

EPIS BASICS: THE US GRAND STRATEGY SPECTRUM

In EPIS Basics, our authors explain basic knowledge of international foreign affairs and security policies. This encompasses basic theories, organisations and events. This series is presented in depth here in the magazine. You can also find other smaller contributions on our Instagram page

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Separated by two Oceans from the tumultuous geopolitics of Europe and Asia, America enjoys unprecedented leeway in the choice of its foreign policy. For other states, foreign policy is a product of necessity born out of circumstance. In contrast, America has the luxury of choosing along a spectrum of four broad grand strategy choices: isolationism, offshore balancing, selective engagement, and hegemony. With the 2024 US presidential election constituting a watershed moment in US foreign policy, this instalment of EPIS basics is dedicated to charting the aforementioned US foreign policy postures.

Isolationism

Strategies advocating for the US's disengagement from alliances in areas other than North (and South) America have been captured under the umbrella term of "isolationism". With Trump's "America First" dictum, US isolationism has resurged. However, readers should remain acute that isolationism is not entirely novel to the US foreign policy tradition. Indeed, the 1920s and 1930s saw the US refusal to join the League of Nations and enter the Second World War in 1939.

Offshore Balancing

Offshore balancing differs from isolationism in recognising the importance of alliances for US power projection. In particular, this goes for the regions of Europe, the Persian Gulf, and East Asia. Nevertheless, proponents of offshore balancing, like the scholars John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, remain sceptical of US troop deployment overseas. Instead, regional allies should constitute the first line of defence. Only if the risk arises of a regional power disrupting the regional balance of power and challenging the US does offshore balancing advocate for direct US involvement overseas.

Selective Engagement

Selective engagement shares with offshore balancing the desire to maintain a balance of power favourable to the US. However, selective engagement advocates for a stronger overseas presence, most notably by strengthening US military bases overseas. Joseph Biden can likely be located in the selective engagement camp.

Hegemony

Under this foreign policy, America strives to be the undisputed hegemon in a respective region, allowing no regional power to emerge. Since the advent of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, America has pursued a strategy of hegemony in North and South America. However, it has rarely projected this stance to other regions. An arguable exception came in the early 2000s when the George W. Bush administration invaded Afghanistan and Iraq. In doing so, the US departed from its previous strategy of maintaining a balance of power favourable to the US in the Middle East.

Quo Vadis, America?

Naturally, the distinction between isolationism, offshore balancing, selective engagement, and hegemony represents a rudimentary breakdown of American foreign policy. Nuances in the means towards America's foreign policy ends remain. For example, differences can be found between American exceptionalism and internationalism. Both advocate for greater US involvement abroad but differ in the importance of international regimes in achieving greater US influence overseas. Nevertheless, the above-presented distinctions constitute a basic map for readers to make sense of US foreign policy and how it might change after November's presidential election.