

# Balancing Threat: The United States and The Middle East

AN INTERVIEW WITH STEPHEN M. WALT, PH.D.

**YJIA:** For those unfamiliar with your balance-of-threat theory, could you briefly explain how this theory describes the nature of the international system and its agents? How does this inform our understanding of international relations today?

Stephen Walt: Balance-of-threat theory argues that states generally act to *balance* the greatest threats to their security. The degree to which a state threatens others is a function of four factors: its aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and offensive intentions. Other things being equal, states that are close by are more dangerous than those that are far away. States with large offensive military capabilities are more dangerous than those whose armed forces are largely suitable for defending their own territory. Lastly, states with clearly aggressive intentions tend to provoke more opposition than those who seek primarily to uphold the status quo.

Balance-of-threat theory does a good job of explaining why the United States was able to form a large and powerful coalition to contain the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The U.S.S.R. possessed significant aggregate power, was close to other key centers of world power, had large offensive capabilities, and at different times proclaimed openly revisionist aims. The United States was stronger overall, but geographically separated from other key power centers in Europe and Asia and thus a more appealing ally.

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The theory also explains why Saddam Hussein's Iraq faced overwhelming opposition after the invasion of Kuwait in 1990 (i.e., Iraq's modest power was compounded by its aggressive aims and its proximity to key oil-producing areas).

Finally, the theory also helps us understand why there has been relatively little overt balancing against the United States since the end of the Cold War, despite the considerable imbalance of power in its favor. First, the United States is geographically distant from other major powers, and thus does not threaten their sovereignty in any meaningful way. Second, many medium powers are primarily worried about local threats, and they often see American power as a useful way to balance those more proximate dangers. Third, the targets of U.S. power have tended to be isolated and unpopular regimes such as Serbia, Iraq, Iran, and North Korea. At the same time, the imprudent or capricious use of American power has clearly undermined America's global standing and encouraged a number of U.S. allies to distance themselves from us, a result that is also consistent with the thrust of the theory.

**YJIA: You've been very critical of the Obama Administration's policies in the Middle East (in particular Israel and the Palestinian Territories) and Afghanistan. How do you see the administration dealing with these challenges in the next couple of years and what do you prescribe?**

SW: The Obama administration took office promising to move quickly to achieve a two-state solution between Israel and the Palestinians. As President Obama put it in his Cairo speech in May 2009, two states for two peoples is "in America's interest, the Palestinians' interest, Israel's interest, and the world's interest." However, Obama's call for a complete freeze in Israeli settlement expansion was rejected by the Netanyahu government, and Obama was unable because of the power of the Israel lobby here in the United States to put serious pressure on Jerusalem. Indeed, the administration's policies since the Cairo speech have been a humiliating retreat.

Unfortunately, I do not expect this situation to change. Despite the frictions that emerged during Vice President Joe Biden's visit to Israel, I see no sign that the Obama administration is willing to make U.S. support for Israel conditional on an end to settlements and the creation of a viable Palestinian state. In other words, the current "special relationship" is going to continue, instead of a more normal relationship akin to our relations with other democracies. And this means that Israel's attempt to colonize the West Bank will continue largely unabated.

The result will be disastrous for two peoples who have already endured more than their share of suffering: the "two-state" solution will soon be impossible

and Israel will become an apartheid state. This is not good for the United States, not good for Israel, and of course not good for the stateless Palestinians.

Afghanistan is a different story. Obama painted himself into a corner by calling it a “war of necessity” soon after taking office, and he probably felt that he had little choice but to escalate the war last Fall. I believe this was a strategic misstep, because the outcome in Afghanistan is not in fact critical to U.S. security. Moreover, the Afghan government is not a reliable partner for us, and the Taliban can retreat to Pakistan and wait us out. It will take many years and billions of dollars for us to stand a chance of stabilizing Afghanistan; and even in the unlikely event that we succeed, the effects on the campaign against Al Qaeda will be minimal. Al Qaeda now has cells in many places, and it no longer needs Afghan territory as a “safe haven.” And even if the Taliban were to regain power in Afghanistan, Al Qaeda could not organize extensive bases there for fear that we would bomb them.

In short, victory in Afghanistan won’t eliminate Al Qaeda—which is what we care about—while withdrawing won’t make Al Qaeda significantly more dangerous to us. And while we are spending \$100 billion or more in Afghanistan each year (on a country whose GDP is roughly \$12 billion) we are neglecting other strategic priorities. Our best hope is for some tactical successes over the next year, which will provide Obama with an opportunity to “declare victory,” negotiate a power-sharing arrangement between the Karzai government and more moderate Taliban elements, and then withdraw U.S. military forces.

**YJIA: Your book *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* with John Mearsheimer has been highly controversial since its release in 2007. Do you think this argument is still valid given the rise of left-wing lobby groups like J Street and the recent Goldstone Report?**

SW: Yes. The power of the mainstream groups in the lobby—such as AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee), the ADL (Anti-Defamation League), and the Conference of Presidents—remains formidable. Obama, Clinton, and McCain pandered to these groups during the 2008 presidential campaign, and the lobby’s power was demonstrated anew when it derailed the appointment of Chas Freeman, a distinguished diplomat and public servant, to chair the National Intelligence Council right after Obama was sworn in. Similarly, AIPAC played a key role in the Congressional Resolution that condemned the Goldstone Report last August, and Obama’s inability to take on these powerful groups explains why Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu was able to defy the president’s call for a complete settlement freeze.

The emergence of J Street is a sign that many American supporters of Israel are realizing that a two-state solution is necessary to preserve Israel's long-term future and to eliminate one of the key sources of anti-Americanism in the region. It is an encouraging development and indeed it is one that we recommended in the conclusion of our book. But J Street has a long way to go before it can match the political power of hard-line groups like AIPAC or some of the so-called Christian Zionist groups like Christians United for Israel. I might note that although AIPAC and the Christian Zionists claim to be "pro-Israel," the policies they favor are in fact unintentionally harmful to the US and Israel alike.

We wrote the book to break the taboo that had grown up around talking critically about Israeli policy and America's special relationship with Israel. Perhaps the most encouraging development since its publication is the emergence of more open debate on these issues. Commentators now talk openly about the "Israel lobby" and its influence, and there is an increasingly lively debate about U.S. Middle East policy, especially in the blogosphere and outside so-called "mainstream media." This is a very healthy trend; I only hope that it is not too late for the two-state solution.

**YJIA: As a professor at Harvard and a commentator for *Foreign Policy* you have placed yourself squarely in academia and the policy world. You have highlighted the relationship between the two in your blog. What do you think ought to be the role of academics in the policy realm?**

SW: Scholarship and policy-making are two different realms, but they ought to be closely connected in clear and discernible ways. First, scholars need to know a great deal about what goes on in the policy world to theorize intelligently, and policymakers will profit if they can get analysis and advice from scholars who have expertise on matters that policymakers care about. Second, I think scholars have a responsibility to investigate vital real-world issues, and especially controversial ones. This is why we have tenure and why our society devotes considerable resources to supporting a robust academic community. As scholars, we pay that investment back by using our training and our insights to suggest solutions to real-world problems. Of course, none of us has the right answer all the time, which is why it always makes sense to have open and lively debates on vital topics. This does not mean that scholars should focus their efforts on writing op-eds or appearing on TV, however. That would actually be foolish because an academic's comparative advantage lies in his or her capacity to dig deep into a difficult problem, to see the big picture, to take positions that are at odds with the conventional wisdom or the passions of the moment, and to create novel ways of understanding (i.e., new theories)

about contemporary issues. But the key point is that these two worlds should not be isolated from each other.

**YJIA: In what ways has the notion of “security”—both academically and politically—changed throughout your career?**

SW: When I entered graduate school, “security” was usually conceived in terms of military power, and there was very strong emphasis on nuclear weapons issues. Topics like terrorism, counter-insurgency, and the various “non-traditional” forms of security were generally seen as secondary. Since then, of course, there has been greater interest in civil wars, terrorism, and other forms of “non-state” violence, as well as a tendency to define “security” as almost anything that might threaten human welfare. Accordingly, some people argue that “security studies” ought to include climate change, public health, domestic crime, etc.

My own view is that the field should continue to focus on organized violence—which has always been a central part of the human experience—but that the precise content of the field and the topics that get special attention should be driven largely by world events.

**YJIA: Looking out to the next decade, what do you think are the top five security threats to the United States and how do you see the United States dealing with them?**

SW: Questions like this are dangerous for scholars, because forecasting the future in politics is a tricky business and even the best scholars make their fair share of bad calls. But let me take a stab at it. I’d offer the following items, which are not in order of importance:

**1. *Overstating Threats.*** Paradoxically, I think one of the main dangers to U.S. security is our tendency to greatly exaggerate the threats we face. To paraphrase Franklin Roosevelt, “we have nothing to fear but (exaggerated) fear itself.” The United States has the world’s largest economy, it spends more on national security than that rest of the world combined, it has several thousand nuclear weapons, a navy second-to-none, and it is protected from many dangers by two enormous oceans. We are, in short, the most secure great power in modern history. Yet we seem to live in a remarkable state of paranoia, seeing third-rate powers as looming dangers and even being too scared to try a terrorist like Khalid Sheikh Muhammed in a civilian court. At a minimum, exaggerating threats in this fashion leads us to waste resources; at a maximum, it leads to great follies like the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

**2. Sino–American relations.** History suggests that the two strongest states in the international system rarely have good relations, and realist theory explains why. Although I do not think war between the United States and China is likely in my lifetime, I do think there will be increasing security competition between these two states, assuming China’s power continues to rise. Maintaining peace will require careful management and mature conduct by Beijing as well as Washington, but it is hard to be confident that both can do that consistently.

**3. WMD terrorism.** I am more sanguine about the risk of “nuclear terrorism” than some of my colleagues, because I think the likelihood of a nihilistic terrorist organization acquiring and using a nuclear device is very low. However, because the consequences of a nuclear terrorist attack would make 9/11 look like a minor event, the United States—and every other country in the world for that matter—should go to great lengths to reduce the number of nuclear weapons in the world and to increase the security of the world’s nuclear stockpiles.

**4. Imperial Overstretch.** Over the next decade, the United States will be facing near-record deficits, a sluggish economy, an aging population, fiscal problems at the state and local level, crumbling infrastructure at home, and a set of counter-productive military commitments that serve no vital strategic purpose. Unfortunately, there is now a well-funded and well-developed set of organizations and institutions—most of them located inside the Beltway—whose main mission is to convince the American public that they are terribly insecure and that our safety depends on intervening all over the world. By contrast, there are relatively few voices favoring a more restrained policy. The United States should not return to isolationism, but it should move back toward its traditional strategy as an “offshore balancer.” In practice, that means it should rely on local allies to preserve the balance-of-power in critical regions and stay away from ill-conceived efforts at “nation-building” in societies that we do not understand and where we are not welcome.

**5. Absence of Accountability.** Finally, I worry about the lack of accountability that seems to pervade our political institutions here at home. A sex scandal can derail a politician’s career—at least sometimes—but repeated demonstrations of incompetence do not seem to have much effect on anyone’s career. For example, U.S. Middle East policy remains in the hands of some of the same people who have mismanaged the peace process in the past, and the architects of the disastrous invasion of Iraq continue to be regarded by the mainstream media as experts on strategy and foreign policy. This is not a partisan statement, by the way: if you look at Obama’s top foreign policy appointees, virtually all of them foolishly supported going to war in 2003.

F. Scott Fitzgerald had it exactly wrong when he said, “There are no second acts in American lives.” There appear to be an infinite number of second chances in American life. And when someone like Glenn Beck can command a huge audience for his ravings, it is hard to retain much confidence in our society’s ability to formulate and execute smart policies. If we don’t go back to having reasoned debates about important foreign policy issues and holding experts and policymakers accountable for their mistakes, we are going to continue stumbling from one foreign policy mishap to another. ■