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Is It Engagement or Is It Exceptionalism?: An Analysis of Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth's Support for a Strategy of Deep Engagement

In their article, "Lean Forward: In Defense of American Engagement," Stephen Brooks, G. Ikenberry, and William Wohlforth look at America's foreign policy approach amidst the international environment, explaining their reasoning for the United States to continue to remain engaged globally. Unlike many other academic articles, the authors do not explicitly state a research question, but the introduction to their article sets out their primary themes and, indirectly, the question they are addressing: why the US should continue to maintain an active and engaged role in international affairs, and what the benefits of American leadership and engagement in global security and economic matters are (Brooks et al 131-132). For Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth, American engagement means maintaining the US position as a global leader, active participation and cooperation in international institutions and the global economy, upholding commitments to alliances and security arrangements, the promotion of democracy, and active involvement in addressing global challenges, all the while balancing strength and diplomacy to support international stability. The authors argue for the US to continue a proactive and assertive approach to foreign policy, advocating for continued engagement, believing it essential for maintaining global stability, promoting national interests, and protecting US national security (Brooks et al. 131-132). Their argument and provided evidence explain the

existing approach the United States takes towards foreign policy and what benefits the US can enjoy if the approach is continued, however, there are several limitations. These limitations include the use of selective examples, normative assumptions about ethics and values, simplification of the complexity of some global challenges, implicit American exceptionalism, and lack of comparison of different views on engagement. Though their argument is fairly strong at explaining why the US has taken this strategy since the end of World War II, the limitations weaken it and make it less malleable in applying it to the current environment and emerging challenges, failing to fully argue why the US should continue this strategy in an evolving world.

The authors begin their article by explaining that the United States' foreign policy approach of deep engagement has remained unchanged since the end of World War II, as the US has worked to promote a liberal world order and establish defense alliances throughout Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East, pushing for the implementation of American institutions abroad. They argue that despite shifts in policy details, America's government and politicians have remained committed to fostering a stable international order where the US dominates (Brooks et al. 130). The ideas the authors push about American engagement are echoed in other writings on US national security and international relations, including Robert Art's "Fungibility of Force," Patrick Porter's "Why America's Grand Strategy Has Not Changed," Jarrod Hayes' "Identity and Securitization in the Democratic Peace," C.J. Chivers' "Small Arms, Big Problems," and Johnathan Caverley's "Slowing the Proliferation of Major Conventional Weapons." Art's article focuses on difficulties associated with disengagement and has parallels to the discussions of Brooks et al., including impacting security concerns (Art 10), risks of escalation (Art 11), the importance of alliances (Art 42), the importance of maintaining US credibility (Art 35), and the

regional implications of disengagement (Art 25-39). Porter's article presents his argument to explain the persistence of the American grand strategy since the end of World War II (9), similar to Brooks et al.'s acknowledgments throughout the article about the continuation of engagement as the American strategy. Hayes' article about the US response to India and Iran's nuclear program provides examples of influences on policy decisions when enacting the deep engagement strategy Brooks et al. argue in favor of (Hayes 994), while Chivers' and Caverley's articles both echo the Brooks et al. piece with highlighting the reasons for US involvement in the arms trade as a key part to the factors of deep engagement (Chivers 121; Caverley 412-415). All five articles help support Brooks et al.'s arguments on the reasons for the engagement strategy and support for continuing the strategy, by offering historical and contemporary examples of specific alliances and the parts of the global order the US employs their deep engagement strategy within.

Beyond the similarities of their argument to other theories on international relations, a key part of Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth's formulation of their argument involves their rebuttal of arguments of proponents of retrenchment. The authors take specific arguments from retrenchment supporters and pick them apart, pointing out the failings of those arguments and how the points are not applicable to the deep engagement strategy. Such cases include arguments about affordability, balance of powers, overstretch, and unnecessary engagement that could lead to forced involvement in unrelated wars. To support their rebuttals, Brooks et al. pull historical examples of conflicts, agreements, and negotiations, like the US convincing the EU to maintain an embargo on military sales to China (134), the post-World War II regional security agreements in East Asia to prevent the spread of communism (136), and the US dominance in the economic

order to place the dollar as the world's reserve currency (140). The arguments the authors rebut echo in other writings, including Karl Eikenberry's "The Limits of Counterinsurgency Doctrine in Afghanistan" and Barry Posen's "The Case for Restraint". Eikenberry's article gives a retrospective analysis of the failings of the counterinsurgency doctrine in Afghanistan, and while more specific in its single example analysis than Brooks et al.'s general argument, the COIN doctrine has its roots in the engagement strategy. Eikenberry's analysis points to some of the failings that can be connected to the rebuttals Brooks et al. make, such as his argument for more careful consideration of resource allocation (70-72). In comparison to him, Brooks et al. discuss the topics of affordability and argue that the US can continue to afford the cost of the grand strategy, as it is kept below a fair share of GDP (132-122). For Brooks et al., the benefits of maintaining military dominance are worth the costs, as they argue against the ideas echoed by Eikenberry – that intervention decisions should include a cautious consideration of resource allocation. Posen's argument stands in direct opposition to Brooks et al.'s. Posen argues for more cautious resource allocation, greater risk aversion, greater minimization and avoidance of unnecessary conflicts, and greater selectivity in alliances. Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth take each of these arguments and provide examples as to why these arguments do not hold up against the engagement strategy. They push the strength and dominance of the US military over any others, whether allies or potential adversaries, as a reason to not be concerned with interventions (Brooks et al. 133). They argue there is no "clear case of a smaller power luring a reluctant great power into war" (Brooks et al. 136), so there is no reason to fear unnecessary conflicts as an outcome of security alliances, and that greater selectivity in alliances opens up greater

possibilities for regional destabilizing and conflicts that will pose a larger threat to US security than staying involved does (Brooks et al. 138).

The argument and evidence put forward by Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth, while somewhat convincing, is not as persuasive as other articles on the topic are, such as Posen's "The Case for Restraint." Brooks et al. framed their argument with a normative, deductive, rebuttal structure to outline their reasoning and present their evidence, but in doing so provide little evidence that directly supports their argument. The normative structure presents American strategy and engagement in its alignment with ethical principles and values of democracy and a liberal international order modeled after American institutions and places their argument for continued engagement on the importance of these values (Brooks et al. 130). The deductive and rebuttal structures go together as the authors lay out their argument for the beneficial nature of continued engagement. They support their thesis by assessing the faults of contradictory arguments and providing evidence of contemporary agreements and historical instances to refute the opposition and support the validity of their own argument. While this tactic does tend to strengthen an argument by anticipating and addressing potential criticisms, in the case of Brooks et al., it feels as though their only source of evidence comes through refuting contradictory arguments, all the while not actually assessing the potential benefits of these opposing strategies. Had they analyzed the opposing strategies and the benefits, then compared them to their preferred strategy and the benefits they found from engagement as the stronger option, it would have been a much stronger argument, especially in contrast to Posen's article that provides direct evidence to his argument for a more restrained grand strategy and stands in direct opposition to Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth's.

Furthermore, the normative argument and assumptions made about American engagement are not as successful at supporting their argument as the authors intended, especially when other examples, not chosen for discussion by the authors, are considered. The authors' arguments for deep engagement lie in the ideas of American exceptionalism and the right for the US to create an American-style global order, pushing democracy, liberal economic order, and America's dominance, and the belief that the US should stay engaged to further promote these values. This belief has structured America's grand strategy since the end of WWII and was a reason for the Cold War engagements in Europe, Korea, and Vietnam – to stop the spread of communism and promote democracy, while also pushing US power and prestige. More recently, it has been the reason for the prolonged involvements in Iraq and Afghanistan, but as seen in the outcomes and criticisms of other articles, like Eikenberry's "The Limits of Counterinsurgency," Andrew Bacevich's "Secrets That Were No Secret," and Posen's "The Case for Restraint," the engagement and promotion of American ideals is not always the best strategy. For someone who believes in the exceptionalism and dominance of the United States as a primary reason for America to stay engaged, Brooks et al.'s normative argument framing would likely be highly convincing, but with the context of contradictory historical examples like Afghanistan and Vietnam, and other opposing articles, the Brooks et al. argument comes across a bit narrow-sighted as it has very little acknowledgment of the existence of these contradictions in their high selectivity of examples.

Beyond the argument structure, there are other limitations that minimize the efficacy of Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth's arguments. As previously mentioned, the authors are highly selective in the examples they chose. While this is true of any argument, as an author will want

to choose examples that support their argument, in this case, they give very little acknowledgment of the importance of contradictory examples that point to the potential importance of considering a new grand strategy. Additionally, with the selectiveness came implicit American exceptionalism. For an article arguing in defense of American engagement, a hefty dose of American exceptionalism is to be expected, however, the implicit nature of it, and lack of acknowledgment and mitigation of its biases is detrimental to their argument overall. The unacknowledged biases led to an underlying sense of a dismissive attitude towards other states' perspectives and capabilities, like in the discussion of the supremacy of the US military being unmatchable (Brooks et al. 133) and the idea that other major powers would be unable to manage conflicts without the US there to mitigate (Brooks et al. 138). While it is true that the US military has many advantages over others, that the US has been involved in many important historic negotiations, and that there is the potential for dangerous escalation without the US, the argument is making a few too many assumptions about other states' comparative weaknesses without acknowledging bias to be truly fair.

In addition to the nature of their example choices and biases, the authors also have a tendency to simplify the vast complexities of international relations and the factors that influence policy decision-making, limiting the impact of their argument. Such instances are the emphasis of American values as guiding principles for the rest of the world to follow, ignoring that some instances may not perfectly align with these values (Brooks et al. 140-141); the simplification of the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy decisions (Brooks et al. 137); and the primary attribution of global stability and positive outcomes to American engagement, despite the reality of multiple actors and complex interactions in international relations (Brooks et al.

139). A final limitation worth noting, similar to the issues with the rebuttal argument structure lacking a robust analysis of alternative strategies, is the lack of addressing the potential downsides or trade-offs that come with continued engagement. The article spends much of its argument discussing the issues with other strategies, without addressing those strategies' benefits, and does the same with their preferred strategy of deep engagement, focusing on the benefits, without assessing its issues. Avoiding this topic weakens the argument because of their failure to truly assess the constraints of their preferred strategy.

Though the limitations of Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth's argument reduce its efficacy, their argument does relate to and shed some light on US national security and foreign policy decision-making. Like Porter's analysis of American grand strategy, Brooks et al.'s argument assesses and explains what American strategy has looked like since WWII, and when the connections are drawn to Porter's argument, the continuity of this strategy of deep engagement can be seen throughout American international relations. In specifics, the article connects to US national security interests through their arguments about engagement to protect global stability (Brooks et al. 137-138), the economic benefits of engagement in the global economic order and trade agreements (Brooks et al. 139-140), the management of transnational threats – such as terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and climate change – to protect US interests (Brooks et al. 138, 141), the collective security provided by alliances and partnerships like NATO (Brooks et al. 141), and the importance of balancing force with diplomacy and adhering to international norms as a preventer against conflict (Brooks et al. 134). These points about protecting US national security that arose in Brooks et al.'s argument relate to the writings by many others on national security and international relations – such as Janina Dill

and Livia Schubiger's "Attitudes toward the Use of Force" and Scott Sagan and Benjamin Valentino's "Not Just a War Theory" – on the roles of norms, values, and ethics on combat and the international order and how a threat to them is a threat to the US. These arguments also relate to the ideas about the global challenges of the proliferation of biological weapons and nuclear weapons as a threat to be managed by the US, as discussed in Gregory Koblentz's "Pathogens as Weapons" and Thomas Schelling's "A World Without Nuclear Weapons." These connections to national security and other writers on similar subjects explain why the US has felt the need to maintain a grand strategy that requires deep engagement, believing it to be the best defense against threats to global stability and US security.

Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth conclude their article by proposing that as the current strategy is the one that is known, changing the strategy would mean entering an unknown state of the world, which is too risky because of the potential of disaster. While they do acknowledge that the rigidity in maintaining this strategy does not prevent the US from adapting to new circumstances or challenges, taking a stance of fear of the unknown makes it difficult to fully know how this argument and strategy can be applied to the evolving world, as the current state of the world in 2023 is much different from 2013, the time of their publication. The assumptions and arguments they made in their article are based on the world as it stood in 2013. This is to no fault of their own, as any writing will remain stuck at the time it was written with the limitations of not being able to predict what is to come, however, the rigidity of their strategy and fear of adaptation or introduction of a new approach leaves their argument feeling too stagnant to be fully applicable as it stands for contemporary conflicts and issues. This is a pitfall of their

argument at the end of the day, as they are advocating for continued engagement, but when it is not malleable enough to adapt to the modern day, it leaves their argument and findings unusable for tackling modern issues in US national security and international relations.

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