

Why the next president should consider making offshore balancing their foreign policy default

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Foreign policy experts John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt recently made a renewed call for the US to adopt an offshore balancing approach to its foreign policy. [Christine Gallagher](#) writes that this approach – which pragmatically aims to limit US intervention abroad in favor of local actors checking rising powers themselves – should be seriously considered by the next occupant of the White House, whoever that might be.



John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt have renewed [a pitch](#) for offshore balancing, a foreign policy approach which aims to limit US intervention in other regions in favour of balance-of-power strategies which encourage local actors to check rising powers themselves.

The timing is right to put a realist grand strategy under the noses of presidential candidates, one of whom will become Commander-in-Chief in January with the potential to shape a new era of US foreign policy. The question is, might the new president steer the US in the direction of offshore balancing? It's possible we may see elements of an offshore balancing strategy in a future Clinton or Trump doctrine but probably not in its ideal form.

Different versions of the offshore balancing strategy have been championed in the past twenty years by Christopher Layne, Barry Posen, Christopher Preble, Robert Pape and others as well as Mearsheimer and Walt who (re)present a case for offshore balancing in a recent [Foreign Affairs](#) article.

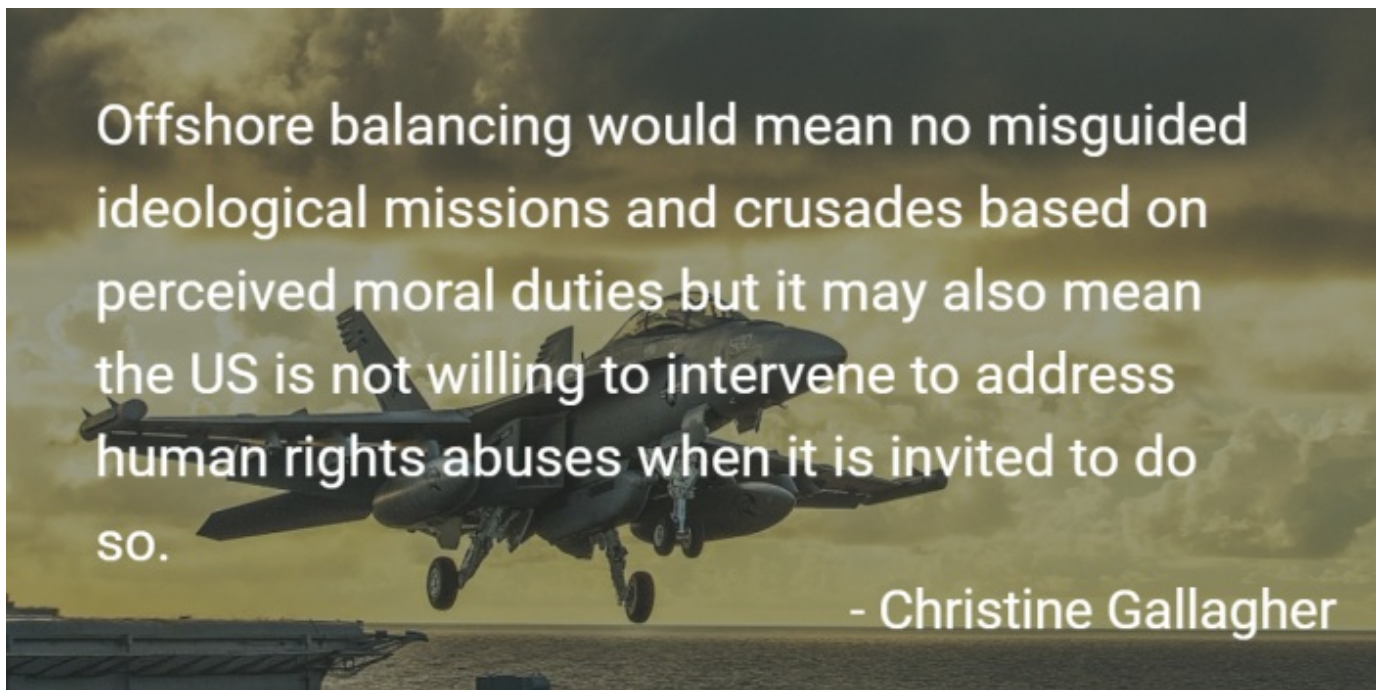
In a nutshell, this is Mearsheimer and Walt's explanation of offshore balancing:

- Primacy is necessary to maximize security and prosperity;
- The US should maintain hegemony in the Western Hemisphere to protect its territorial integrity;
- Strategically, the other three most important regions are Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Persian Gulf;
- In response to emerging hegemonies in these regions, the US should first "pass the buck" to local actors to contain rising powers;
- The US can provide assistance but should only intervene with military force if local actors are struggling to balance by themselves;
- The overall aim is to remain offshore, over the horizon, encouraging local actors to do the heavy lifting for as long as possible;
- If America must intervene with boots on the ground, it should get in and get out as quickly as possible;
- Liberal hegemony should not be the aim and the US should not concern itself with regime changes.

Some say US foreign policy has already been [moving](#) in this direction partly for budgetary reasons (it's less costly than direct engagement) and in response to lessons learned from bungled interventions in the Middle East. Offshore balancing, in theory, would reduce military expenditure and prevent anti-American sentiment because the US would only enter conflicts to save-the-day.

Whilst [certain political pundits](#) are coming around to the idea, neither of the presidential front-runners is likely to entirely embrace an offshore balancing strategy. Hillary Clinton is [seen](#) as being more hawkish than Obama and regarded as a member of the American foreign policy establishment which makes her more likely to maintain the status quo than to fully adopt an offshore balancing strategy.

Clinton's campaign [position](#) on national security emphasises active US leadership and engagement based on core values and principles. But it's not out of the question that she may move forward with a tempered pragmatic version of liberal internationalism looking a bit like offshore balancing but with a dose of moralism thrown in. It's possible to promote democracy and speak the language of American exceptionalism while implementing pragmatic foreign policies (as Ronald Reagan [arguably](#) did in the 1980s).



Trump is a wild card and his [foreign policy advisors](#) are not regarded as heavy weights making his strategy harder to imagine. His maverick style makes you wonder if he might be inclined to read Mearsheimer and Walt's case and adopt elements of offshore balancing since it speaks to some of the concerns he has expressed about US military commitments abroad.

In his book [Crippled America: How to Make America Great Again](#), Trump says he wants to reduce how much the US is spending on military bases and renegotiate the costs of protecting allies. This is not the same as offshore balancing, but it stems from a frustration with the cost of US global policing. He also indicates he'd break from status quo foreign policies, saying:

"Here's what I know—what we are doing now isn't working. And years ago, when I was just starting out in business, I figured out a pretty simple approach that has always worked well for me:

When you're digging yourself deeper and deeper into a hole, stop digging."

But Trump has also expressed foreign policies which would not look anything like offshore balancing including flip-flopping between the idea of somehow [getting rid of](#) North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un and [negotiating](#) with him as well as building up the US military in an effort to [eliminate ISIS](#). Offshore balancing is not about regime change or deal-making and advocates of offshore balancing do not regard ISIS to be an existential threat to the US.

Again, what a president says and does are not always in harmony: Trump's loose lips are not necessarily an indication of how he would implement foreign policy. Talking tough is not the same as sending in troops and if he does make it into the White House, Trump would do well to engage with realist advisors to ensure his actions serve his vision of making America great again.

Offshore balancing in practice

Imagining for a moment that the next president adopts an offshore balancing strategy, there will be consequences for the regions left to their own devices. Remember, this strategy is about serving US vital interests which means non-intervention in regional conflicts even if they involve US allies. Those countries who joined the “coalition of the willing” in Iraq should not expect reciprocal support from the US if trouble emerges in their backyards.

On the upside, offshore balancing would mean no misguided ideological missions and crusades based on perceived moral duties but it may also mean the US is not willing to intervene to address human rights abuses when it is invited to do so.

There is also a possibility of diplomatic fear-mongering, especially over the rise of China, to motivate local actors to balance against rising powers threatening US primacy even if they don't pose a serious threat within their regions.

That said, grand strategies are only overarching guides which inform the role of the US in the world in broad strokes but which do not preclude the implementation of more nuanced foreign policies based on case-by-case international events. Offshore balancing would make for a better default position than interventionism and a new presidency is a good opportunity to reset.

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About the author

Christine Gallagher – *Oxford University*

Christine Gallagher is a Clarendon Scholar at Oxford University. Her research interests include environmental politics particularly climate securitization, American foreign policy, European identity and the power dynamics between developed and developing countries.

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