

Kelly Brownell:

Hello and welcome to Policy 360. I'm Kelly Brownell, Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. I'm very pleased to be joined once again by Peter Feaver. Peter is Professor of Political Science and Public Policy at Duke University. He also directs two programs, one focused on security studies and another on American grand strategy. Peter served in the White House during two administrations, one Republican, one Democratic, during the George W. Bush era, Peter served as special advisor for strategic planning and institutional reform on the National Security Council. He also served as Director for Defense Policy and Arms Control on the National Security Council during the Clinton administration. Welcome Peter.

Peter Feaver:

Thanks for having me.

Kelly Brownell:

On this podcast we're going to talk about an article that you've co-written with historian Hal Brands for foreign affairs on the idea of offshore balancing. Can you explain what the term means?

Peter Feaver:

Well, offshore balancing is an approach to grand strategy some states have taken over the past several centuries. It's when you seek to maintain balances of power that are favorable to you in a region, not by being present in the region, but by working offshore from the distance through local proxies. And so the classic example of that is the 1930s. The U.S. Was not directly involved in Europe, but of course we cared about what was happening in the shifting balance of power in Europe and we tried to work through other partners, chiefly England and France and others, to count on them to maintain a balance of power that would be acceptable to the United States. And if you're going to do that, it's a much cheaper way to conduct your business. And so offshore balancing is attractive, particularly in academic settings. It's an attractive alternative grand strategy to the more expensive, onshore balancing commitment where you have U.S. forces onshore helping to maintain the balance.

Kelly Brownell:

So you've argued in your research that offshore balancing is not a good idea. Why is that?

Peter Feaver:

Well, this article grew out of a course that Hal Brands, who at the time, was my colleague here at Sanford. He's now at Johns Hopkins, and we taught a course on American grand strategy and there was a prominent argument that's very popular in academic circles that says we can save a lot of money. America's strategy over the last 25 years has been too expensive and we could save money if only we shifted to offshore balancing. Some very prominent academics had written articles advocating this and our students found it very engaging and Hal and I realized that what was missing was the other side of the argument. It was a one-sided argument and there wasn't a good equivalent piece that explained why this thing that seems so attractive in an academic seminar is continually rejected by policymakers.

And I've worked in government. Hal brands has also been advising Secretary of Defense Ash Carter and we were struck by how the academic argument in favor of offshore balancing was missing all the risks that seemed so obvious to policymakers as they would weigh this strategy and so that's what the paper did. The example of the 1930s makes it vivid. So yes, the United States saved a lot of money in

the 1930s, not having a large military and relying on our European friends to manage European affairs and so long as European affairs could reliably be believed to stay in Europe, then we didn't need to maintain a large and expensive national security apparatus. The problem is that offshore balancing as a strategy requires that you fight your way on shore when the local balance becomes impossibly imbalanced.

And of course that happened when Nazi Germany, when Hitler rose to power and one by one, he was taking over other sovereign states in Europe and threatening to become a, not just a European [inaudible 00:04:41], but one that could threaten globally. And by the time it became clear that we couldn't count on our partners to manage this, the price of fighting onshore had reached just a horrendous level. And so D-Day, which is the vivid illustration of us finishing off the offshore balancing strategy, fighting our way on shore, on the beaches of Normandy and then from there going all the way to Berlin to defeat Germany and to restore a favorable balance of power. Well, you could say that's an illustration of offshore balancing working. See, eventually we were able to restore a balance of power. But the national security leaders in the United States immediately after World War Two recognized that was a horrible price to pay, several hundred thousand U.S. then trillions of dollars expended to restore a balance of power that could have perhaps been more cheaply preserved some other way.

And so after 1945, the American leaders rejected offshore balancing. They said, "No, the better way to advance America's interest is onshore balancing." So permanent indefinite deployment of U.S. Troops, not just in Europe, but also in Japan to address the similar problem there and leaders flirted with offshore balancing in Korea for about five years. Didn't work, North Korea invades, and they say, "You know what? We need to do onshore balancing in Korea as well." And that is the indefinite commitment to South Korea. And those forces are there today 60, 70 years after they first went there. And as the 2016 election showed, you can have an argument about "Boy, are we spending too much on keeping troops in NATO or keeping troops in Japan?" And it makes some political hay out of it. But at the end of the day, when you compare the true costs of maintaining an onshore balance position against the risks of the offshore balancing strategy, time and time again, our political leaders have said it's cheaper to do onshore balancing, and that's what our article argues.

Kelly Brownell:

So that requires politicians in office to take a long view of things because the most immediate benefit for them would be to spend as little money as possible. You have more money to do other things, balance the national budget and do things like that. So how does that play out in politics with the long versus short-term view?

Peter Feaver:

Well, that's exactly right. Offshore balancing seems to offer win-win. You can have all your interests protected and for less money. That's the classic political siren song. And if you only look at the issue through a short-term lens, then you might be tempted to do that. But once you are responsible for the long-term downside consequences of those of a short-term only policy, then the risks come more clearly into focus.

And so political leaders have recognized that you actually get more cooperation from local allies when they see that you have skin in the game alongside them. It's hard to get other actors to operate in ways you want them to operate if you're not there alongside pushing and in the case of the United States, leading from behind doesn't work. Now in the last eight years or so, we've tried this experiment in several cases. There was an onshore balancing operation in Iraq, the Iraq war, which proved terribly costly, and didn't go as well as the Bush administration thought it would and in response, President

Obama shifted to an offshore balancing approach in Iraq. And so from 2011 to about 2013, 2014, brought back us forces from Iraq and was trying to manage the Iraq situation in an offshore balancing way, working through local proxies.

What we discovered of course, was that the local proxies were not acting in ways conducive to our national interest. And we were not well positioned to prevent the rise of new threats, particularly the Islamic state. So that we're not able to stop them, they arose, Islamic state collapsed. The Iraq control over a significant portion of Iraqi territory and the U.S. was obliged to shift back to an onshore strategy at much higher costs. And so the bloody battle to liberate Mosul was a vivid illustration of how much more it can cost to reclaim lost territory than it would have cost to prevent the loss of territory in the first place. And so I suspect the next administration will conclude that the experiment with offshore balancing in Iraq, that the Obama administration did try, that that experiment was a failure and that it will be cheaper to maintain the favorable balances of power in the Middle East through some kind of modest onshore presence.

Kelly Brownell:

So I'll end with this question. Are there any circumstances under which offshore balancing might become a favorable strategy?

Peter Feaver:

Well, where we close the pieces, it's possible that the U.S. power will recede so much that our position will erode so much that we have no course but to take high risk, low cost strategies. Onshore balancing is a strategy of a wealthy nation. Offshore balancing is a strategy of a poorer nation. And if our global power and our domestic prosperity erodes to the point where we cannot afford an onshore balancing strategy, then at that point, we may be forced to take those risks. And we argue that we haven't reached that point, but that's arguably what the new administration in 2017, that's what that administration is going to be deciding. What kind of country are we? Are we a country in retreat, in inevitable decline? In which case we have to adopt some high risk strategies. Or are we a country that can be in renewal? In which case we can adopt some more expensive but safer strategies.

Kelly Brownell:

Well, thank you, Peter, a very thoughtful and interesting discussion. I appreciate you joining me today.

Peter Feaver:

Thank you for having me.

Kelly Brownell:

So I've been joined today by Peter Feaver. He's a Duke professor and Director of the Duke program in American grand strategy. He co-wrote the paper we have been discussing with historian Hal Brands, Johns Hopkins University. That paper is in the November/December 2016 issue of foreign affairs. Thank you very much for listening. I'm Kelly Brownell.