

Engagement versus Restraint: Explaining the Strategic Alignment between Core U.S. National Interests and NATO Enlargement

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Abstract

American national interests have largely guided the country's foreign policy decisions on strategic priorities and the degree of global involvement. Faced with numerous unfamiliar threats and the vast opportunities of the post-Cold War era, American policymakers had to articulate the nation's role primarily within the Euro-Atlantic space. Having already been operational for over four decades, NATO faced fundamental questions about its future in the early 1990s. The debate over NATO's purpose and institutional enlargement persists to this day. American grand strategic doctrines have assessed NATO's Open Door policy differently, with one group of theories celebrating the policy while others denounce its value to core U.S. national interests.

The paper utilizes qualitative analysis, incorporating process tracing and desk research methods to examine primary and secondary sources. The study aims to evaluate the alignment between NATO enlargement and American national interests. To do so, it first reviews four types of American grand strategies and groups them into two broader categories based on their advocacy for engagement or restraint. Then, the research outlines four core American national interests. Finally, it explains the congruence level between NATO expansion policy and those national interests from

engagement and restraint perspectives. The analysis reveals that context, time, and theoretical framework largely determine the evaluation results. In particular, the findings indicate that NATO enlargement is highly congruent with American interests when assessed using engagement grand strategies, whereas the alignment decreases markedly when applying Restraint strategic logic.

Keywords: Engagement, enlargement, Grand Strategy, NATO, restraint, security

Introduction

American policymaking is characterized by a systematic interaction between its longstanding national interests and implemented policies. At the same time, major political steps are taken in accordance with major strategic doctrines. U.S. Grand Strategies provide significant guidance for leaders and strategists to develop optimal policies that can benefit the state's broader national interests. However, it is also typical for some policies to be highly praised by particular Grand Strategies while being harshly disapproved by others. NATO alliance has been a pivotal mechanism for the United States to achieve its strategic objectives in the Euro-Atlantic space. Its active enlargement policy largely reinvigorated NATO's geopolitical purpose. Nevertheless, the issue is the point of regular political debate between pro-engagement and pro-restraint policymakers in the U.S. The central problem is whether NATO expansion benefits or harms American national interests, considering the historical devotion and vast contribution of the U.S. to maintain security and stability in the area.

The study explores an answer to the research question: To what extent does NATO enlargement policy align with core U.S. national interests?

This research is particularly relevant given the contemporary debate between two strategic-ideological camps: one supporting extensive global engagement and upholding security commitments, and the other favoring protectionist, isolationist, and transactional approaches with the rest of the world. Examining NATO enlargement in this context yields a clear evaluation of this policy vis-à-vis core American interests.

The article is structured as follows. First, it describes research methodology. Then it outlines the theoretical framework by discussing the main types of American Grand Strategy. The next chapter analyzes core U.S. national interests, leading into a discussion of NATO enlargement within the engagement-restraint debate. Finally, the paper summarizes the main findings and answers the key research question.

Methodology

The work is founded on a qualitative research methodology. The selection of this method is tightly linked to the evaluative nature of the central research question, as it assesses policy congruence rather than statistical correlation. Its main purpose is to examine and synthesize existing scholarly publications regarding American Grand Strategy, core U.S. national interests, and NATO's enlargement policy. With this goal in mind, the paper employs various research methods for data collection and analysis.

The research systematically applies process tracing. This tool detects those causal factors of past events that largely predetermine specific results in the present. In particular, it evaluates U.S. strategic doctrines, presidential policy decisions, and their geopolitical outcomes, governing contemporary American foreign policymaking.

Desk research serves as the primary method for gathering relevant data from primary and secondary sources. This analytical approach is vital for conceptualizing key terms and uncovering nuances within the topic. The primary sources include government documents, U.S. National Security Strategies (NSS) and National Defense Strategies (NDS), presidential speeches, and resolutions. Secondary sources include research articles, academic books, and think-tank reports examining American national interests and the importance of NATO enlargement.

Theoretical Framework

This chapter presents types of grand strategy as the theoretical framework. It presents a variety of definitions of Grand Strategy used in modern academia. The paper distinguishes four types of grand strategy, ultimately grouping them into two major sets, depending on whether they advocate engagement or restraint.

There is no single official document that would serve as a fixed formula for American Grand Strategy. Instead, researchers examining strategy must rely on several foundational elements, including the National Security Strategy (NSS) and National Defense Strategy (NDS), as well as the observation of historical experience. While scholars continuously compete to formulate a comprehensive definition of Grand Strategy, devising a new framework is beyond the scope of this paper. Thus, this study relies on already-existing classical definitions of the concept.

Definitions of Grand Strategy

Several notable theoreticians have defined Grand Strategy, including Gary Hart, Barry R. Posen, William C. Martel, and Paul Kennedy. According to Hart, "Grand strategy has to do with the application of power and resources to achieve large national purposes" (2004, p. 3). For Posen,

Grand Strategy is “a political-military, means-ends chain, a state’s theory about how it can best ‘cause’ security for itself” (1984, p. 13). Similarly, Martel defines Grand Strategy as “a coherent statement of the state’s highest political ends to be pursued globally over the long term” (2015, p. 32). Finally, Kennedy’s definition extends specifically into the consideration of timeframe and situation, stating that Grand Strategy is “about the evolution and integration of policies that should operate for decades, or even for centuries. It [does] not cease at a war’s end, not commence at its beginning” (1991, p. 4). Those definitions clearly outline the balancing interrelationship between ends, ways, and means, as well as recognizing the role of the period and global circumstances. Considering their ultimate purposes, Gilford John Ikenberry famously categorized grand strategies into two – one that aims “at countering, undercutting, and containing rival illiberal great power,” and the second that aims “at shaping the general geopolitical environment” (2023, p. 4).

The contemporary world is characterized by constant, rapid modification. This fact considerably raises uncertainty, challenges, and risks for political miscalculations. Though it may seem easy to outline the cornerstones of national security, detect threats, and safeguard national interests, wide-ranging global problems eventually complicate the implementation of grand strategy. Therefore, to manage those difficulties, leaders must remember a triad of Grand Strategy considerations, including previous experience, present reality, and future calculations, explains an American historian, Williamson Murray (2010). Furthermore, Jeffrey W. Meiser highlights the pivotal role of the whole-of-government or DIMEFIL approach, encompassing “diplomatic, information, military, economic, financial, intelligence, and law enforcement” (Meiser, 2016, p. 84), in accomplishing grand strategic objectives.

Gary Hart compares the contemporary grand strategy with “a multidimensional chessboard much more than a war game table, a relief map of peaks, contours, and depressions rather than a flat surface” (2004, p. 10). It is no surprise that the contemporary world comprises fluctuations, crises, and turbulences. Hence, the chosen strategy should possess not only a broad vision for the state’s positioning but also practical instruments to effectively respond to unexpected challenges.

Types of U.S. Grand Strategy

Grand Strategy types are categorized into two major groups. Those advocating for engagement - Deep Engagement, Liberal Internationalism, and Conservative Primacy - are placed in the first group as Engagement Strategies, while those favoring restraint - Offshore Balancing/Restraint - are in the second. While some strategies are enthusiastic about extending

American global commitments, others emphasize domestic security as pivotal. This subchapter distinguishes the main principles of existing U.S. grand strategies and categorizes them into two. This method is considered crucial for the research purpose of determining the level of alignment between NATO enlargement policy and core American national interests.

Deep Engagement portrays the United States as the most resolute superpower, whose multisector dominance allows and commits it to lead the global order. This strategy classifies the U.S. as a hegemon that can structure the international system considering its national interests, consequently benefiting from “global prosperity,” “increased security,” institutional successes, and regional balances of power (Avey, Markowitz, & Reardon, 2018, p. 39). Moreover, the provision of stability, whether it is domestic, regional, or international, is central for Deep Engagement. Effectively containing regional powers in Central and Eastern Europe, Indo-Pacific, and the Middle East has been an enduring strategic objective for the U.S (Friedman, 2022, p. 1291). Although regional priorities regularly shift, the United States has repeatedly proved prepared to engage. Core tasks for the United States to maintain prominence are to prevent the rise of potential hegemonies, robustly counter terrorism, and encourage democratization and protection of human rights, Avey, Markowitz, and Reardon (2018) suggest.

Liberal Internationalism also supports engagement but primarily through international institutions. This strategy endorses multilateralism as the foundational policy for how the United States interacts with other states and solves modern global problems. It recommends that the U.S., as a global power, should maintain its traditional dominance primarily through institutions that it historically leads or is considered first among equals. The proponents of Liberal Internationalism argue that broad security challenges “cannot be solved by any state working alone” (Hiršs, 2021, p. 42). Therefore, regional and global organizations serve as major platforms for the U.S. to maintain close cooperation with global partners and allies and tackle wide-ranging problems efficiently. Beyond solving global issues collectively, active participation in institutions brings various benefits to the U.S., including increased market access, shared technological achievements, and peaceful interstate relations. Notably, ideological differences between states largely determine the prospects for conflict and cooperation. Accordingly, authoritarian and revisionist countries are regarded as the main reasons for instability for the U.S. This was the main argument of former President Joe Biden while following the tenets of Liberal Internationalist strategy and viewing global politics as a domain of confrontation between democratic and autocratic camps (Lo, 2023). “Democratizing impulse” has been a major leitmotif of post-Cold War U.S. support towards NATO

enlargement, mirroring Liberal Internationalist principles (Avey, Markowitz, & Reardon, 2018).

Conservative Primacy is the U.S. grand strategy of the highest vigor and direct engagement features. It is constructed upon the multifaceted U.S. potential and aims at transforming the state into an unchallenged superpower. One of the principal objectives of Conservative Primacy is to maintain the stability of the U.S.-led international system by immediately restricting and challenging potential global powers from shaking American dominance. Notably, Conservative Primacy elements have been applied actively during the “unipolar moment” (Krauthammer, 1990) and the George W. Bush Administration. This strategy has upgraded American resilience to security-related shocks (Porter, 2018, p. 18) and helped introduce the notion of preemptive action right after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States (Gaddis, 2004, p. 37). Hence, the Conservative Primacy strategy has largely rationalized unilateral action or coalitions of the willing (the willing being acceding to American primacy) as the most effective form to counter rogue states and terrorist groups globally (Schmidt, 2012, p. 16). This approach is useful for promptly solving existential security challenges. Simultaneously, Conservative Primacy doubts the role of multilateral platforms, considering them to significantly protract the decision-making process, delaying the achievement of foreign policy goals, or limiting the range of responses or tools that can be used.

Restraint/Offshore Balancing is a distinct type of Grand Strategy preferring more restraining policies than engagement at the foreign policy level. Cautious in global contribution and passive in international engagement, the Restraint strategy is the most protectionist of four U.S. Grand Strategies. It prioritizes domestic security and prosperity over dynamic financial or military involvement. To avoid spending “hundreds of billions of dollars on unnecessary military preparations and unnecessary wars” (Posen, 2014, p. 24), the Restraint strategy famously recommends reducing military presence and shifting American commitments to regional partners and allies. It further emphasizes the role of balance of power, acknowledging that “a bid for hegemony will be opposed by a coalition of other states that will seek to restore a rough balance of power” (Schmidt, 2012, p. 18). Such a limited participation aims to minimize the likelihood of a large-scale confrontation for the United States.

Hence, considering their vision, principles, and approaches, the first three Grand Strategies are usually recognized as pro-engagement. They actively advocate extensive American commitments either alone or through international institutions. In contrast, the fourth strategy is perceived as pro-restraint since it favors protectionism and limited global participation for the United States.

Core U.S. National Interests

American national interests can be grouped into four: security, economic, influence, and systemic. In particular, these are Homeland and Citizen Security (1), Economic Prosperity and Market Access (2), Regional Balances of Power (3), and Maintenance of the Rules-based International Order (4). This formulation is considered both realistic and practically useful for research purposes.

Homeland and Citizen Security has been a vital national interest for the United States. Robert J. Art defines it as “the prevention of attack, invasion, conquest, or destruction of a state’s territory and its residents, and the maintenance of its political sovereignty” (Art, 2003, p. 47). Any sovereign state commits to ensuring the physical security of its citizens against a plethora of daily global challenges. Accordingly, this national interest encompasses various security concerns, starting from border security and territorial integrity and ending with the protection of American citizens inside and outside the country. It aims to prevent and counter terrorist attacks, guarantee the inviolability of U.S. state borders, combat pandemics, neutralize hybrid threats against American state institutions and population, and ensure nuclear non-proliferation.

Economic Prosperity and Market Access is another significant element of U.S. national security, highlighting the central role of economic power in ensuring a state’s security. Notably, all U.S. presidential administration NSS documents underscored the role of economic security (Lowther & Lucius, 2014, p. 48). In particular, while domestic welfare largely determines military finances, international market access provides various alternative opportunities for trade. Consequently, with the combination of a strong economic foundation and trade diversification, the United States can achieve vital foreign policy objectives. This refers to maintaining the stability of the U.S. Dollar-led financial system, access to critical supply chains, and signing mutually beneficial trade agreements (The White House, 2017), ultimately ensuring stability and extending American economic prosperity.

Regional Balances of Power is an American interest primarily based on classical realist notions of power and influence. In this case, the vital objective is to prevent regional hegemons or coalitions of states from marginalizing American influence and shifting the balance of power in their favor (The White House, 2025). Europe, the Indo-Pacific, and the Middle East are key strategic locations for the U.S. that should be kept safe from Russian, Chinese, and Iranian dominance. The United States usually maintains regional balances of power either through regional multilateral alliances and bilateral security treaties or unilateral military engagement.

Maintenance of the Rules-based International Order has been a core national interest for the United States, especially since the Second World War. Multilateral institutions established by the United States and its partners largely preconditioned global stability and were “aligned with U.S. interests and values” (The White House, 2022, p. 32). The UN, IMF, World Bank, NATO, and other institutions “reduce risks for all” and greatly enhance predictability (Feltman, 2023). They endorse international laws and norms, consequently ensuring “non-discriminatory opportunities for all actors” (Bezhitashvili, 2025, p. 33). Additionally, they allow the U.S. to employ diplomatic and normative methods rather than using costly military practices to protect human rights and promote democratic governance worldwide.

NATO Enlargement in the Engagement-Restraint Debate

The debate over the optimal degree of American global engagement has been a prominent issue in contemporary U.S. foreign policymaking. It has been an important topic in post-Cold War presidential debates. Yet its significance has ascended especially since Donald Trump’s entrance into U.S. politics.

After reviewing core national interests in contemporary American politics, it is crucial to examine their alignment level with the process of transatlantic enlargement. To do so, the study applies the aforementioned principles of Engagement and Restraint strategies. Table 1 can provide a practically useful visualization of the findings:

Table 1: Level of Alignment between Core U.S. National Interests and NATO Enlargement according to Engagement and Restraint Strategies

	Homeland and Citizen Security	Economic Prosperity and Market Access	Regional Balances of Power	Maintenance of the Rules-based International Order	
Engagement Strategies	High	High	High	Very High	Enlargement
Restraint Strategy	Low	Medium	Negative	Low	

As shown in Table 1, Engagement Strategies (Deep Engagement, Liberal Internationalism, and Conservative Primacy) view NATO enlargement policy as highly or very highly aligned with major U.S. national interests. In particular, the forward-deterrence opportunity of keeping European wars far from the U.S. and NATO’s collective security umbrella largely protects the U.S. from external aggression (NATO, 2025). It ensures a collective response in the case of an attack on American soil, consequently advancing homeland and citizen security. Second, NATO enlargement

fostered market economic transformation in the post-communist space since the early 90s, providing the U.S. with stable trade partners across Europe. Extending NATO's institutional mandate through the Open Door policy increases market access and safe investment locations for the U.S., upgrading overall economic prosperity (Menon & Ruger, 2020). Third, alliances serve as the strategic means for the U.S. to shape regional balances of power. Transatlantic enlargement famously helped eliminate post-Cold War security vacuums, deterring potential regional hegemony from dominating Europe (Asmus, 2002). Therefore, each of NATO's additional memberships has supported American interests to shape regional politics on the European continent. Fourth, NATO has been a foundational pillar of the current liberal world order. The two important principles of the international system, including democratization and the sovereign choice of states to pursue alliance membership independently, have been in strong congruence with NATO's purposes. By not only maintaining the alliance but also expanding its mandate, the U.S. upholds the principles of the existing international system (Ikenberry J. G., 2011, p. 223), ultimately ensuring a high alignment between NATO enlargement and American national interests.

In contrast, the Restraint Strategy displays skepticism towards NATO enlargement, underscoring its limited alignment with American national interests. First, homeland and citizen security are perceived as at high risk since each new wave of transatlantic enlargement into geographically contentious locations entails strategic threats for the U.S. to engage in military confrontation with Russia (Mearsheimer, 2014). Second, the Restraint Strategy proponents argue that NATO expansion into economically weak states automatically increases demands for American contribution, placing additional financial costs on American taxpayers and damaging their economic prosperity. Third, the Restraint Strategy suggests that alliance enlargement does not benefit U.S. policies to shape European balance of power. Rather, it triggers Russian and Chinese revanchist policies due to a zero-sum perception of relative loss after each enlargement wave (Uvere & Nzeribe, 2025), generating multifaceted aggression. Fourth, those advocating Restraint/Offshore Balancing consider NATO expansion as a significant source of American overextension, undermining systemic stability among great powers. Notably, the recent 2025 National Security Strategy announced "ending the perception, and preventing the reality, of NATO as a perpetually expanding alliance" (The White House, 2025, p. 27). Overall, the abovementioned arguments of the Restraint strategy reveal low alignment between NATO enlargement and core U.S. national interests.

Conclusion

The study examined American grand strategies and categorized them into two major groups, depending on whether they favored active global involvement or isolationist policies for the United States. It analyzed four core national interests: homeland and citizen security, economic prosperity and market access, regional balances of power, and the maintenance of a rules-based international order. These interests have been vital for all post-Cold War U.S. presidential administrations, expressed in both their strategic documents and their statements.

Notably, the study found that American grand strategies evaluate the role of NATO enlargement distinctively. Thus, it largely depends on whether one observes the effects of transatlantic enlargement from an engagement or restraint strategy. In particular, the aforementioned national interests appeared highly congruent with NATO enlargement policy when viewed through the lens of engagement grand strategies. However, the research exposed a low and sometimes negative level of alignment between American national interests and NATO enlargement when assessed from the Restraint/Offshore Balancing grand strategic logic. This result does not necessarily mean the policy is absolutely correct or wrong. Rather, it underlines that certain policies rely on the context and timing of their implementation, as well as the theoretical framework used to evaluate policy costs and benefits.

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