an assessment. He identifies a relatively consistent pattern of activist behavior which he dubs a grand strategy of "Liberal Hegemony." This strategy, he argues, has been wasteful and counterproductive in securing U.S. national security interests, and he offers a competing vision for U.S. national security strategy. While most readers will find his arguments against Liberal Hegemony compelling, his grand strategy of "Restraint" will be divisive on a number of levels.

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Posen is clear and systematic throughout the book in defining his terms and developing his arguments. He scopes his use of the term grand strategy along national security lines related to the generation of military power, avoiding potential pitfalls of debate over issues such as public health or domestic policy. He defines Liberal Hegemony as a strategy of securing the superpower position of the United States largely through the active promotion of democracy, free markets, and Western values worldwide. Variations of this strategy have been championed on both sides of the political aisle by liberals and neoconservatives. His counterproposal, *Restraint*, is a realist-based grand strategy which focuses U.S. military power on a narrow set of objectives, relies on "command of the commons" to ensure global access, avoids entanglement in foreign conflicts, and actively encourages allies to look to their own defense. Posen advances a largely maritime-focused strategy to command the world's commons.

Liberal Hegemony is a strategy based upon a worldview that sees accountable governments as safe and secure partners for perpetuating the American way of life and non-accountable or non-existent governance as a threat that must be managed or ultimately rectified. It encourages a leading role for the United States in establishing and defending this order. It is this role which Posen believes to be ill-conceived and poorly defined, leading needlessly to wars of choice and the open-ended commitment of U.S. forces worldwide. Posen views the current network of U.S. alliances and security guarantees as largely a Cold War relic, allowing countries such as Germany, Japan, France, the Republic of Korea and even some of the Middle Eastern oil suppliers a free ride on the U.S. taxpayer. He also believes that

some of these commitments have encouraged reckless behavior, with Iraq and Israel as particular examples. Posen states that, since the end of the Cold War, policy-makers have consistently exaggerated the threats to U.S. interests in various regions of the world, overstated the benefits of military engagement, and embroiled the U.S. in a morass of identity-based conflicts with little hope for a solution. He argues that most U.S. allies could (and would) manage their own security if forced to do so and that they would naturally balance against threats to regional stability and the emergence of aspiring hegemons. Also, importantly, Posen bases his arguments on the assumption that great powers (current and emerging) will maintain a nuclear deterrence capability and this will largely reduce the likelihood of great power wars.

The grand strategy of Liberal Hegemony, in the form described by Posen, would likely have fewer supporters today than any time since the early 1990s. There is no doubt that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, combined with the larger Global War on Terror, have been tremendously costly in terms of both blood and treasure, and that their long-term benefits are dubious. As of this writing, the Iraqi government faces mortal danger from extremist groups. Democracy in Afghanistan is a tenuous prospect at best. Lieutenant General Michael Flynn, the recently departed director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, was quoted in recent statements as saying that even after more than 13 years of war the U.S. is not safer and extremist ideology is “exponentially growing.” There is little argument that business as usual is no longer an option in U.S. national defense.

While the status quo would seem to require a change, the level of disengagement

recommended by Posen could be problematic in ways that his book fails to explore. The network of alliances and security guarantees maintained by the U.S. does more than simply abet stability in far-flung areas of the world. The U.S., as a nation, tends to be rather opinionated as to the conduct of world affairs. While rarely stated explicitly, security assistance in its various forms is one of the levers used by Washington to gain influence over the decision-making processes of other nations. A prominent example is Congress’ linking of security assistance for Pakistan in 2011 to a concrete set of performance objectives. It is also true that countries hosting U.S. bases or deployments usually reap considerable economic benefits from those arrangements as well.

Unfortunately, balancing power is a dangerous game that does not always lead to stability. Posen argues, for instance, that the U.S. should remove ground forces from Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK), believing that the South Koreans are more than a match for the North and that both Japan and the ROK will balance against China once they have to. But what if the Japanese and the Koreans assess the threat differently than the U.S.? What if one nation attempts to “buck pass” its security preparations to another nation and holds out too long? Stalin did this before World War II, expecting France to bear the cost of balancing against Germany. When France fell in six weeks, the stage was set for a Nazi invasion of Russia.

Balancing can also have unintended consequences. Posen states that, “Restraint aims to energize other advanced industrial states into improving their own capabilities to defend themselves...” But the capability to defend generally implies a capability to attack as well.

Japan's balancing against China would almost certainly arouse insecurities on the Korean peninsula, among other places. Nationalist tendencies in either location might also encourage a state to flex its newfound muscle. Reassurance to the other Allied nations attacked by Japan in World War II was one of the reasons the U.S. assumed responsibility for the security of Japan in the first place after the war. Perhaps the U.S. can no longer afford to be the guarantor, but abandoning this role will relinquish a measure of control that the U.S. maintains over its international environment. The U.S. will always maintain some responsibility to assist its allies and could be drawn into regional conflicts whether or not it prefers.

One of the assumptions underpinning Posen's argument is that countries act in their own rational self-interest. This aligns well with a realist view of nation states as individual actors on a world stage. However, nation states are built of people and groups of people who may possess different and competing views of their own self-interest. Many of the world's states, even nominal democracies, are controlled in practice by groups of elites. Egypt, for example, is largely run by a number of military officers with a disproportionate hold on the nation's economic assets. This group has successfully resisted all attempts to implement greatly needed economic reforms, even using its influence to prevent an IMF loan package in 2011. Egypt has instead turned primarily to handouts by members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, whose interests lie in suppressing both the Muslim Brotherhood and the fledgling democratic movement spawned by the Arab Spring, a self-serving marriage of convenience among Middle Eastern power brokers. Even in more representative societies

such as the U.S., citizens are loath to suffer short-term pain such as taxation for the benefit of long-term necessities like a healthy environment or robust infrastructure. It is therefore dangerous to assume that governments will arrive at decisions that truly reflect the greater good of their populations. Even if a universal law were to ensure the balance of power in every region of the world, the balance that results may not be favorable for U.S. national security interests.

A further assumption supporting Posen's work is that states currently enjoying the benefits of U.S.-provided security will ultimately rise to the occasion if the U.S. steps back from the picture. An alternative possibility is that many governments will simply find a new patron. Vali Nasr argues in his book, *Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat*, that reducing American engagement in the Middle East, for instance, would merely pave the way for increasing Chinese influence in this area of the world. While America's track record for abiding by its own liberal ideals is decidedly mixed in this region, he believes that the Chinese version would be far more extractive and far less benign. However, as demonstrated throughout the era of colonialism, ruling elites are often quick to settle for a bad deal that benefits them directly. Perhaps this trend would prove self-limiting in the long run, but the short-term cost could be a power shift away from the U.S.

Posen's vision for "command of the commons" means that the U.S. would dominate the air, sea, and space. His treatment of space is brief and largely sound, but he underestimates the contested nature of this arena. The air forces are treated as essential but could be right-sized to coincide with a reduction of ground forces. The thrust of Posen's argument

is that the U.S. should support its grand strategy of Restraint through a maritime-focused force, significantly reducing the size and priority of ground forces. In his view, the balance of power and nuclear deterrence will reduce the likelihood of great power war, and a reluctance to engage in smaller-scale regional conflicts will eliminate the need for massive counterinsurgency operations and render the current force structure irrelevant. Oddly, Posen even argues for a reduction in naval forces as well, going so far as to assess the number of aircraft carriers in the fleet. The U.S., he believes, has the economic might to reconstitute the reduced forces if necessary, but should save its money in the meantime.

Many prominent strategists would dispute Posen's argument about the primacy of naval forces in establishing national military power. For brevity, this review will draw upon some key points made by John J. Mearsheimer, author of *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. Mearsheimer quotes British naval strategist Julian Corbett: "Since men live upon the land and not upon the sea, great issues between nations have always been decided – except in the rarest cases, by what your army can do against your enemy's territory and national life, or else by the fear of what the fleet makes it possible for your army to do." Only armies can conquer and control land, and they serve as the primary instrument of military power. Navies can project this power through amphibious assault (against a contested shore), amphibious landing (against a minimally contested shore), or through troop transport (using a friendly port). Amphibious operations are a dicey prospect. The best historical examples of success primarily occurred during World War II, and overwhelming air power was the decisive factor in every case. In

addition, navies can bombard a coastline or launch missiles but, without boots on the ground, the effect is limited. Lastly, navies can regulate commerce, even to the point of conducting a full blockade of littoral regions. However, blockades have an unimpressive history of providing a decisive advantage, especially during great power conflicts. Blockades, and even maritime interdiction, would be considered very controversial actions in the modern world. Therefore, a grand strategy that is founded upon a means of power projection instead of the source of power itself is fundamentally flawed.

Posen's argument that the U.S. GDP would allow it to reconstitute its military forces in short order if required might hold some truth for machines, but it seriously discounts the time that it takes to train and develop professional and technically proficient soldiers capable of operating effectively on the modern battlefield. It also ignores the possibility that the U.S. might be required to engage in two or more conflicts at once. Potential adversaries or regional antagonists might see increased opportunities for aggression once the U.S. commits its diminished ground forces to a particular mission.

Regardless of the reader's views on the grand strategy of Restraint, this book has value. Posen outlines the benefits of having a clearly articulated grand strategy and demonstrates the pitfalls that the U.S. has faced in navigating national security policy without this level of clarity. His case against becoming embroiled in conflicts that require counterinsurgency operations is strong. The grand strategy he proposes is problematic for a variety of reasons, largely for the optimism of its assumptions and its required alignment of forces. However, this work provides a starting point for debate

and a structure from which various alternatives might be built and assessed. Posen is right that something needs to be done differently. In the words of Stephen Walt, “Democracy, freedom, and apple pie aren’t a foreign policy.” They are not a grand strategy either. **PRISM**