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# The Politics of Great Power Retrenchment

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An INTERNATIONAL STUDIES QUARTERLY ONLINE symposium

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# INTRODUCTION

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[Concerns](#) about America's relative [military and economic decline](#) loom large in contemporary debates about United States grand strategy (Wallerstein 2013, Morgan 2012). The wisdom of [policies of retrenchment](#) occupies an important place in these disputes. Advocates argue that Washington [should take proactive steps to avoid strategic overextension](#), including deprioritizing or even withdrawing from some regions of the world (Nexon 2013; McDonald and Parent 2011). Opponents contend that, at best, this will trigger a self-fulfilling prophecy that hastens American decline. At worst, it will lead to greater [turmoil](#) and [threaten](#) the [interests](#) of the United States and its allies (Brooks et al. 2012/2013; Brooks et al. 2013; Muravchik 2013).

In his *International Studies Quarterly* article, "[Decline and Devolution: The Sources of Strategic Military Retrenchment](#)," [Kyle Haynes](#) (2015) contributes to this debate by asking a more basic question: what conditions lead declining powers to retrench from specific regions. He argues that "a declining state will choose to withdraw foreign military deployments and security commitments when there exists a suitable regional 'successor' to which it can devolve its current responsibilities. The degree of a successor's suitability and the strategic importance of the region to the declining state interact to determine when and how rapidly retrenchment will occur."

In this symposium, four scholars engage with Haynes' claims. First, [Paul MacDonald](#) and [Joseph Parent](#) [raise questions](#) about how, for example, Haynes conceptualizes and operationalizes key aspects of his theory. Next, [Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni](#) [argues](#) that, among other things, Haynes downplays the importance of the "threat environment" in driving the security policy of declining states. She concludes by assessing the implications of his article for American grand strategy. Finally, [Joshua Shiffrin](#) [worries](#) that the article makes some problematic assumptions and also questions the policy implications that apparently follow from the theory. [Haynes completes](#) the symposium by responding to the rest of the contributors.

# RETRENCHMENT AND REGIONAL TRADEOFFS

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Paul MacDonald and Joe Parent  
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In “[Decline and Devolution: The Sources of Strategy Military Retrenchment](#),” Kyle Haynes builds a theory of how states react to decline across different regions. Haynes makes two key arguments. First, declining states should begin to retrench earlier when they have access to compatible successor states, which are willing and able to uphold the regional order as the waning state withdraws. Second, declining states should retrench more rapidly in regions that are less important to their security. The gist of our remarks is that, though we have qualms about the nitty-gritty, the work clarifies the big picture and substantially improves the literature on a number of fronts. This is real progress.

On the positive side of the ledger, the virtues of the work are sterling. Haynes’ critique of the literature has bite (disclosure: we receive some of it, though we believe his criticisms of our work are more powerful than he modestly claims). There are many explanations of retrenchment, but few explore the empirical vicissitudes of when, where, and how fast. Haynes rightly pushes scholars to view retrenchment not as a single coherent policy response, but rather an approach that must be tailored to specific regions. This is a useful contribution with serious repercussions, especially as the United States turns increasingly toward Asia.

Haynes constructs his theory to correct the missteps of others with the building blocks of previous works, which makes his contribution cumulative. His writing and logic are concise and clear, and while his case study—Britain around 1900—is heavily trodden ground, he manages to tease out intriguing puzzles and compelling pieces of evidence. Haynes’ most significant contribution is his description of what makes some states more or less attractive successors to declining powers. Haynes argues that the most attractive successor states are those that have compatible interests with the declining power, as well as the capacity to defend a regional order from potential revisionists. He argues that these two factors are mostly determined exogenously, but notes that declining powers will often seek to improve the suitability of regional successors, either by resolving existing conflicts of interest or providing military and economic assistance.

On the other side of the ledger, there are areas where Haynes’ “devolutionary model” of retrenchment could be clarified and defended against potential criticisms. First, some of Haynes’ key terms are difficult to define or operationalize, which could render the argument hard to assess. For instance, timing plays a central role in the discussion, but it is not clear when the retrenchment race officially begins or ends. Similarly, exogenous shocks figure prominently (pp. 5-6), but what counts as a shock remains opaque. On a related note, Haynes’ definition of decline strikes us as capacious. Haynes wants to consider any “sustained reduction in a state’s economic or military capabilities relative to at least one other strategically salient state.” (p. 5) Yet this raises troubling endogeneity issues because the cause (i.e. decline) is measured in military terms, as is the effect (i.e. retrenchment). Plus, what does sustained mean? Who counts as a strategically salient state and why?

Second, the logic connecting Haynes' key variables is ambiguous in certain crucial areas. It is unclear, for example, why the suitability of a successor only affects the timing of retrenchment, but not its pace. If it is clear that regional successors are both willing and able to uphold the balance of power, why not leave quickly? Conversely, it is unclear why the importance of a region only affects the pace of a state's retrenchment, but not its timing. If a region is irrelevant to a declining state's security, why not leave promptly regardless of what is left in one's wake? It is also unclear how the compatibility and capability of potential successor interact. Haynes assumes that all good things go together, but it is possible that as regional states grow in capacity, they may develop interests that are at odds with declining powers. Conversely, weak successors may be perceived as being inherently more compatible, because they lack the capacity to prey upon a declining state's broader interests. The fate of retrenchment may lie less in the inherent suitability of regional successors, but how declining powers navigate the tradeoffs inherent to ceding responsibility for regional order to others.

Third, Haynes' argument would profit from a more sustained engagement with alternative explanations. One factor that drops out from his analysis, for example, is the depth of the dominant power's decline. Yet there are good reasons to believe this factor looms large and interacts with Haynes' variables in unexpected ways. In general, states facing large, rapid declines are more likely to retrench early and to do so quickly. Yet underlying power trends can shape the importance of rival regions as well: large declines can disrupt connections with distant regions, while elevating the importance of homeland defense. Equally important, the search for successors is often tied up in the depth of decline. Potential successors tend to have a greater incentive—and more opportunities—to step into regional power vacuums when dominant powers are suffering from large declines. Yet tradeoffs abound here as well: large decliners have the greatest incentives to identify suitable successors, yet are also likely to worry most about potential predation at the hands of their chosen heirs.

A final point that is worth mentioning is Haynes' assumption that instability is inherently bad (pp. 1, 3, 4, 11). This may be true from a hegemonic standpoint, but no great power can lock in regional stability and no two great powers have identical conceptions of what stability means. Successors are likely to use the threat of instability for bargaining leverage, which can sour relations just as it can improve them. Hegemonic powers often possess revisionist ambitions of their own, and persistent decline might make them skeptical of the virtues of the status quo. More generally, even if stability is a valuable asset, how much is it worth and at what cost? If declining powers put a greater premium on defending specific interests than preserving general stability, then successors are likely to matter much less in their calculations than Haynes predicts.

In sum, Haynes has done the field a favor by drawing attention to important aspects of decline and retrenchment, and developing the concepts to study them. Although we look forward to a more detailed treatment of a few issues, on balance this is a promising project with considerable theoretical and practical implications. Haynes shines a spotlight on the importance of regional variations and potential successors in the process of retrenchment. How and when they do so, however, remains an open question.

# THREAT, DECLINE, AND RETRENCHMENT

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Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni  
University of Cambridge

The 2008 financial crisis injected new life into longstanding debates about the extent, pace and likely geopolitical consequences of the ongoing deterioration of American power. With American relative decline no longer in (serious) dispute, the debate now concerns whether, and how, to adjust American grand strategy. Should a declining America continue its efforts to provide global leadership, or is it time to ‘come home’? So far, the scholarly and policy debate has focused on a number of questions: Does global military leadership pay? Is continued US military presence necessary to keep Europe and Asia peaceful, or have America’s closest allies at last learned to look after themselves? Is retrenchment an effective response to decline, or does it signal weakness and thereby embolden America’s rivals, in turn triggering further decline?

Haynes’ article makes a highly welcome contribution to this debate. First, it usefully narrows the debate pitting retrenchment against “deep engagement” ([Brooks, Ikenberry, & Wohlforth 2013](#); [Craig et al. 2013](#)) to something more concrete: Insofar as some scaling back of US global commitments is desirable, where should we expect it to occur, to what extent and how fast? Second, like [Parent and MacDonald \(2011\)](#), Haynes moves the discussion forward by putting substantive historical data on the table. Among other virtues, his overall argument—that declining states tailor retrenchment policies according to strategic necessity and the availability of reliable allies—strikes me as so intuitively plausible that it’s hard to imagine it being wrong. Yet, the devil’s in the (historical) detail. There are, I think, a few ambiguities in the empirical assessment of the model’s more specific predictions.

Haynes tests his theory by examining two instances of British retrenchment pre-WWI. Beginning in 1905—and following the conclusion of defensive pacts with Japan and France—Britain withdrew the bulk of the royal navy from East Asia and the Mediterranean. Haynes’ model makes sense of why the British navy withdrew more slowly from the Mediterranean than East Asia: the former was of greater strategic importance than the latter. But the general timing of British retrenchment remains a puzzle for his theory. As Haynes acknowledges, Britain suffered a prolonged period of relative decline from 1860 onwards. Nonetheless, meaningful retrenchment didn’t occur until the turn of century.

Haynes deals with this problem by arguing that actual decline must combine with an exogenous ‘crisis’ or ‘shock.’ This forces policymakers to realize their worsened strategic position. In the British case, this shock came in the form of the Boer War (1899-02). But suggesting that British policymakers failed to perceive relative decline prior to 1902 seems odd. The ‘Great Financial Panic’ of 1873 triggered a ‘Long Depression’ (1873-1896), which hit Britain harder than her main rivals ([Howe 2004](#); [Sassoon 2012](#); [Faulkner 2012](#)). Add to this the creation of a unified German state in 1871 and the fact that US GDP overtook Britain’s for the first time in 1872, and relative decline would seem hard to ignore. Still [British military expenditure kept rising](#). The British empire continued to expand.

Indeed, if we are to take seriously the notion that relative decline creates incentives to “redistribute resources away from peripheral commitments towards core commitments” ([MacDonald & Parent, 2011](#)) then Britain’s huge investment in the Boer War itself presents a puzzle. The war diverted some 300,000 British troops to South Africa—a peripheral colony—at a time when London saw France and Russia as its main threats (e.g. [Treisman 2004](#)).

For Haynes the availability of suitable successors explains why Britain ignored incentives to retrench until 1905, and then withdrew simultaneously from two regions of very uneven importance. By 1904 a defensive pact with France and a massively strengthened Japanese navy—built in British shipyards and financed by British loans to enable a ‘handover’ of responsibility to Japan—convinced London that it was possible to retrench from East Asia while preserving its interests. Note that there seems to lurk a danger of circularity here insofar as defensive alliances are both the cause and the manifestation of retrenchment. Regardless, when looking at the long *durée* of British decline it’s hard to see that her situation changed dramatically in 1905.

What did change? The threat environment. Germany’s direct challenge to Britain intensified after the second German Naval Law (June 1900) (e.g. [Herwig & Trask 1985](#); [Massie 1991](#); and [Herwig 1984](#)) which doubled the size of the German fleet and lifted all limits on Germany’s naval budget. By 1905 Germany’s naval ambitions posed a serious threat—not only to Britain but also to her former French and Russian rivals, as evidenced by the Triple Entente of 1907. At the same time, the Russian threat to British interests in East Asia was dramatically diminished. As a result, London [massively increased military spending](#) and began to concentrate British naval forces in the North Sea—where Germany posed an imminent threat (See also: [Bell 2015](#); [Qiuy 2012](#)).

While this strategic re-shuffle tracks well with Haynes’ account, we still face a problem: retrenchment in this case becomes hard to distinguish from simple balancing against a growing threat. Or, to put it differently, Russia’s defeat by Japan and Germany’s naval expansion—more than a sudden perception of acute decline brought home by the Boer war—mainly explain Britain’s strategic readjustment. Clearly, Britain faced strong incentives to reduce the cost and range of her strategic commitments. Yet even a Britain not facing a decline in overall global rank would likely have made similar adjustments given a similar shift in its threat environment.<sup>1</sup> Haynes’ model explains the specific timing and form of Britain’s ‘retrenchment.’ But so does a simpler realist theory of balancing against preponderant threat ([Walt 1990](#)). The case thus appears too over-determined to lend strong support to the theory.

## Does Retrenchment Work?

As [Brooks, Ikenberry and Wohlforth](#) note, although debates about American grand strategy concern the future, they inexorably draw on analogies with past cases. Along these lines, Haynes (2015:500) aims to offer “useful guidance to American policy makers seeking to implement retrenchment responsibly”. What we most need to know, of course, is this: does retrenchment work, or are the pessimists right that it merely accelerates decline? Haynes doesn’t directly address this question, but Parent and MacDonald (2011:29) provide

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<sup>1</sup> For “retrenchment” to serve as a meaningful concept we need to be able to clearly distinguish between, on the one hand, mere strategic adjustments to a changing portfolio of threat and, on the other hand, a shift towards an overall less aspiring foreign policy.

evidence that retrenchment often succeeds. Six out of fifteen acutely declining and retrenching states examined in their study managed to recover their former rank. By contrast, no state that failed to retrench recovered its position. But it proves difficult to judge the significance of their finding. It seems plausible that declining states that fail to retrench may do so because they face a range of acute threats from which they cannot easily back away. Such states will have little choice but to balance through increased military efforts—although doing so entails a risk of military defeat, which will send them falling further through the ranks of great powers.<sup>2</sup> That doesn't necessarily imply, however, that a policy of retrenchment would have ensured a superior outcome.

Overall, though, Haynes provides an important and new perspective on British retrenchment. His article also contains a crucial insight for both historically-focused and current retrenchment debates: the menu of choice for retrenching states depends largely on the strength of their allies. This insight allows Haynes to offer a benchmark for how a rational state might design a 'responsible policy of retrenchment.'

### **Is there a Clear Take-home Lesson for Washington? Should America 'Come Home'?**

Well...perhaps. The answer depends partly on whether we conceive of retrenchment as mere strategic re-adjustments or as an overall scaling back of foreign policy aspirations. If American 'retrenchment' implies abstaining from large-scale military intervention and occupation of other countries in order to impose regime change, then 'yes'. Not so much because such interventions take big chunk out of a shrinking budget, but because they are counterproductive. Budget squeeze or not, rising China or not, the last few decades amply demonstrate that regime-change by force simply doesn't work.

If, on the other hand, US retrenchment implies a general downgrading of strategic aspirations in response to budget constraints, then the advice is less clear. But it is clear that if America chooses to 'come home' she should first seek to make some new allies, build-up their capacity, and withdraw gradually from regions of crucial strategic importance. Retrenchment enthusiasts present good theoretical arguments for why this should prove a winning strategy, but we still need more empirical evidence in favor of retrenchment.

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<sup>2</sup> Declining great powers embroiled in an interstate war in four of the eighteen cases. See Macdonald and Parent, 2011.

# THE DECLINER'S DILEMMA: RETRENCHMENT IN AN UNCERTAIN WORLD

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Joshua Shiffrin  
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“Decline and Devolution” is a timely article. Studies of decline and retrenchment proliferated in the 1970s and 1980s ([Huntington 1987](#)), but the collapse of the Soviet Union and Japan’s prolonged recession changed things. Out was the decline of the great powers; in was the ‘unipolar era’ ([Wohlforth 1999](#)). Fast forward to the 2010s ([Layne 2012](#)). The rise of China and American economic troubles have made decline a hot-button topic once again ([Beckley and Itzkowitz-Shiffrin 2012-2013](#)). Scholars and policymakers increasingly seek to understand the options ([Schweller 1999](#)) available to declining states to ‘manage’ their own relative losses, with the idea of “retrenchment” striking many as attractive in the wake of unsuccessful American foreign adventurism and budget constraints ([Parent and MacDonald 2011](#)). Others, however, consider retrenchment a recipe for further decline and greater geopolitical instability ([Lieber 2012](#)). The old is new again!

Haynes’ is a major contribution to this debate by offering a more nuanced exploration of what retrenchment entails - namely, “where, when, and how quickly” reduces its foreign commitments - than earlier studies ([Lobell 2005](#)). To get here, he assumes, first, that all declining states face incentives to retrench, but, second, a change in the regional status quo is “injurious to a state’s interests.” The resulting argument is then refreshingly straightforward, as the timing and pace of retrenchment hinge on the two variables: the suitability of regional successor states, and the strategic importance of the region in question.

All things being equal, a state will retrench from a region earlier in its decline in the presence of a seemingly suitable successor: a state it trusts to manage the region, and with the military capacity to do so. Likewise, retrenchment occurs at a faster pace in less-important regions than in vital ones. It follows that states will pursue late and slow retrenchment from important regions without successors, and so forth.

I found much to like about the article. First, separating the timing and pace of decline offers a useful way of discussing retrenchment. After all, retrenchment is both a process (“states retrench”) and an outcome (“a state has retrenched”). Haynes’ approach allows us to understand when retrenchment begins and why states seek the partial or wholesale reduction of their commitments.

Moreover, Haynes systematizes important intuitions about decline and retrenchment. Most would agree that declining great powers should cut their losses by withdrawing from unimportant regions when convivial states are willing and able replace them; conversely, and to use a contemporary example, most would also argue against the United States rapidly retrenching from areas of vital national interest ([Posen 2014](#); [Brooks, Wohlforth, & Ikenberry 2012-2013](#)). Whether or not we accept Hayne’s overall theory, we should agree that his article pushes scholars to clarify what we mean when we talk about “retrenchment,”

as well as to think about how retrenchment policies vary in terms of timing, speed, and priority. This is a significant accomplishment.

That said, I do have some concerns about the theory.

### **Change isn't Always Bad**

First, the assumption that any alteration in the regional status quo is necessarily detrimental to a declining state's interests is contestable. On one level, this problematically suggests that declining powers always favor maintaining the status quo. For example, as [Copeland \(1999\)](#), [Streich and Levy \(2014\)](#), and others show, Imperial Japan and Wilhelmine Germany were both in relative decline with respect to Tsarist Russia, but adopted revisionist policies designed to block Russia's rise. Similarly, it may well be that the United States' current determination to limit the growth of Chinese power constitutes a dramatic revision of the a status quo that has seen decades of Chinese growth often aided and abetted by the United States (e.g., [Cohen 2007](#)).

Along the same lines, one might ask whether revision to a regional status quo is as harmful to a declining state's interests as Haynes suggests. After all, great powers often find themselves overextended and, more generally, even dominant powers, often wind up better off from change to the status quo ante. For example, the British retrenchment from Europe shortly after World War Two occurred before the United States committed itself to permanent involvement ([Trachtenberg 1999](#)) in European security affairs, yet led directly to the Anglo-American special relationship that guaranteed British security ([Hathaway 1981](#)). Similarly, analysts today make a strong case ([Posen 2014](#)) that some form of American withdrawal ([Walt 2011](#)) from the Middle East, Europe, and East Asia—with or without a regional successor—would produce security benefits for the United States ([Rovner and Talmadge 2014](#)). In short, the assumption that declining great powers should always fear change may Haynes' theory of retrenchment.

### **What if the Declining Power Doesn't Want to Retrench?**

I worry, too, about the assumption that decline produces incentives for retrenchment. Decline certainly does this, but to focus on the incentive for retrenchment obscures the dilemma faced by declining great powers. As [Gilpin \(1981\)](#) (and, before him, Thucydides) noted, states in decline face incentives to either retrench or adopt hardline, preventive policies to forestall an unfavorable shift in the distribution of power. Haynes' argument, however, does not address a declining state's propensity to wage war or otherwise trigger conflict (see the article's Figure 3.); instead, and though suggesting prevention is possible (cf. [Haynes 2015: 491](#)), it at worst predicts that declining states in important regions without successors slowly withdraw their commitments. This omission matters a great deal: it means the theory presumes that states generally opt for retrenchment (cf. [Haynes 2015: 491](#)) over prevention when there is good reason to believe things are not so simple. To fix the problem, we instead need to know why states opt for retrenchment in the first place. As things stand, Haynes has really produced a theory to explain the type of retrenchment a state pursues once it opts for retrenchment, rather than a theory of retrenchment per se.

### **Looking for Regional BFFs**

Above all, I find it problematic to claim that, first, the compatibility of interests between declining powers and regional successors is exogenous to the process of decline itself such that, second, declining states expend significant time and resource "screening" potential successors for similar interests. Like politics in general, decline makes strange bedfellows.

Decline does this by causing rising and declining states to alter their underlying interests. As [Mearsheimer \(2014\)](#) and others suggest, state interests expand and contract with shifts in the distribution of power. Thus, as decline progresses, states tend to reduce the scope of their interests—otherwise, there would be no need to retrench at all—and increasingly see former enemies as prospective partners. Despite large political and economic differences, for instance, Britain was willing to consider both Germany and Russia as East Asian allies before signing the Anglo-Japanese alliance. Similarly, Britain made common cause with Russia against Germany before the First World War and attempted to do the same twenty years later despite conflicting “ideologies,” different “regime types,” divergent “trade practices,” and a long-standing rivalry (cf. [Haynes 2015:493](#)). More recently, a weakened United States happily repaired relations with China—despite having fought a war barely two decades earlier—and was more than willing to overlook the Shah of Iran’s less-than-stellar domestic record in order to facilitate regional retrenchments after the Vietnam War ([Litwak 1986](#); [Bill 1989](#)). Ultimately, interest compatibility and successor suitability certainly do not seem largely exogenous to decline—rather, they seem largely endogenous to the reshuffling of interests that occurs during power shifts.

This, in turn, suggests declining states would be foolish indeed to spend much time trying—as the article has it—to ‘screen’ potential successors for compatibility. After all, state intentions can change at the drop of a hat ([Rosato 2014-2015](#)), with expanding and contracting power making reshuffling especially likely ([Friedberg 1988](#)). We therefore have to assume a large degree of a-strategic thinking on the part of state leaders for them not to recognize this risk, all of which flies in the face of the otherwise rational calculations driving the theory. More likely, leaders may pay lip service to screening potential successors as part of retrenchment, but recognize that they may lack options but to accept successors. After all, British leaders after 1945 were far from confident that the United States would uphold British interests abroad ([Barker 1983](#)), just as American leaders were less than thrilled with the prospect of retrenching from Europe after the Cold War and relying on different actors to maintain stability (e.g., [Sparrow 2015](#); [Bush and Scowcroft 1998](#)).

### Contemporary Implications

What does all this mean for the United States? Today, United States, as Haynes notes, shows interest in retrenching from Europe and the Middle East in order to pay more attention to the Asia-Pacific area. However, the theory has difficulty explaining actual American behavior. Consider Europe. Given the importance of the region, abundance of potential [successors](#), and the paucity of great-power threats—with Russia a weak reed indeed ([Rovner 2015](#))—the theory predicts early and gradual retrenchment. In reality, the United States has fought hard over the last several decades to remain the regional powerhouse all while taking on additional commitment by moving NATO eastward; if it has retrenched, it is a slow and odd form of withdrawal indeed ([Zoellick 2011](#); [Posen 2006](#)). In contrast, the United States has quickly retrenched from the Middle East since the end of the Iraq War, yet has done so despite the absence of regional successors.

What of East Asia? It is hard to tell. Here, the US has potential successors in, say, Japan and India. But, as the article’s penultimate section suggests, the growing importance of the region also renders the United States reluctant to rely on successors. Instead, it is paying more attention to the area despite its relative decline. This suggests that the strategic importance of the region largely drives state behavior and, above all, states may not respond to decline by retrenching at all. As the paper aptly shows, in fact, a declining United States has gone to the mats to keep ahead of China in East Asia (much as Britain did with Germany before 1912) ([Kennedy 1987](#)). Not only is the decision to forego retrenchment

missing from the argument—the theory seems to predict an early and gradual American drawdown from the region.

### **The Takeaway**

My concerns notwithstanding, Hayne's article is a major contribution to the growing debate over decline and retrenchment. This debate matters a great deal for American grand strategy, and for the future of international security. As we look forward to continuing debates over American grand strategy, we need to understand how a reduced American footprint may factor into international stability and U.S. national security. Haynes work goes a long way towards helping analysts clarify the underlying issues in this debate. Scholars and policymakers alike would do well, as Hayes' implies, to consider not whether retrenchment 'writ large' is a solution to contemporary problems, but rather whether, how, and when regional drawdowns might serve the national interest.

# "DECLINE AND DEVOLUTION": A RESPONSE FROM KYLE HAYNES

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Kyle Haynes  
Purdue University

I am enormously grateful to Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, Josh Shiffrin, Paul MacDonald, and Joe Parent for their comments on my article ([Haynes, 2015](#)). I cannot address all of their important points here but will examine a few recurring theoretical critiques and discuss the model's implications for contemporary U.S. foreign policy.

## **Where's the Decline?**

All three responses take issue with my treatment of decline. MacDonald & Parent are correct that my article downplays the role of decline in causing retrenchment. Even so, my theory builds upon their work ([2011](#)), which showed conclusively that decline plays a central role in driving retrenchment. Thus, my discussion assumes a constant level of decline in order to show more clearly how regional importance and successor states impact the specific form retrenchment takes.

Shiffrin and Eilstrup-Sangiovanni carry this critique further. For Shiffrin, power shifts produce important changes in state interests. Compatibility therefore cannot be untangled from decline. My article admits that declining states can "cultivate" successors through rapprochement and capacity building ([493-494](#)). But the declining state's basic conception of an ideal international order is less likely to change during this process. Decline can limit a state's strategy options and rule out otherwise attractive policies. The declining state's "basic preferences," however, are more likely to remain stable. For instance, British decline prior to WWI left it unable to bear the costs of upholding a liberal international order—but did not change Britain's fundamental desire that such an order exist.

Eilstrup-Sangiovanni claims that decline alone drove Britain's pre-WWI naval strategy, which can be reduced to simple balancing. I agree with the basic point that Germany's naval threat drove this process. But the relevant counterfactual is whether Britain would have been able to balance as effectively without Japan, France, and the U.S. to facilitate peripheral retrenchment. I argue it would not have. My article claims only that these regional successors facilitated British balancing against Germany in important ways.

## **Is Instability Always Bad?**

Both Shiffrin and MacDonald & Parent dispute my claim that "regional instability" is harmful to declining states, who pursue successors in order to reduce the likelihood of such instability. Shiffrin notes that declining states often adopt revisionist policies in order to stifle rising powers. MacDonald & Parent assert that declining states might "put a greater premium on defending specific interests than preserving general stability."

MacDonald and Parent rightly note that even hegemonic states are not satisfied with every aspect of regional politics. But importantly, I conceptualize order as the broader rules and norms that structure state relations across issue areas. In short, order determines political outcomes across “specific interests.” Therefore, if a successor can support regional order, the institutions and norms that make up this order will in turn support the declining state’s specific interests. But MacDonald and Parent are correct that, lacking more broadly compatible successors, declining states should seek out those who will support the aspects of regional order most vital to the declining state’s core interests.

This discussion also sheds light on my disagreement with Shiffrin. He claims that declining states that initiate preventive wars are revisionist actors. In my framework, however, preventive war against a potentially hostile rising power is not itself a revisionist act. It is a risky act that could result in fundamental changes to regional order if the conflict goes badly. But if preventive war is intended to entrench the status quo rules and norms, it does not itself indicate truly “revisionist” preferences.

### **Policy Implications**

Finally, we must closely examine how well my theory explains recent U.S. foreign policy, and what it suggests for American policymakers moving forward. As an empirical matter, Shiffrin claims that the U.S. has not meaningfully retrenched from Europe despite the availability of numerous successors. Conversely, it has withdrawn from the Middle East despite a lack of compatible regional powers. I would first argue that Shiffrin understates the potential threat Russia poses to Europe’s eastern flank. That said, the NATO allies collectively constitute a highly compatible, moderately capable group of successors in a highly important region. My theory thus predicts early, gradual retrenchment. Shiffrin simply claims this has not happened. He is correct that the 2009 NATO expansion runs contrary to the model’s expectations. But as Figure 1 indicates, American military deployments in Western Europe have indeed declined gradually over the past 10 years ([Defense Manpower Data Center, 2015](#)).

Shiffrin also writes that the U.S. has withdrawn from the Middle East despite the absence of regional successors. In the article, I argued that American withdrawal depended upon Saudi Arabia to contain Iranian influence ([500-501](#)). The ongoing Saudi military campaign in Yemen, with tacit American support, bolsters this claim. And as my theory predicts, American withdrawal coincided with a massive spike in U.S. arms sales to Riyadh ([SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, 2014](#)).

Figure 1: American Troop Deployments in Europe, 1995-2015

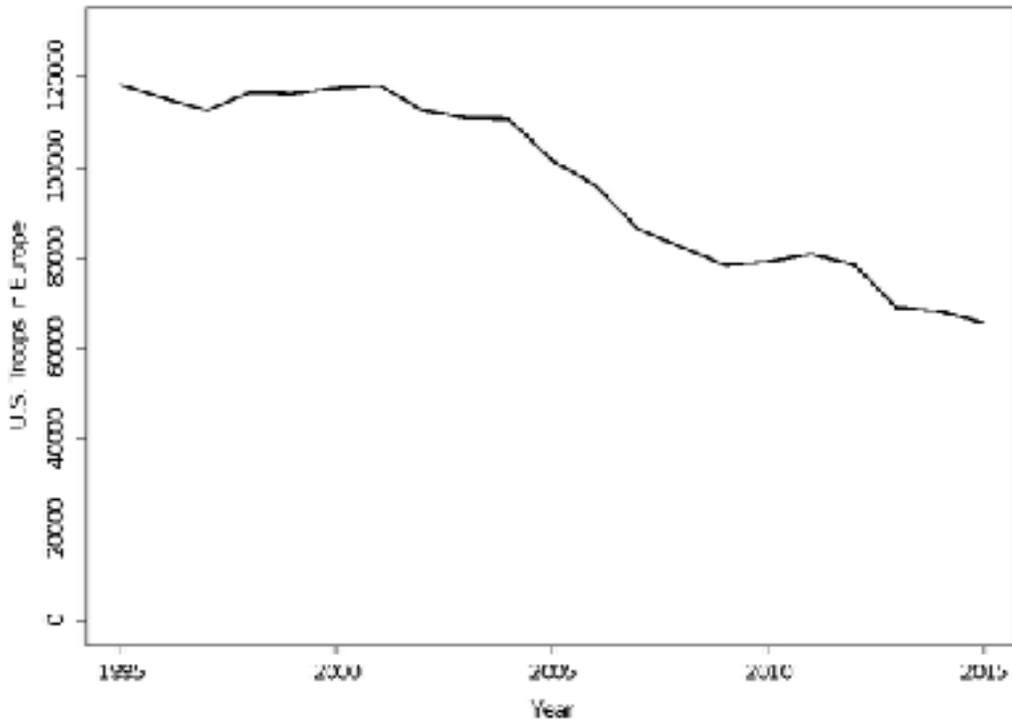
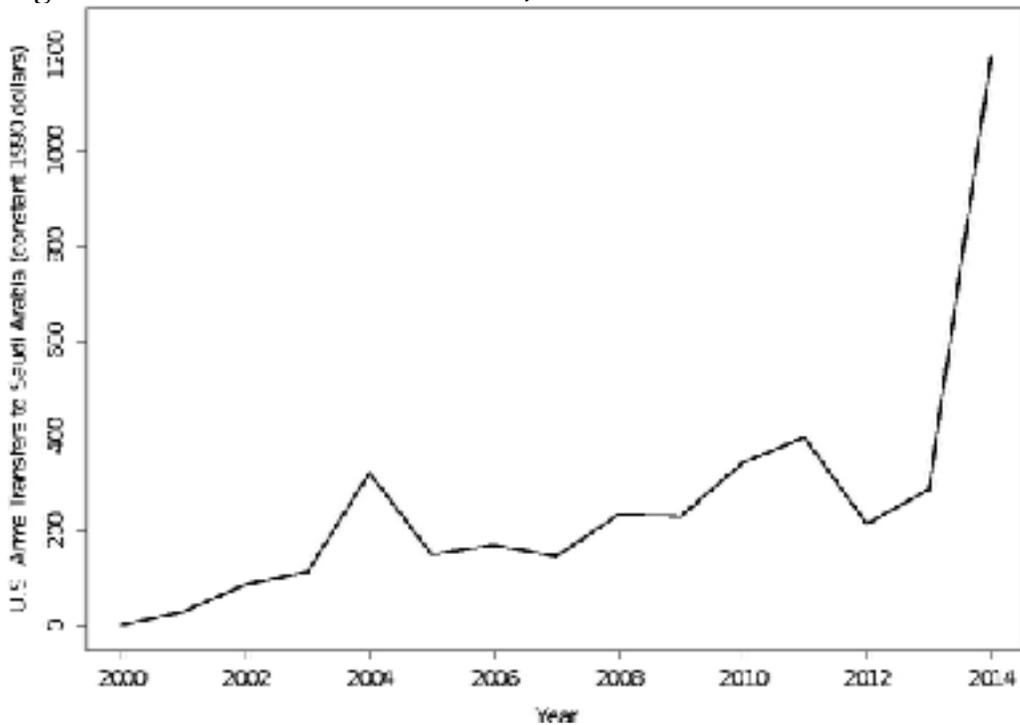


Figure 2: U.S. Arms Sales to Saudi Arabia, 2000-2014



I would also argue that the Obama administration's response to recent crises in Ukraine and Syria supports my core argument. I claim that retrenchment depends upon a declining state's expectations that the status quo order can survive its withdrawal. In both of these cases, unanticipated levels of regional instability prompted the administration to halt the withdrawals envisioned in the original pivot strategy.

Finally, Eilstrup-Sangiovanni rightly points out that my theory says nothing about the conditions under which retrenchment "works." British withdrawal from the Western Hemisphere in 1905 produced a virtuous cycle of mutual accommodation with the U.S. that protected Britain's core regional interests and blossomed into today's "special relationship." Conversely, Britain's withdrawal from East Asia set the stage for Japanese imperialism and WWII in the Pacific. My article tells us little about which dynamic would likely result from American retrenchment today.

I am developing this project into a book manuscript that directly addresses this question. In it, I argue that the knock-on effects of retrenchment depend primarily on the successor's expectations regarding the emergence of future threats. Successors who see no major threats on the horizon have little to gain from the declining state's continued presence. They will thus view retrenchment positively and look more favorably on the declining state's core regional interests. At the very least, these successors will ensure the declining state is happy enough with the regional order to remain withdrawn. Conversely, even highly capable successors may feel abandoned by the declining state's withdrawal if they foresee serious threats down the road. Such successors could bandwagon with revisionist actors simply to cover their own backs.

Thus, in order to retrench safely, the U.S. must ensure its chosen regional successors feel adequately secure. American policymakers should be careful that successors are not forced to cast about for other great power patrons or pursue unnecessarily risky policies out of fear and insecurity. In some cases, a successor's regional preponderance may render this concern moot. In others, the U.S. would simply need to provide modest levels of military assistance to guarantee the successor's long-term security. Heavy arms sales have the added benefit of rendering the successor dependent upon the U.S. for replacement parts and maintenance. And finally, successors who perceive serious long-term threats may require the U.S. to retain a residual military presence in the region. This can reassure the successor of American capacity to provide assistance in case of unanticipated regional instability.

In this respect, even token onshore commitments or continued control over concentrated regional chokepoints can yield outsized benefits. Modest American deployments into Eastern Europe help reassure NATO's newer members, highlight the alliance's continuing vitality, and may even facilitate future reductions elsewhere across Europe. Similarly, clear commitments to hedge against the expansion of Iran's regional influence will discourage Saudi Arabia from seeking Chinese or Russian aid and dampen the incentives for Riyadh to support Sunni extremist groups across the Middle East. But complete and irreversible withdrawal is particularly risky in these regions where successors, even powerful ones, anticipate and must adjust to emerging threats.

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