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**Stephen Brooks, John Ikenberry and William Wohlforth. "Don't Come Home, America: The Case against Retrenchment."** *International Security*, Vol.37, No. 3 (Winter 2012/2013): 7-51.

Reviewed by Colin Dueck, George Mason University

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Response by **Michael D. Cohen**, University of Southern Denmark

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In their recent article "Don't Come Home America: The Case against Retrenchment," Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry and William C. Wohlforth (hereafter referred to as BIW) argue that the prevailing scholarly wisdom on U.S. grand strategy is wrong.<sup>1</sup> This wisdom states that the U.S. should curtail or eliminate its overseas military presence and security commitments and minimize or eschew its efforts to lead the liberal institutional order.<sup>2</sup> The costs

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Brooks, G. John Ikenberry and William Wohlforth, "Don't Come Home America: The Case against Retrenchment," *International Security* (Vol. 37, Iss. 3) 7-51.

<sup>2</sup> Barry R. Posen, "The Case for Restraint," *American Interest*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (November/December 2007), 7-17; Stephen M. Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006); John J. Mearsheimer, "Imperial by Design," *National Interest*, No. 111 (January/February 2011), 16-34; Eugene Gholz, Daryl G. Press, and Harvey M. Sapolsky, "Come Home, America: The Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation," *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (Spring 1997), 5-48; Paul K. MacDonald and Joseph M. Parent, "Graceful Decline? The Surprising Success of

of the United States' strategy of 'deep engagement' with the world have been exaggerated, according to BIW, and its benefits neglected. Their article is an important contribution because it is the first to make a strong case for deep engagement that is grounded in International Relations theory. In claiming that deep engagement is the cure-all, however, BIW go too far. It is one thing to claim that the costs of retrenchment would be too high, and another to claim that deep engagement and only deep engagement could have caused the outcomes attributed to it. The second claim may not be correct and does not follow from the first.

Most of BIW's claims are severely undermined by the fact that a different U.S. grand strategy such as 'offshore balancing' could have had similar or more desirable effects than those that BIW attribute to deep engagement. It is possible that deep engagement has distinct and more desirable effects than strategies such as offshore balancing, but much more than what BIW offer is required to sustain this argument. Furthermore, their tendency to sometimes not specify exactly what 'deep engagement' looks like – a weakness that of course afflicts most of this literature – further exacerbates this problem. I here outline how these problems undermine BIW's claims. BIW chop and change throughout their article from discussing the limits of retrenchment to showing the strengths of deep engagement. I argue here that it is not clear that deep engagement is necessary or sufficient for the outcomes that BIW attribute to it.

BIW succinctly summarise their argument when they claim that “without the security commitments, U.S. leverage for leadership on both security and non-security issues declines. Leadership facilitates cooperation to address security challenges and expand the global economy, and moves the cooperative equilibrium closer to U.S. preferences” (11). The problem with this claim is that we do not know what effect weaker security commitments would have on different aspects of U.S. leadership. Similarly, while *no* leadership might cause undesirable consequences for the United States, it is not clear whether less (or more) – and this is where the grand strategy debate resides – would have similar effects. Thus while Colin Dueck concluded his H-Diplo review<sup>3</sup> by claiming that the coming question is whether the United States should *dismantle* the broad set of security commitments it inherited from the past seventy years, a more appropriate word might be *revise*. To more conclusively address this issue, scholars need to more rigorously define 'leadership' and establish the relationship between variation in security commitments and variation in leadership success as well as variation in leadership and variation in cooperation.

### *The Costs of Deep Engagement*

I don't address budgetary costs because BIW note that there is no consensus regarding the budgetary costs of 'deep engagement' and its alternatives. BIW show that the United States can sustain the budgetary costs of deep engagement (18), although the alternatives that fall short of full disengagement “might promise some savings” (17). Nonetheless, International Relations

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Great Power Retrenchment,” *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Spring 2011), 7–44; Christopher A. Preble, *Power Problem: How American Military Dominance Makes Us Less Safe, Less Prosperous, and Less Free* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2009); Christopher Layne, “From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America's Future Grand Strategy,” *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (Summer 1997), 86–124 and Christopher Layne, “Offshore Balancing Revisited,” *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Spring 2002), 233–248.

<sup>3</sup> <http://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/ISSF-AR20.pdf>

scholarship has a ways to progress before we can confidently proclaim that it strongly supports deep engagement.

BIW claim that “the current grand strategy of deep engagement runs no risk of generating “hard” counterbalancing” (20). But this says nothing about whether other strategies would generate hard balancing. It is possible that, given U.S. unipolarity, other grand strategies would also produce no hard counterbalancing. The more important question may be how much less relative power the United States must have before hard counterbalancing would occur.<sup>4</sup> BIW note that U.S. military pre-eminence is unlikely to spark a diffusion of military power (20). But military pre-eminence is consistent with most serious U.S. grand strategies. We need to know how much relative power the United States needs to prevent diffusions of military power. Moreover, if the diffusion of military power to rivals is unlikely, the United States need be less concerned with preventing regional allies and adversaries from increasing their military capabilities. It is thus odd that BIW to proceed to claim that “a United States less committed to global leadership with a less dominant military posture would have far less capacity to control the diffusion of military power” (21-22). If military power is unlikely to diffuse, preventing its diffusion should not be a central goal of a U.S. grand strategy. Forms of global leadership and military posture other than deep engagement may similarly influence the diffusion of military power and better fit U.S. interests. Similarly, BIW’s claim that “securing partners and allies in key regions reduces their incentives to generate military capabilities” is undermined by the fact that these incentives may not be able to be realized (21). Not only might strategies other than deep engagement also be able to secure these allies and partners, but it is unclear whether any strategy can prevent a determined partner from transferring sensitive technology to potential rivals.<sup>5</sup>

BIW explain that the concern of many that deep engagement would cause the United States to be dragged into conflicts that it had no interest in fighting – entrapment – is unfounded. Most alliances are written to protect the more powerful state from entrapment (29). But this does not do away with the problem that different alliances in different grand strategies may also prevent entrapment and serve U.S. interests. Here again, BIW’s theory and evidence do not show that deep engagement is necessarily the way to go.

BIW also argue that the problem with the argument that peerless military capabilities will lead to an expansion of U.S. interests that will drag the country into wars is that “it would look much different without Iraq in the picture” (31). Even if we accept the measurement of overall casualties relative to population size, the Iraq war is very much in the picture. Whether or not it would have occurred without President George W. Bush, just one war that many now agree was unnecessarily costly is a serious cost of deep engagement. Moreover, if we abstract from combat losses to the initial decision to use large-scale offensive military power and consider the regional consequences for the United States in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and perhaps Syria, Iran and elsewhere in the future, the costs of U.S. military pre-eminence look very different. BIW argue that Iraq has generated a Vietnam syndrome for the post-Cold War era (33) and that the Barack Obama Doctrine is ‘no more Iraqs.’ But it is unclear that future presidents will not commit the

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<sup>4</sup> For a position on this and a summary of the literature see Davide Fiammenghi, “The Security Curve and the Structure of International Politics: A Neorealist Synthesis,” *International Security* 35: 4, 126-154

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Matthew Kroenig, *Exporting the Bomb: Technology Transfer and the Spread of Nuclear Weapons* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

United States to such wars. A new president who learned different lessons from Iraq may well bring the United States to war again in the Middle East or East Asia. It should also be noted that if U.S. power rather than U.S. grand strategy caused these wars, different grand strategies than deep engagement may have had similar effects.

### *The Benefits of Deep Engagement*

BIW claim that core U.S. alliances “deter states with aspirations to regional hegemony from contemplating expansion and makes its partners more secure, reducing their incentive to adopt solutions to their security problems that threaten others” (34). But this is a hypothesis to be tested, not a definitive conclusion. How can we know what Chinese, Japanese and South Korean behavior would have occurred with different (or absent) U.S. alliances in East Asia? It is not clear that China has sought and will seek regional hegemony, and that the United States needs to “maintain key alliance relationships in Asia as well as the formidable military capability to intervene there to achieve its regional objectives” (39). The grounds for claiming that the United States can substantially influence important aspects of Israeli, Egyptian, South Korean or Japanese behavior are weaker than BIW assert. Once again, different alliances could have had similar results. Even if BIW are correct that retrenchment would cause Japan and South Korea to develop nuclear weapons, this says nothing about which of the many alternatives to deep engagement would best achieve U.S. regional objectives.

BIW argue that avoiding wars and security dilemmas in the world’s core regions is in the national U.S. interest because higher levels of conflict make the world more dangerous and that this type of conflict would promote a diffusion of military power away from the United States (37). But the United States cannot prevent all conflict, and BIW earlier argued earlier in their article that a diffusion of military power away from the United States is unlikely (20).

BIW address the challenge of proliferation cascades and argue that “the debate over the stability of proliferation changes as the numbers go up” (37-38). But leaving aside the important questions of whether proliferation cascades occur and whether deep engagement is the best strategy to prevent them, there is no theory or evidence that supports this proposition. How has the impact of nuclear proliferation on state conflict propensity changed from the 1950s-world of three nuclear powers to the current world of eight or nine? Nuclear proliferation has occasionally caused instability and mostly promoted stability, and there is no reason to expect this to change if the numbers increase further.<sup>6</sup>

BIW claim that the security commitments of deep engagement support the global economic order by reducing the likelihood of security dilemmas, arms racing, instability, regional conflicts and, in extremis, major power war (41). But here again it is unclear that deep engagement is necessary to do this. Maintaining sea lanes and shipping corridors and protecting property and sovereignty rights does not necessarily require deep engagement. The problem is highlighted when BIW ask whether hegemonic leadership makes the continuation of global economic stability more likely (42). The more important question at the heart of the grand strategy debate is what sort of leadership is required, and whether deep engagement, offshore balancing or some other strategy will realise given objectives. BIW do not show that deep engagement will realise

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<sup>6</sup> I further address the relationship between nuclear proliferation and state conflict propensity in a book manuscript titled *When Nuclear Proliferation Causes Peace: Leaders and the Psychology of Nuclear Learning*.

U.S. strategic objectives better than its alternatives. We need to know which sorts of economic and security leadership have what effects in different regions and issue areas. Similarly, to the extent that “the American military role...means that the provision of protective force can be used in bargaining situations,” (43) we need to know which military roles have what effects. Again, it is not clear that deep engagement is the cure-all. Knowing that alliance ties help gain favourable outcomes on trade and other economic issues (43-44) says little about whether variation in these alliances and the grand strategy in which they were embedded would have had similar effects. Perhaps other alliances and different strategies of coercion or bargaining could have achieved the same outcomes at less cost.

BIW argue that deep engagement enables leadership that fosters institutionalized cooperation that offers a wide range of benefits (46-47). The problem here is that there is nothing in the literature on this subject that suggests that a number of other grand strategies, given U.S. unipolarity, could not also offer the same. And to the degree that the existing U.S.-led security system puts the United States in a stronger position than it otherwise would be to strike bargains and share burdens of security cooperation (48-49), grand strategies other than deep engagement may also achieve this. Thus Dueck argued in his H-Diplo review piece (3) that the benefits of institutionalized and multilateral cooperation should be judged on a case by case basis.

### *Conclusion*

BIW have made an important contribution in showing that realism does not yield an unambiguous verdict in favour of retrenchment. But they claim too much in insisting that the preponderance of International Relations theory expects the United States to pursue a grand strategy of deep engagement after the Cold War. It is possible that several other strategies could have had caused similar outcomes to those that BIW attribute to deep engagement and that these alternatives may be less costly and/or more beneficial than deep engagement. The U.S. grand strategy debate needs to mature beyond assessing generic strategies to establishing the impact of specific policies in different regions, both during and after the Cold War. BIW have made an important step in this direction, but much remains to be done.

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