

**The Unreality of Offshore Balancing: Security Commitments, Military Bases, and Public Support for Intervention**

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## **Introduction**

The 2016 presidential campaign raised deep questions about the United States' approach to the world. For decades, a consensus has prevailed in favor of some version of "engagement" among American foreign policy elites. The consensus held that the maintenance of American security commitments and the forward deployment of American military assets abroad stabilized international politics and was, on balance, good for both the United States and the rest of the world.

The consensus in favor of engagement among foreign policy elites has never gone unchallenged among academics. Academic critics have questioned the wisdom of using American power to provide security abroad. They have bemoaned the fact that American security commitments allow other states to free ride on US military spending; they have worried about entanglement in unnecessarily conflicts; they have warned that "forward" defense postures lead to anti-American backlashes.

Many of these academic criticisms of grand strategic engagement now have some degree of representation in Washington. This makes a theoretical and empirical assessment of the case for engagement versus its alternatives urgent. In this paper, we take a small step in this direction by investigating the influence of security commitments and forward deployed military assets on public support for military intervention abroad. Engagement's most prominent alternative – offshore balancing – is rooted in the notion that the most efficient and cost-effective way to prevent any other state from achieving regional hegemony (and thus putting itself in position to seriously challenge American national security) is to serve as a "balancer of last resort." In other words, the United States should withdraw its security commitments and bring its troops home. This would encourage regional actors to balance against one another. Only when it becomes clear that they cannot should the United States return to an onshore posture in the region. This, according to

proponents of offshore balancing, is effectively what the United States did to great effect during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

We argue that this view is based on an unrealistic assumption: that American foreign policy elites will be able to persuade domestic audiences of the wisdom and necessity of large-scale intervention to uphold the balance of power in a far-away region in which the United States has no security commitments or forward deployed military assets. In fact, historical interventions by the so-called “offshore balancers” (typically understood as the United States and Great Britain) have almost always come either in response to the violation of a security commitment that the offshore balancer had with another state, or in response to a direct threat to or attack on some sort of military or civilian asset. This implies that while leaders may often find it difficult to persuade audiences of the need to act to restore the balance of power in some other region of the world, they find it much easier to persuade audiences of the need to act to uphold a promise or to respond to a direct threat or attack.

Using a survey experiment, we show that this is true. Respondents are indeed more supportive of American military intervention to defend another state from an attack when the United States has a defensive alliance with the victim, and when the victim hosts a US military base. These findings have important – and troubling – implications for debates about American grand strategy. On one hand, they suggest that offshore balancing is unrealistic – withdrawing American security commitments and forward deployed military assets may save money and help prevent entanglement abroad, but it is also likely to make it much harder to transition to an onshore posture if doing so appears to be necessary in order to preserve an extra-regional balance of power. On the other hand, our findings also imply that security commitments and forward-deployed military assets may *produce* ideas about what constitutes the national interest – which raises serious ethical and strategic questions about their use.

The paper proceeds as follows. We first provide an overview of the debate between proponents of engagement and proponents of offshore balancing. We focus on the logic of offshore balancing's "second stage," during which the offshore balancer is supposed to act to restore a regional balance of power that regional actors have been unable to preserve. We show that there are serious empirical and theoretical problems with the assumption that the United States would be able to transition seamlessly from an offshore posture to an onshore posture in case doing so became necessary in order to, for instance, prevent Chinese hegemony in East Asia. We then discuss our experimental procedures and provide an overview of the results of a pilot survey conducted using a sample of undergraduate political science students. We conclude by examining the implications of our argument and findings for debates about American grand strategy.

### **The Offshore Balancing/Engagement Debate**

Since the end of the Cold War, a lively debate over American grand strategy has raged among policy analysts and academics. While the debate implicates a variety of theoretical questions and policy positions, the most salient cleavage is between proponents of various versions of "engagement," on one hand, and proponents of "offshore balancing" on the other. Engagement, as the term is used in debates about American grand strategy, refers to a foreign policy orientation that is based on a forward military posture and the maintenance of strong security commitments in key regions. Proponents of different forms of engagement (for instance, Robert Art's "selective" variant and Brooks and Wohlforth's "deep" variant, as well as different versions of "internationalism") disagree about many elements of US foreign policy – like the conditions under which force should be used, the utility of force versus diplomacy, the relative importance of objectives like democracy promotion and the protection of universal human rights, and the tradeoff between the legitimacy and burden-sharing benefits of working through multilateral institutions versus the flexibility of

working unilaterally. What proponents of engagement agree on, though, is that American security commitments and the presence of US military assets in Europe and East Asia play critically important roles in stabilizing those regions and thus in protecting American national security.<sup>1</sup>

According to proponents of engagement, maintaining a forward posture is the best way to promote one of the United States' most important national interests: preventing the emergence of a "hegemon" in Europe or East Asia. The centrality of this objective in American grand strategic thought goes back at least to George Kennan, though pre-World War I thinkers like Lewis Einstein and Alfred Thayer Mahan couched arguments about the importance of the European balance of power in these terms as well.<sup>2</sup> As long as no single state controls the enormous resources in these regions, no state can seriously threaten the most *important* American national security interest: its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Proponents of engagement argue that the safest and most cost-effective means of preventing the emergence of a dominant state in Europe or East Asia is to use American troops as a "security blanket" in these regions. American security commitments and forward-deployed military assets serve three important functions. First, they mitigate the regional security dilemma by discouraging regional powers from arming themselves out of fear of each other. The United States' provision of security for Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and other East Asian states is supposed to prevent arms-racing among these states, and between them and China. Since regional arms races result in increased military capabilities, keeping a lid on them helps to prevent the growth of regional centers of power that could eventually challenge for regional dominance.

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<sup>1</sup> See, among others, Brooks and Wohlforth (2016); Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth (2013); Art (2003).

<sup>2</sup> On Kennan's thought and influence, see Gaddis (2005). See also Mahan (2009 [1910]) and Einstein (1918) for early arguments about the importance of the balance of power abroad for American security.

Second, security commitments and forward-deployed military assets are supposed to help deter revisionist moves by regional powers. China and Russia are both, in different ways, dissatisfied with their respective positions in their regions. China would like to dominate the South and East China Seas, while Russia wants to reestablish what it sees as its traditional sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. On-shore American security commitments are supposed to signal to Moscow and Beijing that revisionist action will bring an armed response from the United States, and is thus too costly and risky to try.

Third, security commitments and forward deployed military resources are supposed to facilitate a timely and effective response in case a regional power with revisionist ambitions attempts to act on them. American military bases and pre-existing contingents of troops and military hardware will reduce the amount of time needed for an armed response, and also may help avoid the coordination problems that often plague ad hoc coalitions. In short, a forward defense posture minimizes the probability that American intervention in a major regional conflict will be necessary, but maximizes its effectiveness in case it is.

Offshore balancing denotes a grand strategy in which the United States would withdraw security commitments and military assets deployed abroad and intervene only as a last resort if there is no other way to prevent the rise of a dominant power in another region. Washington would adopt an “over the horizon” posture, in which regional states are encouraged to play a much larger role in providing their own security. Proponents of offshore balancing share with proponents of engagement the notion that preventing the emergence of a Eurasian hegemon should remain a central objective of American foreign policy. What they disagree about is the value of a forward posture for promoting that aim efficiently and effectively. Indeed, proponents of offshore balancing take magnetically opposed positions on the effects that security commitments and forward deployed

military resources have on the probability and effectiveness of American intervention in a major regional conflict.<sup>3</sup>

First, proponents of offshore balancing see the “security blanket” effect as an impediment to the operation of regional balancing dynamics. American security commitments and troops deployed abroad allow regional powers to free ride on the United States’ provision of security instead of building up their own military capacity. This implies that the most efficient and effective means of preventing successful bids for regional hegemony – the formation of a robust, stable regional balance of power – is taken off the table.

Second, proponents of offshore balancing fear that security commitments may lead the United States to become entangled unnecessarily in regional conflicts. This, in a sense, is the dark side of the deterrent effect that proponents of engagement value. The same mechanisms (for instance, public commitments that impose costs on leaders for failing to follow through on promises or threats) that are supposed to signal to potential adversaries the credibility of American promises to defend friends might at the same time embolden allies in ways that encourage them to behave recklessly. These mechanisms might also encourage leaders or domestic audiences to understand the credibility of an alliance commitment – apart from the concrete interests that it is supposed to help promote – as itself a compelling reason for intervention. Proponents of offshore balancing see this as the sort of pathological grand strategic reasoning that led to American intervention in Vietnam.

Finally, proponents of offshore balancing see delay in intervening in a major regional conflict as a virtue. Involvement at the start of a conflict means that the United States would bear the same costs as other participants, and that it might be doing so unnecessarily (since regional powers may be able to parry a challenge for hegemony on their own – especially if they have been encouraged to build up their military capabilities through American retrenchment). Waiting, on the other hand,

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<sup>3</sup> For prominent articulations of the logic of offshore balancing, see Layne (1993, 1997, 2012); Posen (2014).

allows Washington to ensure that intervention is truly the only way to avoid a successful bid for regional hegemony, and also minimizes the costs the United States bears relative to states directly involved in the conflict from the start.

### **The Logic and Record of Offshore Balancing's Balancing Stage**

As the discussion above implies, offshore balancing is a two-stage approach to grand strategy. In the first stage, a disengaged United States remains “over the horizon” and relies on regional balancing dynamics to obstruct bids for hegemony by dissatisfied regional powers. During this stage, according to proponents of offshore balancing, reduced American military spending fosters economic growth in the United States. Combined with reduced military commitments, this helps the United States marshal its strength in preparation for a potential future conflict.

In the second stage, the United States is supposed to serve as the balancer of last resort. If regional balancing dynamics fail to prevent the emergence of a challenger for regional hegemony, and local actors prove unable to manage the threat on their own, offshore balancing calls for on-shore intervention à la American efforts to check German and Japanese hegemony in 1917 and 1941.

Most of the action in debates between proponents of offshore balancing and engagement has been focused on the first stage. Proponents of engagement dispute the economic benefits of retrenchment; they question the ability of regional actors to balance against or deter aggression by powerful revisionist states like China and Russia; and they worry that disengagement will leave other kinds of threats unchecked and lead to the disintegration of the “liberal international order.” In general, they argue that retrenchment is risky, that engagement has served the United States well for the past seven decades, and that we should err on the side of an imperfect but good enough status

quo over the uncertainty of an approach that may be attractive in theory (at least in some ways) but remains untested.

There has been less scrutiny of the second stage of the logic of offshore balancing. Is it reasonable to expect a state that has adopted an “over the horizon” posture to be able and willing to act to preserve a regional balance of power if doing so becomes necessary? This is, in some ways, the crux of the offshore balancing argument. It is all that separates proponents of offshore balancing from proponents of isolationism – an approach that almost no serious analysts of American grand strategy embrace. If there is reason to doubt the ability and willingness of an offshore balancer to actually intervene effectively when necessary, then the logic of offshore balancing collapses. Proponents would then have to shift toward arguing that preventing the emergence of a dominant power in Europe or East Asia is not, in fact, necessary for the protection of American security or the promotion of the national interest. This is not an argument that even the most strident of offshore balancers – like Christopher Layne – have been willing to make.<sup>4</sup>

Proponents of offshore balancing have appealed to the history of American and British foreign policy to support the notion that on-shore intervention by “over the horizon” powers is – when necessary – not unrealistic. American and British interventions in both world wars constitute, on this view, important precedents, and underline the plausibility of the second stage of the logic of offshore balancing. But a closer look at the history of the efforts of these two offshore balancers over the past two centuries raises serious questions.

Great Britain has faced potential regional hegemonies in Europe, Asia, and North America since 1815. London’s record does not instill confidence in the ability of offshore balancers to come onshore when doing so is required to preserve a regional balance of power. For one thing, the British failed to prevent the United States from achieving hegemony in North America. This was not

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<sup>4</sup> Though Layne’s (1997) invocation of “America First” does point toward a certain compatibility with isolationism.

for lack of opportunity. London could, for instance, have intervened to prevent Washington from annexing Texas. Maintaining an independent Republic of Texas would have blocked American expansion and given London the opportunity to develop a local counterbalance to the United States. And – in the wake of Andrew Jackson’s refusal in 1836 to agree to Texan requests for accession to the Union – the Texans approached London for support. Though hesitant at first, during the years leading up to the Mexican-American War, the British pursued strengthened relations with Texas. This was, at least in part, because leaders in London understood Texas’ value as a means of checking Washington.<sup>5</sup> When in 1844 news emerged of a possible agreement that would facilitate Texas’ annexation by the United States, the British proposed an Anglo-French alliance to block the move.<sup>6</sup> The scheme fell apart when the French press caught wind of it, and James K. Polk’s surprise victory in the presidential election that November brought annexation within months. The British proved unwilling or unable to act to prevent it.<sup>7</sup> And by the end of the decade, Washington had expanded to the Pacific coast, and London had failed to take advantage of this opportunity to preserve the balance of power in North America.

This was not, it turned, Great Britain’s last chance to oppose American hegemony in North America. During the American Civil War, London initially supported the Confederacy. But this orientation lasted only until the Emancipation proclamation clarified the ideological and institutional stakes of the conflict, which raised liberal opposition to any policy that would support a regime defending slavery against one that had abolished it.<sup>8</sup> The British had another opportunity – perhaps their last – to oppose Washington’s domination in the Americas during the 1895-96 Venezuela Crisis. Instead of standing firm in the face of President Grover Cleveland’s expansive assertion of the Monroe Doctrine, the British once again backed down, which in this case signaled that the

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<sup>5</sup> Worley (1905).

<sup>6</sup> Adams (1909).

<sup>7</sup> Smith (1911).

<sup>8</sup> Owen (1997).

Western Hemisphere had become Washington's sphere of influence. While London's retreat in this case was driven by an entirely reasonable calculation that saw Germany, France, and Russia as more pressing threats, it stands as the culmination of a decades-long failure to act as an offshore balancer should when presented with evidence that another state is poised to achieve and consolidate regional hegemony.<sup>9</sup>

London *did* intervene twice to preserve the balance of power in Europe during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. What is significant about these cases is that pre-existing security commitments played critical roles in prompting British action. During debates in the cabinet and parliament in August 1914, arguments in favor of intervention were often couched in terms of the obligations that London had to its allies. For instance, under the terms of the 1912 Anglo-French Naval Convention, London and Paris had agreed that the French Navy would patrol the Mediterranean while the British Navy would defend France's northern coast. On August 1, French ambassador Paul Cambon reminded Foreign Minister Grey of the arrangement, and asked: "does not Britain have a moral obligation to help us, to at least give us the help of your fleet, since it is on your advice that we have sent ours away?"<sup>10</sup> This became an important part of the case for intervention that Grey brought in front of the Cabinet and Parliament. He noted in a speech on August 3 that "The French fleet is in the Mediterranean, and has for some years been concentrated there because of the feeling of confidence and friendship which has existed between the two countries."<sup>11</sup> This line caught on with other advocates of intervention. It is also significant that a decision in favor of British intervention did not finally come until Germany violated Belgium's neutrality – which would not have mattered to the British if not for the 1839 Treaty of London (which committed all signatories to defend Belgium from violations of its sovereignty).

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<sup>9</sup> Kupchan (2010); Rock (1989); Campbell (1974).

<sup>10</sup> Clark (2012), pg. 540.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 544.

British entry into World War II also came only in response to violated security commitments and direct attacks on assets in Southeast Asia. Intervention against Nazi Germany was prompted by Berlin's invasion of Poland, to whose defense London and Paris had formally pledged to come in the wake of Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia. The Poles found this guarantee to be so uncertain that they deployed their military sub-optimally – at the border with Germany, rather than in more defensible positions in the country's interior – in order to be sure that the British and French could not excuse a non-response by claiming that Poland had not resisted. In East Asia, London did virtually nothing to oppose the rise of Japanese domination until Tokyo attacked Malaya and Hong Kong in December 1941.

The history of American foreign policy during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century also calls into question the logic of offshore balancing's second stage. Though proponents of offshore balancing – most prominently John Mearsheimer – have interpreted American intervention in the First World War as an act motivated by the desire to prevent German hegemony in Europe, this is a difficult claim to sustain. Galen Jackson has recently shown that calculations about the likely course of the war – and, in particular, fears about imminent German victory – played virtually no real role in the American decision to go to war. Instead, according to Jackson, two factors contributed to Wilson's decision for war: first, Germany's resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare, which threatened American shipping; and, second, the President's desire to influence the peace that would follow the fighting.<sup>12</sup>

The United States' responses to potential Japanese and German hegemony in East Asia and Europe during the decades leading up to the Second World War also raise doubts about the logic of offshore balancing's second stage. The United States took no concrete steps to oppose Japan's domination of China until the late 1930s, and did not decide to fully intervene until late 1941. Two

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<sup>12</sup> Jackson (2012).

elements of this process are striking. The first is that American elites did not even agree, during this period, that Japanese hegemony in East Asia was worth fighting to prevent. Though Theodore Roosevelt initially saw the maintenance of a balance of power in East Asia (between Japan and Russia) as the best possible state of affairs, in the wake of Japan's stunning victory over Russia in 1905, he eventually came around to the idea that Washington should acknowledge a Japanese sphere of influence in Manchuria rather than attempting to restore the regional balance of power that the war's outcome had broken. Some officials – like Roosevelt's Secretary of War Elihu Root – even thought that Japanese hegemony in East Asia would help the region develop in a way that would ensure its stability and foster conditions favorable to future commerce.<sup>13</sup> The second notable feature of this case is that American intervention came only in response to a direct attack on American soil. The attack on Pearl Harbor was what ultimately allowed Franklin Roosevelt to overcome domestic opposition to direct military action against Japan. Indeed, there is serious reason to believe that the United States would not have intervened against Japan if Tokyo had sought to conquer only European holdings in Southeast Asia without attempting the knockout blow in Hawaii.<sup>14</sup>

It is also worth bearing in mind that direct American involvement against Germany came only after Hitler declared war on the United States, a year and a half after Germany defeated France and Britain, and half a year after the beginning of Operation Barbarossa. Moreover, absent a series of avoidable errors, there is reason to think that Germany could have consolidated hegemony in Europe – and even delivered a knockout blow to the Red Army – before December 1941.<sup>15</sup> In short, American intervention against Germany was hardly a well-timed intervention to prevent German hegemony at the last possible moment.

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<sup>13</sup> See LaFeber (1997) and Pash (2014).

<sup>14</sup> Sagan (1988), pg. 898.

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, Stolfi (1992).

## **Explaining the Infeasibility of Offshore Balancing's Balancing Stage**

The historical record of offshore balancing's second stage – the stage during which the offshore balancer is supposed to come onshore in order to preserve a regional balance of power in imminent danger of collapsing – raises serious questions about the grand strategy's feasibility. In particular, the very brief discussion of the records of American and British approaches to potential extra-regional hegemony provided in the section above suggests that the logic of offshore balancing might be flawed in two related ways.

The first is that the transition from an offshore posture to onshore intervention is likely to face a variety of obstacles that might distort decisionmakers' ability to correctly perceive that action is necessary and react accordingly. In other words, while the logic of offshore balancing assumes that leaders will know when regional balancing has failed and will then be able to mobilize support for a timely military response, there are reasons to doubt that that process will function smoothly in practice. One of these is that foreign policy elites may not agree that preventing another state from dominating a far away region of the world constitutes a threat to the offshore balancer's vital interests. British reactions to increasing American domination in North America were ambivalent; so were American reactions to the rise of Japan during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, Lobell has recently argued that leaders typically pay more attention to the components of a potential rival's capabilities that are likely to threaten vital interests, rather than to the potential rival's aggregate power.<sup>16</sup> This implies that we should not necessarily expect leaders and foreign policy elites to agree that the rise of a hegemon in another region itself constitutes a serious threat – they should only do so when the potential hegemon develops capabilities that appear to threaten values that are understood as vital interests.

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<sup>16</sup> Lobell (2016).

A second obstacle is that even if leaders and foreign policy elites *do* agree on the need to confront a potential hegemon in another region, this may be difficult to sell to domestic audiences. One issue is that domestic audiences – unschooled in international-relations theory and unaware of the logic of the argument in favor of preventing the rise of extra-regional hegemons – may find it difficult to understand why the United States should spend resources and risk American lives to oppose a state in a distant part of the world that does not seem to be a direct threat to Americans, American territory, or American interests. Moreover, domestic audiences may be driven by a variety of other logics that might militate against intervention to preserve or restore a regional balance of power – for instance, British liberals passed up an opportunity to restore a balance of power in North America during the civil war for reasons related to political ideology; and Americans with interests in investing in Japanese interests opposed efforts to confront Japan’s domination of Manchuria and China during the 1920s and 1930s.

The second problem highlighted by the history of American and British responses to the rise of potential hegemons in other regions involves the manner in which obstacles to intervention have typically been overcome. In particular, the central role that violated security commitments and threatened or attacked military or civilian interests have played in facilitating elite and domestic consensus on the necessity of direct military action is striking. Debates over British intervention in the First World War were influenced by security commitments London had undertaken with Paris, and were ultimately decided because Germany violated Belgian sovereignty. Direct British intervention against Nazi Germany came in response to a violated mutual defense agreement with Poland. American intervention in the First World War came, at least in part, because of German actions that threatened American shipping; and American intervention to contain and rollback Japanese hegemony in East Asia came in response to the attack on Pearl Harbor.

What this record implies is that violated security commitments and direct threats to military or civilian interests may have the effect of clarifying the need for intervention in minds of elites, and making it easier for leaders to sell the case for intervention to domestic audiences. And this has important implications for the logic of offshore balancing's balancing stage. In particular, offshore balancing involves withdrawing American security commitments and bringing forward deployed troops home. This may have a number of beneficial consequences, including minimizing the risk of entanglement, preventing free-riding by allies, and reducing the overall cost of American foreign policy. But it is also – whether intentionally or unintentionally – likely to make it far harder for the United States to make the transition from an offshore posture to onshore intervention when doing so seems necessary. With fewer (or perhaps no) security commitments abroad, leaders will be unable to invoke violations to argue in favor of intervention. And without forward deployed military assets, it may be harder for leaders to argue that American interests are directly threatened by the aggressive actions of a regional power.

But the analysis thus far is speculative. Do security commitments and forward deployed military assets actually influence support for American military intervention to oppose aggression abroad? If so, how much, and why? Answering these questions is the purpose of the remainder of this paper.

## **Methodology**

We want to know if promises by great-powers to intervene even when they are “over the horizon” should be regarded as credible. Our goal is to see if we can establish whether security pledges or military positioning matter more for audiences. As a first cut at this problem, we seek to see if domestic audiences in a great power will support or reject military action to defend another state against aggression.

Many challenges arise in assessing this issue. Audiences (and the leaders of great powers) may find many variables relevant to the question of whether to intervene in a conflict. For instance, authors have suggested that regime-type solidarity, trade relations, shared cultural values, and the perceived cost of intervention might matter along with questions of whether failing to come to a client's rescue would cost a leader support at home (the 'audience costs' hypothesis). Moreover, in the "real world", disentangling different causal strands proves difficult because of the rampant endogeneity at work (for instance, maybe all security pledges are upheld, but only because pledges are only given to clients or allies that the guarantor would have defended anyway).

We want to isolate the pledge and positioning arguments from the rest of these variables. To do so, we turn to experimental methods, which enable us to directly manipulate the treatment that subjects require. Because we can control the treatment, we can make more plausible arguments about the causal relationship between the treatment and the dependent variable (in this case, the likelihood of supporting military action). By randomly varying treatment, we can avoid endogeneity (as long as our sample size is large enough). Survey and experimental research has become more popular and accepted in international-relations and foreign policy scholarship as a way to test these sorts of relationships for these reasons.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, in real life, policymakers (and audiences) assess decisions across more than one dimension. This complicates matters even further than the standard worries about endogeneity. Should resources be allocated to defend an autocratic regime which faces a conventionally-armed adversary and has substantial trade relations with the policymaker's country or should they instead be allocated to defend a democratic regime without much commercial importance that faces a nuclear-armed adversary? If policymakers decide to support autocratic regime A instead of democratic regime B, it is hard to know if it was the trade relations or the strength of the adversary

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<sup>17</sup> See Hyde (2015) for review of recent work.

that tipped their hands. We might seek to see if there were other states C or D that offered additional variation, but nature is not always able to furnish more Ns for study than we have plausible theories to explain such variations. Such problems beset conventional survey-experiment designs as well. Researchers could try to mimic the scenario described in the prior paragraph by randomly varying whether the situation facing audiences was more like that of regime A or regime B, but how could they then isolate which of the covariates mattered most in persuading audiences? We could always design a survey that would only vary treatments along one dimension (autocratic—democratic, nuclear adversary—non-nuclear adversary, etc), but that would defeat the entire purpose.

We employ a particular kind of experimental methodology, a conjoint survey experiment, to overcome this problem (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto 2014; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015). Conjoint survey designs are becoming increasingly popular because they enable researchers to tease out the effects of different manipulations simultaneously. In a conjoint analysis, subjects are asked to complete a task (like choosing between two options) in the presence of numerous different characteristics. Those characteristics are randomly assigned by computers administering the surveys between the two options in a given task and subjects are asked to complete several different tasks. As their answers are aggregated across a suitably large number of respondents, researchers can use the resulting variation to estimate “the relative influence of each attribute value on the resulting choice or rating” (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto 2014, 2). In a conjoint design, to return to our problem from the prior paragraph, we could ask several hundred respondents to choose between defending countries that varied at random along several different dimensions (autocratic—democratic, commercially important—commercially unimportant, nuclear adversary—non-nuclear adversary, etc). Doing so would allow us to estimate the influence of each variation on the

dependent variable while holding constant the other variables, a causal quantity of interest that Hainmueller and Hopkins (2015) refer as the “average marginal component effect” (AMCE).

### *Experimental Design*

Our design is straightforward. For this pilot survey, we distributed a conjoint survey design using the Qualtrics design software to 214 undergraduates at a large research university in the Northeast, who completed the survey for course credit. Of the 214, 192 successfully completed all five tasks that they were required to complete, yielding completed data suitable for analysis. We prepared the Qualtrics questions, conjoint design, and analysis using software created by Stezhnev et al (Stezhnev et al. 2017).

<< Insert Table 1 about here >>

Table 1 shows the attributes and levels we specified for this pilot study. We decided to include treatments that would get at the likeliest hypotheses from the democratic and commercial peace literatures, as well as measures of military capability and cost, in addition to the measures of proximity and pledges that we viewed as important of study.

We asked respondents a prompt before each task:

In this exercise, I'd like for you to think about scenarios in which the United States might consider using force. You're going to be presented with several scenarios in which an aggressor country threatens a victim with the use of military force. The United States may intervene in the scenario on the side of the victim.

If the United States intervenes and war results, it will suffer casualties but will likely help the victim prevail; if the United States does nothing, the victim will likely be forced to submit to the aggressor's demands.

You will be asked to evaluate in which circumstance you would be **more** willing to support the use of force by the United States on the side of the victim against the aggressor. You will also be asked **how likely** you think you would be to support U.S. intervention in both cases.

Respondents were then presented a table showing two scenarios (Table 2) from which they would make their choice.

<< Insert Table 2 about here >>

## Results

Conjoint designs prove easy to interpret. Each AMCE “can be straightforwardly interpreted as the expected change in [the dependent variable] when a given attributed value is compared to the ... baseline” (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto 2014, 19). Table 3 presents the results in tabular form; Figure 1 shows them in graphical form.

<< Insert Table 3 about here >>

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Many treatments display expected variation. For instance, support for intervention declines monotonically as expected casualties rise; compared to the baseline case (“light US casualties”), the support for intervention that would entail “severe US casualties” is about 20 percentage points lower. Similarly, support to intervene on behalf of countries with which the United States has low trade relations is about as much lower than the baseline case of a major U.S. trade partner. Yet some results seem surprising. Respondents did not seem to care much about the *aggressor’s* characteristics in making their decisions; although the AMCE estimates for aggressor’s trade relationships are in the

expected direction (respondents are likelier to support intervention against a low-volume trading partner than a high volume one), the results are not statistically distinguishable from the null effect. Perhaps even more surprising, nuclear weapons prove to be orthogonal to the calculus, conditional on other values: neither the victim's nor the aggressor's nuclear status matters. And neither the victim's nor the aggressor's regime type influences support for intervention at a statistically significant level (although notably a democratic victim is more, and a democratic aggressor is less, likely to receive support for an intervention).

Turning to our quantities of interest, we can see that a victim's proximity to U.S. military forces *and* its diplomatic ties to the United States both matter. A country that has a U.S. military base on its territory is much likelier to receive support for intervention than one that does not. But a country that has a treaty of mutual defense with the United States is about twice as likely to receive support for intervention as one with a base on its territory—a difference of about the same magnitude in *favor* of intervention as severe casualties *dissuade* intervention.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has offered preliminary evidence that security commitments and forward deployed military assets both increase public support for American military intervention abroad. These findings have important implications for theoretical debates in international relations. In particular, they point toward public opinion as one mechanism through which alliances might constrain leaders and thereby increase the credibility of commitments; and they also suggest an independent role for military assets as “tripwires” that can increase public support for intervention in addition to the security commitment effect.

But the paper's most important implications bear on questions about American grand strategy and debates between proponents of "engagement" versus "offshore balancing. On one hand, our argument and findings suggest that offshore balancing faces a dilemma. It is rooted in the notion that the United States will be willing and able to act as a balancer of last resort if a potential hegemon arises in a far-away region. Yet, by withdrawing security commitments and removing American military assets based abroad, offshore balancing makes it much more difficult for leaders to argue that intervention in far-away regions is necessary or worth the cost. This suggests that the success of offshore balancing's second stage may be conditional on its first stage remaining unimplemented (or, at least, not fully implemented) – in other words, the "offshore" element of offshore balancing makes the "balancing" element less likely to function. If this is true, then offshore balancing collapses into isolationism – proponents may have to shift the basis of their argument to one rooted in a fundamentally sanguine view of the rise of dominant powers in other regions of the world.

On the other hand, our argument and findings also suggest that the way that people understand the nature of the national interest may not be independent of the tools that states use to pursue it. One interpretation of the results of the survey experiment reported above is that respondents see security commitments and forward deployed military assets as either constituting or signaling information about what the United States' interests are in a conflict. Respondents may see the maintenance of security commitments (or perhaps credibility) as a value that generates an interest in intervention. Or they may believe that the presence of an American base either increases the value of Washington's relationship with the host or implies that that state must be strategically important. If this interpretation is correct, it means that grand strategic posture can alter the way that individuals understand the nature of interests. While a forward posture – like the one prescribed by proponents of engagement – may have a number of benefits, it is difficult to see its role in

expanding the way that Americans understand the national interest (and thus in inflating potential threats to the national interest) as anything but a cost.

Table 1. Attributes and levels for conjoint analysis.

Attribute	Levels
<i>Aggressor Regime Type</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Democratic</li> <li>• Autocratic</li> </ul>
<i>Victim Regime Type</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Democratic</li> <li>• Autocratic</li> </ul>
<i>Region</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Middle East</li> <li>• Europe</li> <li>• Asia</li> </ul>
<i>Aggressor Nuclear Status</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has nuclear weapons</li> <li>• Does not have nuclear weapons</li> </ul>
<i>Victim Nuclear Status</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has nuclear weapons</li> <li>• Does not have nuclear weapons</li> </ul>
<i>Victim Alliance Status</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has a treaty of mutual defense with the USA</li> <li>• Does not have a treaty of mutual defense with the USA</li> </ul>
<i>Victim Proximity to US Forces</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has U.S. base on its territory</li> <li>• Does not have a U.S. base on its territory</li> <li>• Is not near a U.S. base</li> </ul>
<i>Aggressor Trade Relationship with US</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Major U.S. Trade Partner</li> <li>• Minor U.S. trade partner</li> <li>• Not a significant U.S. trade partner</li> </ul>
<i>Victim Trade Relationship With US</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Major U.S. Trade Partner</li> <li>• Minor U.S. trade partner</li> <li>• Not a significant U.S. trade partner</li> </ul>

Table 2. Sample Qualtrics task for each respondent.

	<b>Scenario 1</b>	<b>Scenario 2</b>
<b>Victim Trade Relationship with US</b>	minor US trade partner	minor US trade partner
<b>Victim Regime Type</b>	autocratic	autocratic
<b>Victim Nuclear Status</b>	does not have nuclear weapons	has nuclear weapons
<b>Victim Proximity to US Forces</b>	does not have a US base on its territory	is not near a US base
<b>Likely US Casualties</b>	severe US casualties	light US casualties
<b>Aggressor Trade Relationship with US</b>	not a significant US trade partner	minor US trade partner
<b>Aggressor Nuclear Status</b>	has nuclear weapons	has nuclear weapons
<b>Victim Alliance Status</b>	does not have a treaty of mutual defense with the USA	has a treaty of mutual defense with the USA
<b>Region</b>	Middle East	Europe
<b>Aggressor Regime Type</b>	democratic	autocratic

Table 3. AMCE results from conjoint survey design. 1920 observations (192 respondents).

<b>Attribute</b>	<b>Level</b>	<b>Estimate</b>	<b>Std. Err</b>	<b>z value</b>	<b>Pr(&gt; z )</b>
<i>Aggressor Nuclear Status</i>	has nuclear weapons	0.0028	0.0218	0.1261	0.90
<i>Aggressor Regime Type</i>	democratic	-0.0302	0.0218	-1.3850	0.17
<i>Aggressor Trade Relationship with US</i>	minor US trade partner	0.0196	0.0266	0.7370	0.46
	not a significant US trade partner	0.0359	0.0268	1.3420	0.18
<i>Likely US Casualties</i>	moderate US casualties	-0.1112	0.0271	-4.1011	0.00***
<i>Likely US Casualties</i>	severe US casualties	-0.2141	0.0266	-8.0525	0.00***
<i>Region</i>	Europe	0.0078	0.0264	0.2965	0.77
	Middle East	0.0227	0.0266	0.8560	0.39
<i>Victim Alliance Status</i>	treaty of mutual defense with the USA	0.1782	0.0218	8.1633	0.00***
<i>Victim Nuclear Status</i>	has nuclear weapons	-0.0074	0.0218	-0.3407	0.73
<i>Victim Proximity to US Forces</i>	has US base on its territory	0.0954	0.0265	3.6002	0.00***
	is not near a US base	0.0359	0.0267	1.3457	0.18
<i>Victim Regime Type</i>	democratic	0.0186	0.0219	0.8490	0.40
<i>Victim Trade Relationship with US</i>	minor US trade partner	-0.0970	0.0270	-3.5970	0.00***
	no trade relations	-0.1968	0.0266	-7.3934	0.00***

Aggressor Nuclear Status:  
 (Baseline = does not have nuclear weapons)  
 has nuclear weapons

Aggressor Regime Type:  
 (Baseline = autocratic)  
 democratic

Aggressor Trade Relationship with US:  
 (Baseline = major US trade partner)  
 minor US trade partner  
 not a significant US trade partner

Likely US Casualties:  
 (Baseline = light US casualties)  
 moderate US casualties  
 severe US casualties

Region:  
 (Baseline = Asia)  
 Europe  
 Middle East

Victim Alliance Status:  
 (Baseline = does not have a treaty of mutual defense with the USA)  
 has a treaty of mutual defense with the USA

Victim Nuclear Status:  
 (Baseline = does not have nuclear weapons)  
 has nuclear weapons

Victim Proximity to US Forces:  
 (Baseline = does not have a US base on its territory)  
 has US base on its territory  
 is not near a US base

Victim Regime Type:  
 (Baseline = autocratic)  
 democratic

Victim Trade Relationship with US:  
 (Baseline = major US trade partner)  
 minor US trade partner  
 no trade relations

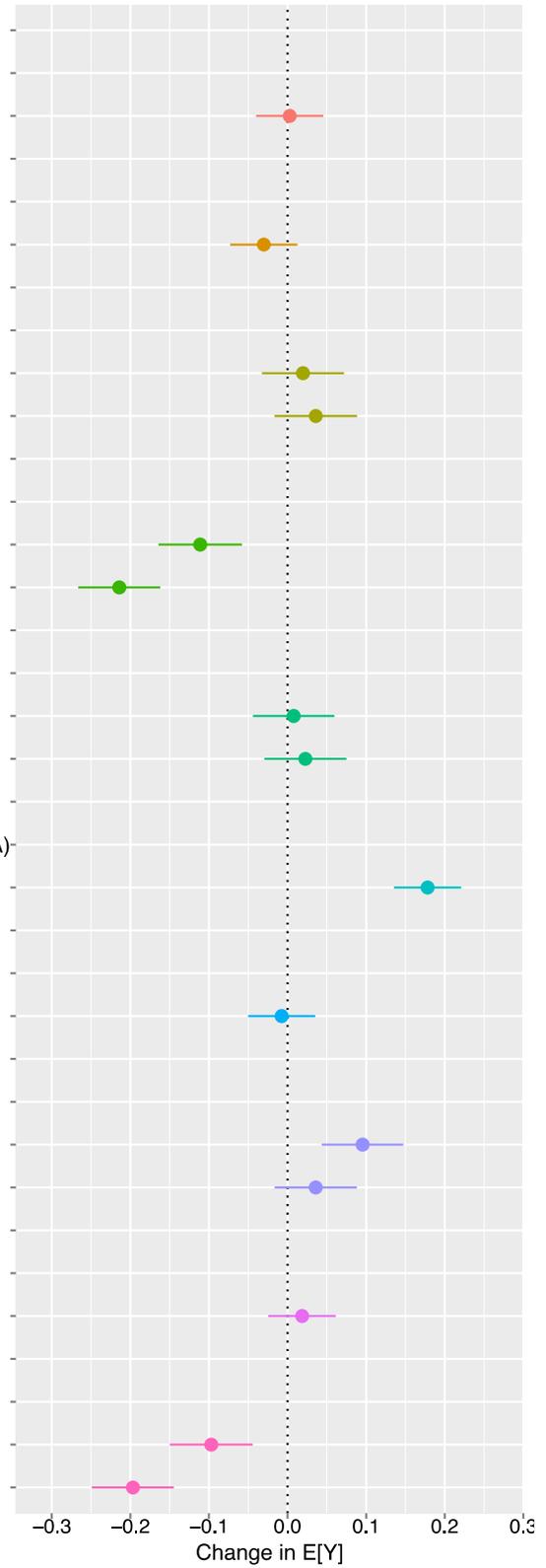


Figure 1. Results of conjoint pilot survey.

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