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Tearing Down the Facade: Power, Realism, and The War on Terror

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Tearing Down the Facade: Power, Realism, and The War on Terror

By Samirah Jaigirdar

A Senior Integrative Project for the Department of Government and International Relations
and the Toor Cummings Center for International Studies and the Liberal Arts

Advised by Professor Eric Fleury
Fall 2021

Connecticut College
New London, Connecticut
December 12, 2021

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Abstract

Realism is a powerful theoretical framework to analyze international relations, including the War on Terror. For realists, US foreign policy is a tool to achieve national interests that are defined by the pursuit of power and primacy. Twenty years after 9/11, the US is still pursuing the War on Terror in order to continue protecting and building their unipolar sphere of influence. This motivation makes the War on Terror an example of realist grand strategy. However, proponents of neorealism argue that US foreign policy is engulfed in a liberal crusader sentiment that spreads democracy. But the US's national security policies, such as the predator drone program and its strategy to combat ISIS, innately projects American power and reflects characteristics of offshore balancing in the Middle East and North Africa, a critical region to national security. Neorealists are critical of the War on Terror for projecting liberal hegemony, but they do not acknowledge that many aspects of the War on Terror follow their ideas of pursuing power, because it splits their theory from their policy preferences.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge several people for their time as I wrote this senior integrative project. First, my advisor, Professor Eric Fleury, for his endless support and feedback as this project developed. Second, Professor Andrew Levin for being an invaluable mentor throughout my time at Connecticut College. Both these professors have made a significant impact on my college career and I am grateful for their guidance. Third, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Dean Geoff Norbert for being a constant source of encouragement. Lastly, I would like to thank my CISLA cohort with whom I spent many late nights writing and getting coffee from Blue Camel.

Introduction

“In the anarchic world of international politics, it is better to be Godzilla than Bambi.”

- *John Mearsheimer*, 2006¹

John Mearsheimer's quote encapsulates how neorealists look at power in the international system. They insist that the US strive to be the most powerful and maintain its balance of power as long as possible. Nevertheless, when the US attempts to do it differently from what neorealists envision, they paint US foreign policy as a liberal hegemonic disaster. Over the past two decades, the War on Terror has featured some of the most realist foreign policy tendencies as it is a strategy designed to project US power globally. Neorealists are critical of the War on Terror for projecting liberal hegemony, but they do not acknowledge that many aspects of the War on Terror follow their ideas of pursuing power.

Realism is a robust theoretical framework to analyze international relations, including the War on Terror. For realists, foreign policy is a tool to achieve national interests defined in terms of power. Although there are variations of realism, they are unified by the belief that world politics is a field of conflict among actors pursuing wealth and power. Realism is often associated with *realpolitik* because both deal with the pursuit and possession of state power. Despite the core assumption that a realist grand strategy is imbued with the pursuit of power, most contemporary neorealists cannot acknowledge how the War on Terror aims to project American power all over the globe.. It now exists to preserve America's unipolar sphere of influence indefinitely.

¹ Mearsheimer, John J. “China's Unpeaceful Rise.” *Current History* 105, no. 690 (2006): 160–62

Since the War on Terror was codified into a grand strategy by the Bush administration, neorealists have insisted that American foreign policy can only exist in two forms: liberal or realist. The liberal logic purportedly dictates that the US continues its path of democratization to promote worldwide peace and the preferred realist alternative promotes an alternative grand strategy of offshore balancing that both preserves US primacy and depends on allies to clamp down on regional hegemons.² Proponents of offshore balancing believe that US foreign policy desperately needs to be corrected to reflect a less interventionist stance as the American empire cannot trump the nationalism of foreign states. Based on the balance of power logic, offshore balancers put forth a binary argument that US foreign policy will achieve its desired national interests at a low cost while building a society that other nations will admire and seek to replicate.³

After 9/11, war against terrorist organizations became an indispensable facet of US foreign policy. Regardless of the party in power, American foreign policy has adopted a heavily militarized approach to fight terror.⁴ The characterization of this strategy as the 'War on Terror' only sought to disseminate American power further abroad. Policymakers and academics understand that the US cannot fight a tactic that aims to advance and publicize a political agenda, but they *can* fight rogue actors in any place they deem to be threats.

Before 9/11, fighting Islamic militancy and terrorism was used more as a rhetorical tool for politicians to garner support for their campaign instead of a strategy codified in institutions. If the US used military force to retaliate against a state that sponsored or supported a terrorist

² Fleury, Eric, 2021. "Making Democracy Safe for Realism? Offshore Balancing and the Limits of a Rational U.S. Foreign Policy," unpublished manuscript.

³ Mearsheimer, John J. and Stephen M. Walt. 2016. "The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy." *Foreign Affairs*.

⁴ Fleury, Eric. 2019. *On Absolute War: Terrorism and the Logic of Armed Conflict*. Maryland: Lexington Books. 2

group, it was a coercive diplomatic tool rather than an ingrained ideology.⁵ The primary goal of coercive diplomatic efforts was to ensure that states were discouraged from similar actions in the future. However, the War on Terror was made possible by what Charles Krauthammer termed the US's "unipolar moment" as "the center of world power is the unchallenged superpower, the United States, attended by its western allies."⁶ Thanks to the primacy it achieved during the Cold War, the US influenced the international system and its norms and expectations under the guise of multilateralism.

Presently, the US has the power to set the discourse on a range of topics, from terrorism to preemptive war, and shape our understanding of the international system according to its terms. Additionally, the extended unipolar moment allowed American exceptionalism to embed itself into American politics. On the surface, American exceptionalism is a sentimental angle politicians use to attract voters. In reality, it is another name for a specific type of American power projection that has helped shape American foreign policy for the next few decades. This, in turn, has greatly influenced the international system and its norms. While President Donald Trump put a name to the 'America First' stance, the War on Terror cemented the implications of its adoption to the point where the US knew it was above international censure. The War on Terror is a distinct study of how the US took advantage of its unipolar moment to ensure that it could project American power anywhere and any time.

While the pursuit of power defines the War on Terror's parameters, politicians have sold this strategy to the public as an "us versus them" problem to convince them that militant Islamists must be deterred by any means necessary, portraying the militants' hatred for the US as

⁵ Fleury, 2019: 1

⁶ Ehrenberg, John, J. Patrice MacSherry, José Ramón Sánchez, and Caroleen Marji Sayej. 2010. *The Iraq Papers*. New York: Oxford University Press 3

endless.⁷ The proper response to such hatred was a coordinated military strategy to completely eradicate militant Islam in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. This sentiment was codified into both policy and political discourse by the George W. Bush administration with the idea that “great powers never have, and never will, just mind their own business within their borders.”⁸ This rhetoric has caused neorealists, such as John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, to characterize the War on Terror as a liberal moral crusade that imposes the American empire onto other regions in a bid to democratize them.

By analyzing counterterrorism policies and strategies to fight the Islamic State from the Obama-Trump era, this article dispels the belief that the War on Terror is a liberal hegemonic strategy. Instead, this article argues that the War on Terror is a realist grand strategy, including policies that emulate characteristics of offshore balancing. To do this, I will be analyzing selected counterterrorism policies from the Obama and Trump administrations. I chose these two administrations as they had to grapple with the legacy of the Bush administration’s War on Terror policies. After examining their respective uses of the Predator drone program and enhanced interrogation strategies, I examine how they handled ISIS. This is particularly important as we see how Obama and Trump chose to handle a terrorist group by projecting American military power and employing some aspects of offshore balancing - two inherently realist moves.

The United States used the War on Terror as a tool to impose its power worldwide with minimal checks and balances and change the normative structures that it adheres to when engaging with actors on the international stage. American impunity has enabled the US to unleash unchecked military power upon the MENA region with a straightforward realist goal: to

⁷ Lewis, Bernard. 1990. The Roots of Muslim Rage. *The Atlantic*.

⁸ Rice, Condoleeza, 2002. Remarks on Terrorism and Foreign Policy, *Johns Hopkins University*. (Ehrenberg et al, 2010: 64)

ingrain American power into every political facet of the region, thus ensuring that the balance of power always favors the US.

Section 1: Literature Review

Realism is one of the dominant schools of thought in international relations theory. It posits that in an anarchic world, every state pursues their self-interest. In the academy there are three main branches of realism. Classical realists believe interstate conflict derives from human nature; neorealists believe that the anarchic nature of the international stage influences conflict; and, neoclassical realists believe that conflict happens as a result of both, combined with domestic politics.⁹ Realism entails four core beliefs. First, states are the central actors in the international system, not international organizations or individuals. Second, the international system is anarchic in nature meaning that there is no central authority capable of reigning in state behavior. Third, states tend to act in their rational self-interest within the international system. Last, states rely mainly on relative power to survive self-preservation.¹⁰ Realism is primarily an academic pursuit that attempts to explain and predict state behavior through the pursuit, possession, and application of power. It is focused more on national interests rather than moral values which, in their understanding, goes against the conventional wisdom of American democratic ideals. They typically dismiss any moral aspirations as either doomed to fail or cynical attempts to cover up political motives.¹¹

Realists posit that the preservation of American power should primarily drive US foreign policy, whose overarching goal is to ensure the safety and prosperity of the United States. Below, I will explore how realists define US national interests in the MENA region, their characterization of the War on Terror as driven primarily by liberalism, and how realists envision

⁹ Donnelly, Jack, 2000. "Realism and International Relations." *Cambridge University Press*.

¹⁰ Donnelly, 2000: 6–8.

¹¹ Kaplan, Robert, 2021. "Why John J Mearsheimer Is Right (About Some Things)." *The Atlantic*. [Available Here](#).

fixing these problems. Lastly, I will show how realists use liberalism as a scapegoat to hide the shortcomings of realism.

American National Interests in the MENA

The US has three major national interests in the MENA region. Realists set forth that they are energy, the protection of Israel, and counterterrorism. These interests ensure that the balance of power is always maintained in the US's favor. The US interest in the Persian Gulf arises from the 50% of the planet's oil reserves concentrated there.¹² While the US only depends on 20% of its oil imports from the MENA, the market for oil is worldwide. Hence, if gulf oil was restricted, the price of oil would increase worldwide, and the US would pay more overall for energy. This would harm the US economy and have a negative impact on the world's economy as American hegemony is dependent on the relative stability in the trade of vital goods. According to Barry Posen, there are four possible security threats to oil in the MENA. First, an oil hegemon could arise through coercion or conquest; second, a hostile regime could come into power in a state that produces a lot of oil; third, a war could cause damage to oil producing infrastructure; and fourth, the US's failure to guard against these three threats would decrease their influence in the region which would tip the balance of power away from the US.¹³

Israel is the US's closest ally in the MENA region. As Israel is one of the strongest military powers in the MENA, having them as an ally ensures the balance of power is in the US's favor. According to Barry Posen, Israel's security could face two potential threats: terrorist attacks in its territory; and, attacks by long range biological, chemical or nuclear warhead.¹⁴ Given these, realists like John Mearsheimer and Posen believe that the US should limit its

¹² Posen, Barry. 2014. "Restraint : A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy." Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press. 106

¹³ Posen, 2014: 107

¹⁴ Posen, 2014: 113

military assistance to Israel as that is in both nations' favor. According to Posen, the US "through its military assistance to Israel, now indirectly subsidizes policies that are not in its interests."¹⁵ Instead, they can support Israel through arms sales and other offshore methods. While the US can limit its military aid to Israel, its investment in the relationship is important to maintain American power in the MENA region due to Israel's strategic position.

The third and most relevant national interest for this paper is the US's vested interest in counterterrorism in the MENA region. This interest involves dismantling existing terrorist networks, keeping tabs on emerging ones, and preventing hostile states from acquiring weapons of mass destruction (WMD). These can tip the favor away from American allies and the US.

The Realist Nightmare: Liberal Hegemony

Neorealists, including Barry Posen, John Mearsheimer, Stephen Walt, and Kenneth Waltz do not think the US is pursuing the aforementioned national interests in an appropriately realist manner. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US has "gradually converged on an activist grand strategy."¹⁶ In *The Great Delusion*, John Mearsheimer defines this as liberal hegemony which is "an ambitious strategy in which a state aims to turn as many countries as possible into liberal democracies like itself while also promoting an open international economy and building international institutions."¹⁷ According to him and Walt, though democracy and liberalism sometimes works well for domestic policies, it fails when a country tries to impose it on countries with different ideologies. Realists argue that as there is no international authority figure, the US - even as a dominant power - does not have full authority over the rules and norms of the international system. One of the core ideas of liberal hegemony is that the dominant state

¹⁵ Posen, 2014: 118

¹⁶ Posen, 2014: 5

¹⁷ Mearsheimer, John J. 2018. "Great Delusion : Liberal Dreams and International Realities." *Yale University Press*. 1

self-imposes rules about human rights and economic openness on others. Mearsheimer calls this a crusader-like impulse.¹⁸ Such interventions, he says, are doomed to fail because of nationalism.¹⁹ He further argues that the liberal state will end up fighting endless wars that increases the level of international conflict which may threaten its own liberal values as “liberalism abroad leads to illiberalism at home.”²⁰

According to Posen, proponents of liberal hegemony see the following as core national security threats - failed states, rogue states, and illiberal competitors.²¹ One of the ways this belief has manifested itself is the War on Terror in a post-9/11 world. The Bush administration’s unilateral approach to the War on Terror fundamentally changed the US’s reputation of attempting to preserve the established political order. Their primary belief was that democratizing the MENA was paramount to American security. However, Robert Pape stresses that spreading democracy “at the barrel of a gun” is not the most effective way of preventing terrorism.²² Instead, the Bush administration's methods exacerbated the terrorist threat. They conflated the links between Iraq and Osama Bin Laden’s Al-Qaeda to justify a link between Iraq and 9/11.²³ This claim overlooked the structures that became solidified after the US invasion of Iraq and there’s minimal paper trails between Saddam and Bin Laden.²⁴ The Bush administration’s MENA strategy left a hard path for both Trump and Obama to follow as most of their policies were contending with Bush’s legacy.

¹⁸ Mearsheimer, 2018: 2

¹⁹ Mearsheimer, 2018: 3

²⁰ Mearsheimer, 2018: 2

²¹ Ibid

²² Robert A. Pape, 2005. “Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism.” New York: *Random House*. 246.

²³ Ehrenberg et al, 2010: 68 (*The Downing Street Memo*)

²⁴ Abramowitz, Michael, 2007. “Bush Blames Iraq Violence on Al-Qaeda.” *Washington Post*.

The presence of US troops in the MENA was supposed to reduce American vulnerability to terrorism. However, realists firmly believe that the “huge US politico-military footprint in the Middle East region – including Iraq – is, along with America’s policy on the Israel/Palestinian issue, the primary driver of Middle Eastern terrorism.”²⁵ The War on Terror reinforces the Islamic world’s anti-American perception where the US is synonymous with neo-colonial foreign policies and imperial ambitions. A grand strategy featuring restraint, according to Posen, would minimize such political risks for the US.

The Realist Solution: Offshore Balancing

So how do realists propose fixing this problem and adopting a grand strategy of restraint? John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt emphasize that the US should move away from democratization and focus on offshore balancing. Through the balance-of-power logic, offshore balancing would sustain US power in the MENA while limiting direct involvement. This strategy involves deploying the military only when US interests are directly threatened. The US would remain diplomatically involved with the region and maintain a robust ‘over the horizon’ capability. This was the US’s strategy for the MENA during the Cold War. It was also during this era that Kenneth Waltz crafted his balance of power theory which he categorized as a systemic tendency, an important aspect to understanding offshore balancing and contextualizing the US’s national security interests.

Waltz’s balance of power theory makes three primary claims for the post-Cold War era. First, we should see that the US is acting unilaterally as it is unconstrained by the international system thanks to its unipolar moment. We have seen this repeatedly especially after 9/11. Second, we will see that other powers are moving away from the US in order to counter their

²⁵ Layne, Christopher. 2009. “America’s Middle East Grand Strategy after Iraq: The Moment for Offshore Balancing Has Arrived.” *Review of International Studies* 35, no. 1 (2009): 5–25. 23

influence.²⁶ As the US has the most powerful military in the world, states will not directly challenge the US military but use non-military tools, such as international institutions, to delay and undermine aggressive unilateral US military policies.²⁷ While soft balancing cannot stop the US from pursuing short-term military goals, it reduces cooperation amongst regional allies with the US and increases the costs of war. Additionally, terrorism can be used by non-state actors as an asymmetric strategy to resist US dominance.²⁸ This will tip the balance of power away from the US in the long run. Third, we should see the US embrace the inevitability of multipolarity.

Mearsheimer and Walt uses the basis of Waltz's balance of power theory to craft the offshore balancing solution for both liberal hegemony and the War on Terror. Offshore balancing significantly reduces the chances of the US becoming involved in another costly war like the Iraq War. This strategy limits the use of military intervention and "recognizes that the United States does not need to control this vitally important region; it merely needs to ensure that no other country does."²⁹ The US will depend more heavily on its allies in the region to contain their neighbors and non-state actors. Additionally, offshore balancing reduces anti-American terrorism.³⁰ When the US imposes its version of democracy on the MENA, it is not surprising that nationalism and religious ideology breeds fierce anti-American resistance. By reducing the American military footprint in the region, the US minimizes the resentment felt by citizens of the MENA.

Offshore balancing is cited by many realists as the ideal choice instead of liberal hegemony especially in the context of the War on Terror. Realists, such as Christopher Layne,

²⁶ Waltz, Kenneth N. 1979. "Theory Of International Politics." 1st ed. New York: *Random House*.

²⁷ Pape, Robert A. 2005. "Soft Balancing Against the United States." *International Security* 30, no. 1 (2005): 7–45. 10. [Available Here](#).

²⁸ Layne, 2009: 9

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Ibid

believe that the US's "current strategy is in shambles."³¹ As organizations like ISIS and Al-Qaeda are non-state actors, their balancing of the US is not traditional. But their strategies reflect many of the traditional balancing techniques by states. While terrorists cannot balance directly against the US, they "can engage in a related form of activity aimed at undermining American primacy by raising its costs" which tips the balance of power away from the US.³²

The Assessment

At realism's core is the belief that international politics is "a struggle for power among self-interested states."³³ The theory's biggest success is its ability to explain what can happen when a state acquires too much power. When a state grows vastly more powerful than any other singular state, realists expect that it will exploit that position to expand its sphere of influence. It is hard for realists like Mearsheimer and Walt to explain why the US announced a war which they believe contradicts how the US should try to maintain the balance of power. One of the primary problems of realism is that it largely considers states as primary and rational actors on the international stage. Realists do not fully examine the role non-state actors could have in destabilizing regional power balances. But, the theory can still be used to explain and predict the behavior and motivations of groups such as ISIS. This application would not be new. For instance, Robert Pape has argued that suicide bombing can be a realist strategy for liberation movements to expel occupying powers.³⁴

However, what realism has the ability to do is theorize how the US crafted and codified the War on Terror into its foreign policy institution in order to maintain its balance of power in the MENA region. Standard realism theorizes that a great power like the US will be balanced in

³¹ Layne, 2009: 12

³² Layne, 2009: 20

³³ Snyder, Jack, 2009. "One World, Rival Theories." *Foreign Policy*. [Available Here](#).

³⁴ Pape, Robert A. "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism." *The American Political Science Review* 97, no. 3 (2003): 343–61. [Available Here](#).

some way by either another state or a coalition. But the US has not been directly balanced yet. Hence, they are attempting to preserve the status quo by quashing any hint of opposition, by a state or a non-state actor. Realists have not attempted to even acknowledge that the War on Terror is not purely a liberal hegemonic strategy.

Realism does not have a strong ability to explain change in turbulent times.³⁵ It is not accounting for how powerful non-state actors can send a strong military force, like the US, scrambling to declare war. Realists are so occupied with blaming all of the US's foreign policy problems on liberalism, they cannot fathom that the US is pursuing the War on Terror to ingrain its sphere of influence into the MENA region. As realism cannot account for an extended period of US unipolarity or contemporary situations, proponents of realism continue to cite liberalism as the root cause of the US's problems. Non-state actors, rogue states, and terrorists are acknowledged as threats in realist literature. However, the post-9/11 War on Terror policies confound their expectations of what a realist foreign policy should be for a superpower. Realists tend to equate rationality with realism and irrationality with liberalism. Hence, a foreign policy they consider as irrational must be liberal.

³⁵ Ibid

Section 2

2.1: The Predator Drone Program and Enhanced Interrogation

In 2021, the US still continues to be a superpower. Its military reach extends to every point in the world. The US's sprawling military power and its primacy has enabled it to set its own foreign policy objectives and dictate norms in the international system without relying on others. The US has the freedom of action to do almost anything it thinks can be good for national security. This impunity has enabled it to codify a militarized foreign policy that involves targeted killings, torture, and extraordinary rendition.

The Legacy

Both Presidents Obama and Trump had to deal with the legacy of the Bush administration's War on Terror counter-terrorism policies. In particular, Obama had to grapple with the fallout over controversies such as the Torture Memos and the information emerging about Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. Under the guise of fighting terrorism, the Bush Administration changed its approach to detaining prisoners, and rebranded torture as enhanced interrogation that allegedly does not leave permanent damage.³⁶ Although the US had ratified the Convention Against Torture, the Bush administration made enhanced interrogation, extraordinary rendition, and secret black sites in other countries a staple in its War Against Terror. Primarily, the use of waterboarding, sensory manipulation, sleep deprivation, and humiliation tactics (tactics termed as torture in the Geneva Convention) were used by the US to extract information from detainees suspected of having links to terrorists.

³⁶ Lt. Col. Jerald Phifer, 2002. "Request for Approval of Counter-resistance Strategies". (Ehrenberg et. al, 2010: 415)

John Rizzo, the CIA's top lawyer at that time, was quoted saying, "The government wanted a solution, . . . , It wanted a path to get these guys to talk."³⁷ While the US Constitution states that criminal defendants have the right to an attorney, an impartial jury, and a free and fair trial, because the US has removed terrorism from criminal jurisdiction, it can operate in a grey area, unlike its European counterparts who rely on their existing law and institutions to punish terrorists.³⁸ With the introduction of the Patriot Act and the 2001 Joint Congressional Resolution to Authorize the Use of United States Armed Forces Against Iraq (AUMF), the US codified its pursuit of power. These moves signaled to the world that the US intended to deal with terrorists the way it wanted to. Not only was this silently accepted by the international community, but there were (and still is) an unknown number of black sites in different countries which the CIA uses to interrogate suspected terrorists and hold them illegally. Hence, the US has forged its unilateral path against terror in the international system with no regard for international laws and norms. It could do this as the US operated in a unilateral world order where they wanted to ensure the status quo remained unchanged.

Targeted Killings and the US's Predator Drone Program

Targeted killings through drone strikes can be considered illegal as they violate international laws. Briefly, drone attacks violate the sovereignty of states not involved in armed conflict with the US and targeted killings do not fulfill the criteria of self-defense that is outlined in the UN charter.³⁹ Additionally, targeted killings are carried out unilaterally by the President, his Executive cabinet, and intelligence agencies. These killings are secretive and undermine the liberal notion of multilateralism. The UN has condemned the drone program while traditional

³⁷ Apuzzo, Matt, Sheri Fink, and James Risen. 2016. "How U.S. Torture Left A Legacy Of Damaged Minds". *New York Times*. [Available Here](#).

³⁸ Ehrenberg et al, 2010: 458

³⁹ The Geneva Conventions of August 12, 1949, *International Committee of the Red Cross*, Geneva, 153-221.

American allies in the MENA like Turkey have expressed their disapproval. As targets and strikes are confidential, it is extremely difficult for any country to express their opinion on specific strikes. Hence, The US's predator drone program illustrates a superpower who has impunity in the international system and exploits it to project power anywhere in the world.

Merely three days into his presidency, Obama authorized his first drone strike mission: two strikes in Waziristan, Pakistan that killed approximately twenty civilians.⁴⁰ Eight years later, Obama left the White House after having vastly expanded the predatory drone program that normalized the use of armed drones for counterterrorism in non-battlefield settings such as Yemen and Somalia.⁴¹ Based on the National Security Strategies published by the Obama administration, drones were the favored tools for three primary reasons: first, its risk-averse nature; second, its cost-effectiveness; and third, its precision.⁴²

Similar to Obama, Trump's targeted killing strategy has largely followed the realist stream of thought. A redacted version of the Trump administration's Principles, Standards, and Procedures for U.S. Direct Action Against Terrorist Targets (PSP) was declassified in 2021. The PSP immediately starts with the emphasis on "direct action" as a component of counterterrorism. It then elucidates that direct action should "further US national security interests" and "will be informed by departments and agencies, any by analysis provided by the Intelligence Community."⁴³ The Trump administration's open-ended PSP to target anyone it deems as a terrorist threat regardless of a nation's sovereignty or international law laid the groundwork for the targeted killing of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani. After the strike, the Department of

⁴⁰ Zenko, Micah, 2017. "Obama's Final Drone Strike Data." *Council on Foreign Relations*. [Available Here](#).

⁴¹ Zenko, 2017

⁴² Presidential Policy Guidance, 2013. *The White House*. [Available Here](#).

⁴³ Principles, Standards, and Procedures for US Direct Action Against Terrorist Targets. 2017. *The White House*.

Defense claimed that the US military had taken decisive action against Soleimani on the grounds that he was actively planning an attack on American diplomats and service members in Iraq. Subsequently, Trump claimed that the strike was meant to “stop a war, not start one.” This gave the administration the opportunity to justify their actions using the vague rhetoric of an “imminent attack” on the US.

None of this is particularly new to US foreign policy, however while the Obama administration’s rhetoric signaled restraint and regulation, the Trump administration gives a largely unregulated blank check to agencies to conduct targeted strikes against terrorists as long as a proposal is submitted to the National Security Council. Unfortunately, we do not know the criteria for these proposals as it was redacted. A primary difference between Obama and Trump’s strategies are that Obama’s policies largely referred to ISIS and Al-Qaeda affiliate forces whereas Trump’s PSP refers to any Al-Qaeda and ISIS networks across the globe. While both presidential strategies authorized the use of force outside war zones, the Trump rules clearly demonstrate an aim to put US national security over anything else which does not embody liberalism.

Enhanced Interrogation & Extraordinary Rendition

Like drones, enhanced interrogation and extraordinary rendition have also caused public debates about how far the US can sacrifice its liberal values in exchange for national security. Torture, or enhanced interrogation techniques, includes the use of sleep deprivation, stress positions, sensory manipulation, and waterboarding as a means of gathering information from suspected terrorists. Meanwhile, extraordinary rendition involves kidnapping people and

transporting them to another country to a black site where they would be subjected to enhanced interrogation.

It is a popular perception that these practices were banned by the Obama administration after the international backlash the Bush administration received when the torture memo was revealed. However, this is not completely true as some practices were justified in different ways. While Obama's rhetoric suggested a more liberal counterterrorism strategy, a number of his policies clearly prioritized projecting American power and impunity above all else. For instance, the Obama administration still used tactics from the Army Field Manual which has a number of loopholes for enhanced interrogation previously exploited by the Bush administration (such as the use of sleep deprivation). Additionally, despite allegedly closing the CIA run black sites, extraordinary renditions still happened but with more oversight.⁴⁴ According to the Washington Post, the number of renditions that occurred during the Obama administration are unknown due to the program's secrecy.⁴⁵

Theoretically, Obama's rhetoric and the public perception of his policies regarding extraordinary rendition and torture complies with international laws and institutions which aligns with liberalism. However, given that enhanced interrogation techniques are codified in the US Army Field Manual and shunned by the Convention Against Torture (which the US ratified), it can be said that this counterterrorism tactic is still unilateral and permissible on the international stage only due to the US's hegemonic status. Moreover, the Obama administration has emphasized that it has no plans to prosecute military or CIA personnel who are suspected of committing torture (at Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib etc) as there is nothing to gain from

⁴⁴ Whitlock, C. 2013. "Renditions Continue under Obama, Despite Due-Process Concerns." *Washington Post*.

⁴⁵ Ibid

looking at the past.⁴⁶ The US's use of these techniques can be explained by Waltz's logic that countries who wield a lot of power will be tempted to misuse it.

In many ways, Obama's pursuit of national security does not represent a break with the previous Bush administration. They represent a continuation and expansion of many policies, especially the usage of drones. The continuity between Bush and Obama was particularly pronounced in their counterterrorism policies. While Obama suspended the usage of enhanced interrogation techniques, he intensified the use of surveillance technology and covert military operations, particularly the usage of drones to identify, target, and kill suspected terrorists. Although Obama rejected many of the unilateral impulses of the Bush administration, he neither fundamentally reoriented US foreign policy nor questioned the military force deployed to eliminate terrorist threats.

Obama's grand strategy, focused on "leading from behind," aimed to preserve American primacy in a post-9/11 world where the diffusion of power and the rise of other countries was ending the era of American unipolarity.⁴⁷ More countries demanded a voice in global governance and security and believed less in the efficacy of the US's military and counterterrorism solutions.⁴⁸ This geopolitical landscape was very different from what Cold War presidents had to navigate and Obama's strategy of burden sharing with allies "counteracted the Washington consensus on hegemony and the perceived uniqueness of America's world political role."⁴⁹ His reliance on the US's allies suggested that his administration acknowledged a multipolar

⁴⁶ The White House, 2009. Press Release, *Office of the Press Secretary*, Statement of President Barack Obama on Release of OLC Memos, April 16, 2009

⁴⁷ Löfflmann, Georg. 2017. "American Grand Strategy under Obama: Competing Discourses." *Edinburgh University Press*, 184

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Löfflmann, 2017: 186

geopolitical landscape where the US has less global influence. Hence, his burden sharing strategy to ensure the balance of power is an inherently realist move, aligned with neorealism.

While the Obama administration put in place numerous restrictions on how to handle detainees, Trump started his term by a draft order titled “Detention and Interrogation of Enemy Combatants” which would undo many of these restrictions. This draft order included the revocation of the Obama administration’s directive of allowing the Red Cross to access all detainees in American custody. The order would be a step towards reopening overseas black sites as it called for a high-level policy review to determine “whether to reinstate a program of interrogation of high-value alien terrorists to be operated outside the United States.”⁵⁰ While it does not directly address resuming enhanced interrogation techniques, it sets up high level policy reviews for recommendations to President Trump about enhanced interrogation. The draft order also criticized the Obama administration for not exercising “certain authorities” about detainees which is critical to defend the US from “radical Islamism.” But most alarmingly, the draft order would resurrect a 2007 executive order by President Bush that listed which actions constituted war crimes. This enabled interrogators to use tactics like extended sleep deprivation. While the Obama administration revoked this order in 2009, his administration also peripherally used sleep deprivation as an interrogation tactic as there was a loophole in the Army Field Manual.

American Power & Realism

The US’s power has enabled it to pursue its interests any way it pleases. Hence, both the Obama and Trump administrations have used foreign policy as a tool to maintain, extend, and strengthen the US’s relative position of power. Unfortunately, neither administrations set limits to

⁵⁰ Savage, Charlie. 2017. “Trump Poised to Lift Ban on C.I.A Black Site Operations,” *The New York Times*. [Available Here](#).

the US's pursuit of power. Hence, they could engage in enhanced interrogation on foreign soil using black sites or assassinate an Iranian leader with less to no consequences or rebuke from the international community. Neorealists criticize American foreign policy as they think the US is trying to achieve power in the wrong way. However, they don't acknowledge that the US is doing the very thing neorealists say a great power can do - exploit its position in world affairs to achieve what they want, regardless of the means.

2.2: Fighting ISIS

The fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), a portion of the War on Terror, is also regularly hailed as a liberal and imperial crusade in the MENA region by neorealists. However, as this section will demonstrate, the US did not fight ISIS with the intention of democratizing the region under ISIS's control. They fought ISIS to ensure the balance of power in the MENA remains in the US's and its allies favor.

ISIS is a militant Sunni Islamist group that follows a Salafist jihadist doctrine. They came into existence in April 2013 and gained worldwide prominence in 2014. In 2013, ISIS was considered by many as "Al-Qaeda's Iraq affiliate."⁵¹ Only in December 2013, when ISIS seized Fallujah and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the founding of a new caliphate, were they taken seriously. As a caliphate, they claimed religious, political, and military authority over all Muslims worldwide. Its adoption of a caliphate status has been criticized heavily by religious leaders and many Muslim scholars have denounced their claims of statehood. Now, the group is known for its human rights abuses, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.⁵²

⁵¹ Gordon, Michael R and Adnan, Duraid, 2013. "Brazen Attacks at Prisons Raise Worries of Al Qaeda's Strength in Iraq," *The New York Times*. [Available Here](#).

⁵² Amnesty International, 2014. "Ethnic Cleansing on a Historic Scale: Islamic State's Systematic targeting of Minorities in Northern Iraq," *Amnesty International*

Although ISIS is Salafist, it rebels against traditional Salafi interpretations and labels the majority of Salafists (and other Muslim sects) as heretical. ISIS ideologies rarely uphold the teachings of Islamic scholarship, relying instead on rulings based on their own interpretation of the Qur'an.⁵³ A notable difference between ISIS and other Islamist Jihadi movements, including Al-Qaeda, is the group's belief that it will defeat the army of Rome at the town of Dabiq.⁵⁴ As their distinctive strategy and beliefs about the apocalypse matter greatly to them, understanding these are key to designing a strategy that effectively combats them.

Obama's Strategy (2014-2016)

At the beginning of 2014, Secretary of State John Kerry said that the US had no intention of getting involved militarily in Iraq again. While the Obama administration acknowledged that Iraq was having a "difficult time," the Iraqis would handle it with the help of a new arms injection from the US.⁵⁵ From 2005 to 2013, the US had sold Iraq about \$14 billion in weapons and related military items and pledged to send more tanks, helicopters, and missiles to combat ISIS. But, as ISIS seized Mosul, numerous politicians heavily criticized the Obama administration's handling of the crisis. In June 2014, President Obama announced that the US was repositioning its troops in anticipation of targeted military action; increased intelligence surveillance; dispatched US troops to aid the Iraqi army; and finally, was convincing Congress to approve more weapons transfers to Iraq. Soon after, when ISIS's threats to the Yazidis increased, Obama approved air campaigns against ISIS strongholds which effectively started a new war in Iraq, according to Andrew Bacevich.⁵⁶ However, this is simply not true. In 2003, the US had

⁵³ Al-Yaqoubi, Muhammad, 2015. "Refuting ISIS: A Rebuttal Of Its Religious And Ideological Foundations." *Sacred Knowledge*.

⁵⁴ Wood, Graeme, 2015. "What ISIS Really Wants," *The Atlantic*. [Available Here](#).

⁵⁵ Bacevich, Andrew J. 2017. *America's War For The Greater Middle East: A Military History*. New York: Random House. 345

⁵⁶ Bacevich, 2017: 346

invaded Iraq with the intention of overthrowing Saddam Hussein and installing a government sympathetic to the US's interests. In this case, the US had to re-engage militarily in Iraq to ensure MENA stability. There were no intentions of installing a democracy which goes against liberal hegemony ideals. The US, attempting to preserve the status quo in the MENA, directly impacted the balance of power which is a realist ideal.

Over the next few months, the Obama administration kept expanding their air campaign against ISIS and coordinated with several nations on a strategy to contain ISIS. The Global Coalition against ISIS was formed in September 2014 and featured 83 countries. The coalition's goals included crippling ISIS's finances, curbing foreign fighters crossing the borders, restoring essential services in areas liberated from ISIS, and countering the group's propaganda. Through the coalition, the US trained the Iraqi army more as they saw that the Iraqi army created during the American occupation had disappeared.⁵⁷ Alongside the coalition, the US increased its air campaigns in key ISIS strongholds. Although it must be noted that the US relied more on supplying arms to Iraqi security forces instead of air warfare as evidenced by the fact that the number of bombings in this situation was fewer compared to Bosnia in 1995 and Libya in 2011.⁵⁸ Both these examples have one thing in common - the US relied on allies to fight ISIS on the ground. This is an integral realist belief to handle foreign policy.

In March 2015, the Obama administration projected an upbeat tone as its air strikes had stalled ISIS's plans to expand their territory. However, by mid-2015, ISIS had managed to recruit a large swath of both local and foreign fighters. Most alarmingly, ISIS managed to capture both Ramadi in Iraq and Palmyra in Syria. As a vulnerable Baghdad was near Ramadi, the criticism against the Obama administration increased again. Numerous Republican senators, like Lindsey

⁵⁷ The Global Coalition Against Daesh, 2021. "Mission." [Available Here](#).

⁵⁸ Bacevich, 2017: 348

Graham, pressed President Obama to escalate military intervention by deploying another ten thousand ground infantry.⁵⁹ Moreover, critics of the Obama administration mused that “there is no strategy to contain the destabilization of the Middle East.”⁶⁰ However, the Obama administration did not cave into the criticism. Instead, Obama chose a compromise. He ordered a few hundred additional American trainers to Iraq, shelved plans to retake Mosul, and concentrated efforts to rescue Ramadi. Additionally, he also rushed an order of military equipment to Iraq. The Iraqi army was causing problems for themselves by abandoning their kits on the field. Hence, the US had to deliver antitank kits to any faction fighting ISIS as the group’s fighters had started using abandoned American humvees as suicide bombs. Obama utilized a degree of restraint to fight ISIS as he was unwilling to repeat Bush’s mistake of getting the US involved in another all out war in Iraq. He also rejected the previous unilateral stances that the War on Terror espoused. The Obama Administration considered fighting ISIS a group effort and a fight that the Iraqi army had to be able to handle.

Donald Trump’s Strategy (2017-2020)

Donald Trump’s policies towards ISIS was largely a continuation of Obama’s strategy. Trump both continued and intensified the military campaign against ISIS. In 2017, this strategy paid off as the caliphate was largely defeated compared to 2014 - ISIS’s control was limited to a few enclaves with a few thousand fighters instead of large swathes of land in Iraq and Syria.

Trump’s fixation on containing ISIS was due more to his aversion to what conservative Christian circles consider their new boogeyman after communism - radical Islamic terrorism. Yet, Trump’s ISIS strategy mimicked Obama’s. There were only two major tactical shifts - field commanders were given more authority and instead of luring ISIS fighters out of their safe

⁵⁹ Bacevich, 2017: 350

⁶⁰ Ibid

locations, they would be surrounded in their strongholds. The notable difference between Trump's campaign rhetoric and actual policy was that the rules of engagement remained the same. The administration neither "bombed the hell out of ISIS" nor did it significantly troops in the region. Notably, the Obama era strategy of working through partners in Iraq and Syria continued alongside coalition airstrikes.

A notable policy choice that does not reflect realism was how the Trump administration handled being in Syria after the fall of the caliphate. While Trump promised his supporters that the US would be leaving Syria soon, both John Bolton and Mike Pompeo insisted that there was a tangible connection between Iran and Al-Qaeda. Getting a chance to further abuse the 2001 AUMF, the Trump administration wanted to use the War on Terror and ISIS as a means to counter Iran and appease Erdogan. Instead of aiding the Kurdish allies who helped the fight against ISIS, the Trump administration ended the US's support for this group, enabling Turkey to attack the Kurds. Withdrawing from Syria in the immediate aftermath of the fall of ISIS is reflective of realism. However, realism does not promote abandoning key allyships in regions especially in situations where the group was integral in the US's fight against ISIS.

Both Trump and Obama concluded that the strategy to contain ISIS was sustainable as it would not needlessly endanger US troops. Additionally, a surge of military power from the US side would take away the responsibility from the Iraqi government who should be heavily invested in containing ISIS. This has eased both the financial burden and the pressure on the American military presence. This particular strategy of relying on allies to contain a threat strongly embodies realism.

Defeating ISIS & Offshore Balancing

The strategy to counter ISIS in the Obama-Trump years reflect the ideals of offshore balancing instead of a liberal hegemonic crusade. As I explained in Section 1, realists presume that offshore balancing is the best strategy to preserve the US's power on the international stage. Under this strategy, the American "national security establishment depends on the distribution of power in the key regions." Offshore balancing exists to preserve America's power in the strategic areas of Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Gulf.⁶¹ According to Walt, the US's "terrorism problem would be less worrisome" under offshore balancing as the US will not be spreading democracy. However, the fight against ISIS does not involve democratizing nations; instead, it focuses on preserving the status quo power balances in the MENA region.

At ISIS's peak of power, they were a serious threat to the US's allies in the MENA region. Hence, the US had to deploy military force to protect the balance of power. However, Obama's first line of defense was to depend on the American-trained Iraqi forces and aid them with an injection of arms. The US "passed the buck" to Iraq's security forces and backed them with "material support" in terms of an arms injection. This is directly in line with what Walt says is the first step of intervening in a region as per offshore balancing. As 2014 progressed and it was evident that Iraq's military was unable to handle ISIS, the US stepped in with "enough military force to the region to shift local balance in its favor."⁶² The US did not drastically increase its military foothold, instead it relied on bombing campaigns. Additionally, the US stepped up its efforts to train Iraqi soldiers so that Iraq could continue defending itself. This was also a move heavily informed by offshore balancing as the US only got involved when it was

⁶¹ Walt, Stephen M. 2018. "The Hell of Good Intentions : America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy." First edition. New York: *Farrar, Straus and Giroux*. 262

⁶² Ibid

evident that the local actor could not thwart the threat.⁶³ Most importantly, the US took steps to ensure that the local actor would have the skills to defend itself when the US pulled back its aerial campaign. Obama's strategy, continued by Trump, aimed to keep "US forces "offshore" for as long as possible" while acknowledging that at points, they had to get involved to ensure the balance of power in America's favor.⁶⁴

Walt writes how the US foreign policy establishment will be dead set against adopting the "radical" idea of offshore balancing into its strategy. But he does not acknowledge that the status quo, especially in the fight against ISIS, mimics many attributes of offshore balancing. It prioritizes the US's power over anything else, including Iraqi and Kurdish allies. In his chapter about offshore balancing in *The Hell of Good Intentions*, Walt insists that "diplomacy takes center stage" in offshore balancing. An integral part of diplomacy is working alongside partners to achieve a mutual goal. This feature of offshore balancing is illustrated by the coalition against ISIS that has 83 participating nations. Overall, the fight against ISIS features numerous parts about offshore balancing and reflects realist ideals.

⁶³ Ibid

⁶⁴ Walt, 2018: 263

Conclusion

In international relations, realism is closely associated with the pursuit of power. From Morgenthau to Mearsheimer, realists have argued that power is the decisive factor that determines world order and how “states think about the world around them.”⁶⁵ Due to the Cold War, the U.S. had unprecedented hold over the world order which they exploited to start the War on Terror. The U.S. was able to use its influence to project power and fundamentally change the normative structures of the international system. Presently, in the international system, this power manifests itself as the U.S. often pushing its agenda forward and disregarding multilateral approaches. The U.S. has successfully consolidated their sphere of influence to ensure they would have unparalleled cultural and ideological influence worldwide, emboldening their notion of American exceptionalism. The best way to preserve this system of unipolarity has been to stifle anything that could tip the balance of power away from the U.S.

The War on Terror was a strategy designed to project American power onto the world. It was merely painted as a fight between good and evil to justify to the public that it was the only way to protect the U.S. from terrorist threats. In reality, it was just another strategy to disseminate power worldwide. While the term ‘War on Terror’ was quickly discarded after Bush left office, its policies and strategies were continued by both Obama and Trump. They continued to frame the fight against terror as a multigenerational global war that enabled the US to abuse, project, and solidify its power in the world.

The War on Terror is not a liberal hegemonic strategy. The U.S.’s urge to protect itself from terrorist threats is rational and this feeling has driven the War on Terror more than its urge to democratize nations in the MENA. Neorealists cannot entertain the idea that the War on Terror

⁶⁵ Mearsheimer, 2001: 12

can be based on the rational pursuit of power as the foreign policy establishment paints it as the export of democracy. Hence, the War on Terror's implications on U.S. power in the world must be examined rather than criticizing its liberal nature. However, the War on Terror's lack of clearly defined end goals has made it seem like an irrational endeavor. In its current form, the War on Terror has gone beyond the parameters of the balance of power theory. It seeks to preserve and increase the US's primacy in the international system by militarily imposing its power worldwide.

The Current Way: Realism and the Biden Doctrine

As this article has established, there is a significant amount of continuity in national security strategies between different presidential administrations, regardless of their party affiliation. A *Foreign Affairs* highlighted how Biden, despite being a “septuagenarian with a half century of experience in national politics,” could champion pragmatic realism over liberal primacy. However, most of the announced foreign policy changes he is adopting in respect to national security aims to preserve the U.S. 's balance of power. None of his policies espouse liberalism. Instead, much of it is reminiscent of offshore balancing.

In a speech delivered by Assistant to the President for Homeland Security, Liz Sherwood-Randall, introduced the guiding principles that will guide the Biden administration's counterterrorism strategy. While laying out this three-pronged approach, Sherwood-Randall mentioned that the U.S. will continue to fight terrorism “over the horizon” by “working with partners, with tools that are commensurate with the threat, and without an American military presence on the ground.” This rhetoric and promise is reminiscent of previous presidential policies of using and projecting American power anywhere in the world, including outside war zones. But most notably, policies revolving around diplomacy, alliances, and lack of an

on-the-ground military presence represent offshore balancing much more than a crusader impulse of democratization.

An interesting point to keep in mind is how Biden's strategy of maintaining "over the horizon" capabilities will involve the drone program. A *New York Times* article suggests that the Biden administration is currently working on a new predator drone policy that is a combination of Obama and Trump's policies. In January 2021, Biden set out to establish his own overarching policy for drone strikes that would target terrorist threats emerging from countries where the U.S. does not have troops on the ground. The *Times* investigation hypothesized that Biden would return to the Obama era's policy of having a "centralized interagency vetting of proposed strikes" in countries without U.S. military presence. However, in countries where there are troops, Biden would follow Trump's playbook: issue "country plans" that delineate policy goals and targets, then give field commanders the freedom to carry out strikes they deem necessary. The only major difference between Biden and Trump's policy would be that the military would have to obtain consent for drone strikes from the State Department's chiefs of mission. Biden's predator drone policies will reflect how much of a pragmatic realist he can be.

However, Biden's counterterrorism proposal, in this form, indicates that the War on Terror is not coming to an end any time soon. While it may now be a war by another name, the Biden administration will continue to conduct drone strikes, special operations, and advise security missions around the world. Seemingly, the U.S.'s sphere of influence and its primacy cannot be sustained if the U.S. was not engaged in counterterrorism operations in at least 85 countries.⁶⁶ From a policy lens, the Biden administration touts its "over the horizon" policy as a strategic decision that incurs lower costs. However, from the legal lens, the administration says

⁶⁶ Savell, Stephanie. 2021. "United States Counterterrorism Operations 2018- 2020." *Brown University, Watson Institute of International and Public Affairs*. [Available Here](#).

that the use of limited force, as long as it is against terrorist groups, does constitute a war so that the U.S. military can determine which rules of engagement to use. Biden's "over the horizon" strategy is the War on Terror disguised as something else. Hence, this administration continues to use the realist structures of the War on Terror to preserve the U.S.'s power.

Realism's Way Forward

It will take a sizeable amount of effort and planning to dismantle the vast infrastructure of the War on Terror that continues to dictate "the organization of the U.S. government, the deployment of the U.S. military, the operations of the U.S intelligence community, and Washington's support for autocratic regimes in the Middle East."⁶⁷ Power should not solely be pursued through the War on Terror. Neorealists correctly argue that the War on Terror has caused non-Americans to view the U.S. unfavorably. They say this sentiment results in the decrease of American power, but I argue that the War on Terror has caused the world to view American power as the villain. The U.S.'s power enabled it to dominate both Al-Qaeda and ISIS, especially the latter which it did through buck-passing and minimal U.S. ground personnel. Some aspects of the War on Terror's infrastructure has been essential to preserve U.S. primacy.

Although the War on Terror is meant to pursue and solidify power, it is not sustainable in its current form. Twenty years after 9/11, it is time to reconsider how the U.S. can continue strengthening its power in the international system. To make the U.S.'s grand strategy more realist, there needs to be some structural change in the way the U.S. interacts with other nations. It is possible that a genuine embrace of some liberal ideals can get neorealists the restrained foreign policy they want. For instance, if the U.S. thoroughly followed the laws and norms of the international system such as the Convention Against Torture, and clarified what can be classified

⁶⁷ Rhodes, Ben. 2021. "Them and US: How America Lets Its Enemies Hijack Its Foreign Policy." *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2021 Issue. 24

as an imminent threat to national security so the US does not unnecessarily conduct drone strikes. These are more liberal ways of approaching international affairs as it embraces international institutions but it can limit the U.S. 's security activities in numerous regions and bring more accountability to the international system.