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Eliot A. Cohen. *The Big Stick: The Limits of Soft Power and the Necessity of Military Force.* New York: Basic Books, 2017. ISBN: 978-0-4650-4472-6 (hardcover, \$27.99/CDN\$36.50).

Robert G. Kaufman. *Dangerous Doctrine: How Obama's Grand Strategy Weakened America.* Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2016. ISBN: 978-0-8131-6720-6 (cloth, \$40.00).

Robert Lieber. *Retreat and its Consequences: American Foreign Policy and the Problem of World Order.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. ISBN: 978-1-1071-4180-3 (hardcover, \$89.99); 978-1-3165-0671-4 (paperback, \$24.99).

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Introduction by Henry R. Nau, The George Washington University

The debate about American foreign policy has always divided along two dimensions. How close in or far out should America protect its security? And for what moral or political purpose does America exist and participate in world affairs?

‘Nationalists’ adopt the close-in approach to American security, generally confined to America’s borders and the western hemisphere.¹ They dominated American foreign policy in the 1920s and 1930s. ‘Realists’ venture further out to anticipate and counter threats in distant regions—Europe, Asia and the Middle East—before they reach America’s shores.² They formulated the containment doctrine during the Cold War, permanently stationing for the first time American forces in Europe and Asia. Both nationalists and realists focus on security, not the spread of human rights and democratic regimes. They accept the world as it is, not as they might wish it to be.

‘Internationalists’ envision changing the world, eventually making it more democratic and more peaceful. They come in two varieties. ‘Liberal internationalists’ push multilateral diplomacy and international institutions to reduce the role of military competition, promote ideological tolerance and spread the rule of law.³ They inspired the League of Nations and United Nations. ‘Conservative internationalists’ use a more muscular diplomacy to strengthen democratic and weaken authoritarian regimes while preserving national sovereignty.⁴ They crafted the arms buildup and superpower diplomacy that ended the Cold War in a starburst of democratic states.

The three books reviewed in this forum favor an internationalist foreign policy and the conservative rather than the liberal variety. They emphasize military power (Cohen), geopolitical forces (Lieber) and American exceptionalism (Kaufman), rather than disarmament, international institutions, and ideological tolerance, which is more characteristic of liberal internationalism. The irony is that they appear on the scene just as the American public has chosen presidents, Barack Obama and now Donald Trump, who favor a more realist, even nationalist, approach to foreign policy. As Matthew Kroenig writes in his review, “the most biting criticism of these books might deal with whether the analysis stands up in light of recent events, including the U.S. presidential election.”

Eliot Cohen, one of America’s top analysts of military strategy and civil-military relations, reasserts the utility of military power, “the big stick,” to safeguard U.S. interests but struggles to understand the populist mood (he led the “Never Trump” movement) that rejects foreign military assertiveness. Robert Lieber, a prolific and

¹ For a stellar nationalist treatment of American foreign policy, see Eric A. Nordlinger, *Isolationism Reconfigured: American Foreign Policy for a New Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

² See Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014)

³ See G. John Ikenberry, Thomas Knock, Anne-Marie Slaughter, and Tony Smith, *The Crisis in American Foreign Policy: Wilsonianism in the Twenty-first Century* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009).

⁴ See my book *Conservative Internationalism: Armed Diplomacy under Jefferson, Polk, Truman and Reagan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press: paperback ed., 2015).

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insightful political scientist, illuminates the baleful geopolitical consequences of America's "retreat" from global leadership yet acknowledges how difficult it is to get America's richer allies, which are also experiencing populist backlash, to step up and share more of the burdens of global leadership. And Robert Kaufman, a thoughtful and refreshingly principled conservative scholar, spotlights the moral dimension of American foreign policy, which was badly missing in the Obama Doctrine, but worries that it may be decades before America finds again inspirational presidents like Harry Truman and Ronald Reagan. All three authors believe that international circumstances can be reversed yet they do not tell us much about the domestic leadership and choices that might bring about such changes.

Cohen wants an all-purpose military that costs about 4% of GDP (the current level is 3.6%) and is flexible enough to deal with any contingency. He places a premium on planning and mobilization strategies that quickly generate the kind of force and equipment to meet specific threats. As William Inboden notes, Cohen offers the antidote to the Weinberger Doctrine. That Doctrine, named after a 1984 speech by U.S. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, called for using military force only when national interests, chances of winning, exit strategies, and domestic support were all crystal clear. Reality is too complex, Cohen counters; uncertainty is the only certainty. The country has to be ready to meet multiple contingencies across a broad spectrum of possible threats—rising powers, dangerous states, jihadist terrorist groups and threats to the commons. The last thing you need in an uncertain world, Cohen argues, is a grand strategy.

Cohen's analysis is ideal for the war planner but potentially a nightmare for the politician. How does a president justify a defense budget, constant in terms of percentage of GDP, without an overall strategy for its use? Cohen offers the analogy of individuals saving a fixed percentage of their income for retirement. But, until retirement, individuals or their fiduciaries have to decide where and toward what ends to invest their money. Presidents (and Congress) too will have to decide which threats (stocks) are more pressing (better bets) and what contingency (hedging) plans may be necessary. Is America's objective to preserve the global status quo (current income), make America great again (make up losses) or lead the world toward expanding freedom and prosperity (greatest gains)? Do we have any red lines (risk tolerance), and do they have to be declared beforehand (stop/loss orders) to have effect? Right now, the American public believes that the status quo is not in their favor, that the United States does too much and the allies too little, and that it may be time to let the allies know that they either step forward or forget looking back.

Getting allies to do more is Lieber's dilemma. He graphically portrays the benefits Europe and Japan enjoy under the American-led world order. Germany has the largest absolute and relative trade surplus in the world, double that of China. Europe spends so much on welfare, 50% of global spending or double its share of world GDP, that it contributes little or nothing to world growth. Even when Europe steps up militarily as in NATO's operation in Libya, it runs out of precision munitions in eleven weeks. And Japan, while expanding modestly its military role, relies entirely on U.S. forces to defend the Korean peninsula, where Japan and South Korea quarrel endlessly over World War II grievances.

What can be done about allied complacency? Not much. Lieber hopes for European economic revival, a relaunching of regional integration, passage of multilateral trade agreements, and a strengthening of NATO. But he regards each as "unlikely" or "daunting" (and some like the TransPacific Partnership may already be history). He notes a final possibility, withdrawal and abandonment of Europe by America. That too he finds "far-fetched" (44-45).

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But what if a U.S. withdrawal from Europe were a ‘looming’ rather than far-fetched possibility? What if a Trump administration, by linking America’s support to specific allied trade concessions and defense budgets, put the allies on notice that in the future they may have to bear more of the consequences of their inactions? For example, renegotiate and enforce trade agreements with rough timetables for reducing (not necessarily eliminating) imbalances, allowing first for domestic measures to take effect and then imposing external measures if necessary. Back up any military actions Europe agrees to take (no need to worry about entrapment since these actions are unlikely to be more aggressive than America would want) but only at the level of matching what the Europeans themselves put up (today the U.S. bears 70% of NATO defense spending). Lead by example and end Congressional restraints on U.S. defense spending while spurring U.S. economic growth through bold tax and regulatory reforms. If Europe continues to drift, move increasingly to an over-the horizon posture of not abandoning NATO but giving Europe plenty of time and opportunity to take the lead. Risky, yes! But compared to what? Without another major confrontation or war, the American people are unlikely to accept the burden sharing that currently exists.

What the American people will or will not accept is Kaufman’s riddle. He understands instinctively that American society is unlikely to support significant engagement in world affairs just for defense or geopolitical reasons. While Cohen and Lieber see America’s problem as a lack of will not capability, Kaufman sees it as a lack of commitment to America’s ideals. American foreign policy needs to reaffirm the exceptionalist view that American and western values of individual human dignity and free institutions (including markets, trade unions, press, courts, and divided powers) are superior to authoritarian institutions. He observes how Harry Truman and Ronald Reagan, the bookend presidents of the Cold War, stood unabashedly for freedom in Europe and elsewhere in the world. Kaufman details how Obama abandoned this vision and watched the number of democracies in the world decline over the past decade.

From Kaufman’s perspective, authoritarianism is on the move. Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese leader Xi Jinping have stated explicitly their intention to roll back the western liberal order. And religious and nationalist governments in Turkey, Hungary, and Poland are flirting with Moscow, while elites in Germany, France, and South Korea may already be putting commercial interests with Russia and China ahead of their political preferences with the West.

As Cohen intuits, any U.S. strategy to counter a rising authoritarianism risks military confrontations. Why? Because, as we have seen in Ukraine and the South China Sea, authoritarian states use military force readily, if they can, to enforce their domestic and international objectives. Will the American people support interventions as long as they meet with success? Maybe. They did so in Germany and Korea during the Cold War. But many if not most Americans now consider Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq as mistakes. (Surprisingly, Cohen agrees on Iraq.) And the first Persian Gulf War of 1990-1991, though a stunning military success, led to all sorts of political complications that contributed to the rise of militant Islamic terrorism and a second Persian Gulf War.

There is no simple solution, and I anguish in my own writings over these same questions.⁵ Nevertheless, I conclude from my reading of Vietnam and other postwar conflicts that America should prioritize the promotion of democracy primarily on the main borders of existing democracies, not in regions remote from these borders such as Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Today the main borders include the struggle in

⁵ See *Conservative Internationalism*.

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Ukraine between a free Europe and authoritarian Russia and in Korea and Taiwan between free Asia and an authoritarian China. Backed by strong, nearby free markets and alliances, border area confrontations with authoritarian powers offer greater chances of success to advance freedom and greater losses if freedom is rolled back. Other issues and regions, such as terrorism and the Middle East, pose material but not existential threats unless they cumulatively destabilize free Europe and Asia. Future leaders of the Truman and Reagan type might be able to persuade the American people to support sustained political and, if necessary, military interventions in these priority areas.

For the moment, however, we have Trump. His brand of nationalism could cut some better deals for America's interests and potentially extend public willingness to stay engaged in world affairs. But it could also destroy the edifice of western unity that has preserved world order and spread democracy for the past 70 years. Is Trump saying that he is walking away from the western liberal order, a strategic goal, or that he is *willing* to walk away in order to fix it, a negotiating tactic? Given his political base, he may have the best chance since Reagan to reconnect the populist and principled traditions of American foreign policy.

Participants:

Henry R. Nau is Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at the Elliott School of International Affairs, The George Washington University. Among numerous publications, he is the author of four University press books and a widely used textbook on international relations, to include *Conservative Internationalism: Armed Diplomacy Under Jefferson, Polk, Truman and Reagan* (Princeton University Press, 2013; paperback with new preface 2015); *At Home Abroad: Identity and Power in American Foreign Policy* (Cornell University Press, 2002); *The Myth of America's Decline: Leading the World Economy into the 1990s* (Oxford University Press, 1990); *National Politics and International Technology: Nuclear Reactor Development in Western Europe* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); and *Perspectives on International Relations: Power, Institutions, and Ideas* (Sage/CQ Press, 5th Edition, 2016). His most recent articles and book chapters include "America's International Nationalism," *The American Interest* (January/February 2017); and "The 'Great Expansion': The Economic Legacy of Ronald Reagan," in *Reagan's Legacy in a World Transformed*, edited by Jeffrey L. Chidester and Paul Kengor, (Harvard University Press, 2015). He served on the National Security Council staff in the Reagan administration (1981-1983) and in the U.S. Army with the 82nd Airborne Division (1963-1965).

Eliot A. Cohen is the Robert E. Osgood Professor of Strategic Studies at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). After receiving his BA and PhD degrees from Harvard he taught there and later at the Naval War College, before coming to SAIS in 1990. His books include, most recently, *The Big Stick: The Limits of Soft Power and the Necessity of Military Force* as well as *Conquered into Liberty: Two Centuries of Battle along the Great Warpath that Made the American Way of War* and *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime*, among others. He served in the U.S. Army Reserve, was a director in the Defense Department's policy planning staff, led the U.S. Air Force's multivolume study of the first Gulf War and has served in various official advisory positions. In 2007-2009 he was Counselor of the Department of State, serving as Secretary Condoleezza Rice's senior adviser, focusing chiefly on issues of war and peace, including Iraq and Afghanistan. His public commentary appears in *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times* and on major television networks, and he is a contributing editor at *The Atlantic*.

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Robert G. Kaufman is the Dockson Professor of Public Policy at Pepperdine University. He is the author of four books, including his most recent *Dangerous Doctrine: How Obama's Grand Strategy Weakened America* (The University Press of Kentucky, 2016). He has published frequently in scholarly journals and the realm of commentary, including the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, and *Fox News*.

Robert J. Lieber is Professor of Government and International Affairs at Georgetown University. He is author or editor of seventeen books on international relations and U.S. foreign policy. In addition to his latest book, *Retreat and Its Consequences: American Foreign Policy and the Problem of World Order* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), his recent books include *Power and Willpower in the American Future: Why the United States Is Not Destined To Decline* (Cambridge, 2012), *The American Era: Power and Strategy for the 21st Century* (Cambridge, 2007), and edited volumes including *Foreign Policy* (Ashgate Library of Essays in International Relations, 2008), and *Eagle Rules? Foreign Policy and American Primacy in the 21st Century* (Prentice-Hall and Woodrow Wilson Center, 2002). His articles have appeared in scholarly and policy journals including *International Security*, *Foreign Policy*, *World Affairs*, *The National Interest*, *American Political Science Review*, *British Journal of Political Science*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Internationale Politik* (Berlin), *Politique étrangère* (Paris), and *International Politics* (London).

William Inboden holds the William Powers, Jr. Chair as Executive Director of the Clements Center for National Security, and is also Associate Professor at the LBJ School of Public Affairs, both at the University of Texas-Austin. He is the author of *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945-1960: The Soul of Containment* (Cambridge University Press, 2008) as well as numerous articles and book chapters. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, a contributing editor to *Foreign Policy* magazine, and his commentary has appeared in numerous outlets including the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, NPR, Sky News, BBC, and CNN. His previous policy positions include service on the Department of State's Policy Planning Staff and as Senior Director for Strategic Planning on the National Security Council.

Matthew Kroenig is an Associate Professor of Government and Foreign Service at Georgetown University and a Senior Fellow in the Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security at the Atlantic Council. He is the author or editor of six books, including *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy* (forthcoming). He formerly served in the U.S. Department of Defense and the Central Intelligence Agency and regularly consults with the U.S. government.

Erin M. Simpson is the Founder and CEO of Archer Avenue Consulting, working at the intersection of data science, intelligence, and national security. She has lectured widely on international security and intelligence matters, including DARPA, the Joint Special Operations University (JSOU), Defense Intelligence Agency, MIT's Lincoln Labs, Google Ideas, the Patterson School, Georgetown, and the University of Pennsylvania. She was previously an Assistant Professor of National Security Affairs at the Marine Command and Staff College in Quantico, VA, and a counterinsurgency advisor in Afghanistan. Dr. Simpson holds a PhD in Political Science from Harvard University and a BA in Political Science and International Studies from the University of Kansas.

Review by William Inboden, University of Texas at Austin

Insofar as scholars and practitioners of American national security policy can ever agree on anything, there seems to be a near-consensus that the United States faces an imperiled and deteriorating position on the global stage.¹ The litany of challenges is familiar yet still daunting to behold: tense and eroding relations with the great powers, especially Russia and China; the resilient and evolving threat of jihadist terrorism; the Middle East convulsed by multiple conflicts and failing states; the Afghanistan War now into its sixteenth year; North Korea making further advances in its nuclear arsenal and delivery systems, seemingly immune to over two decades of international efforts to thwart it; an international economic order that may be undergoing a slow-motion disintegration. The Trump Administration, in short, is inheriting a difficult hand. It prepares to take office in the midst of an extraordinary set of global challenges, and with a nation whose resources are diminished, whose body politic is divided, and whose global posture is weakened.

Yet on precisely what has caused these challenges, and what is to be done about them, the consensus devolves into sharp disagreements over fundamental questions. Most academic realists, for example, contend that the United States bears considerable fault for these problems, and that the solution is to adopt a posture of restraint or off-shore balancing.² The work of John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt exemplifies this perspective, though there are many other academic realists who echo their diagnosis. Their recent *Foreign Affairs* article “The Case for Offshore Balancing” catalogues the many international maladies, and then argues:

The United States does not bear sole responsibility for all these costly debacles, but it has had a hand in most of them. The setbacks are the natural consequence of the misguided grand strategy of liberal hegemony that Democrats and Republicans have pursued for years. This approach holds that the United States must use its power not only to solve global problems but also to promote a world order based on international institutions, representative governments, open markets, and respect for human rights.³

Instead, Mearsheimer and Walt urge the United States to reduce its international commitments and defense budget, demand that other nations take more responsibility for their regional security, and focus on preventing a hegemon from emerging to dominate the three strategic regions of Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Persian Gulf. This they suggest is best done through a posture of off-shore balancing, maintaining the

¹ The near-consensus is not unanimous, of course, and there are some thoughtful voices, usually from Obama Administration officials, who believe the United States is in a relatively good position all things considered. For an articulate defense of this stance, see Derek Chollet, *The Long Game: How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America's Role in the World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016).

² On the distinction between academic realists and policy realists, see William Inboden and John Owen, “Putin, Ukraine, and the Question of Realism,” *The Hedgehog Review* 17:1 (Spring 2015). Available at: http://www.iasc-culture.org/THR/THR_article_2015_Spring_OwenInboden.php.

³ John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, “The Case for Offshore Balancing,” *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 2016), 70-83.

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bulk of the United States' military forces at home and only deploying them in the event of a hostile state disrupting the balance of power in the vital regions.

Contra the academic realists, there are another set of voices who hold that the problem has been just the opposite: a United States that has been too passive and withdrawn from its historic role of global leadership, and it is this American timidity that has contributed to the breakdown in international order and proliferation of global dangers. The three books under review here by Robert Lieber, Eliot Cohen, and Robert Kaufman exemplify this position. While the near-simultaneous publication of three books making similar arguments is rather remarkable, it bears noting that these authors are not alone in their grim diagnoses. Other contemporary books offering a likeminded analysis and set of prescriptions include Robert Kagan, *The World America Made* (2012), Bret Stephens, *America in Retreat: The New Isolationism and the Coming Global Disorder* (2014), Colin Dueck, *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today* (2015), and Paul D. Miller, *American Power and Liberal Order: A Conservative Internationalist Grand Strategy* (2016).⁴

Nor, it should be stressed, are the three books under review identical. To be sure, all three authors are political scientists who work in the historical-qualitative tradition. All three are also faculty members at policy schools: Cohen at Johns Hopkins SAIS, Kaufman at Pepperdine's School of Public Policy, and Lieber at Georgetown's School of Foreign Service (with a dual appointment in the Department of Government). Yet each has a unique focus. Against the backdrop of public weariness with war, the mistakes and uncertain outcomes of the past decade and a half of military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the Obama Administration's persistent false dichotomies between diplomacy and the use of force, Cohen attempts to recover the military as an instrument of statecraft. A gifted stylist, in arresting prose Cohen subjects America's performance in recent conflicts and the present threat environment to unsparing analysis. Of the three books, Cohen's is most suffused with a historical consciousness, and his sense of history shapes his belief in the fundamental uncertainties of the future as well as his skepticism about grand strategic designs and doctrines. "Grand strategy is an idea whose time will never come, because the human condition does not permit it," he says (204). In his concluding chapter on "The Logic of Hard Power," Cohen critiques the false comfort offered by the Weinberger Doctrine's illusory clarity on the deployment of the military, and instead proffers six sensible rules for how the United States ought to approach the use of force.

Kaufman focuses squarely on the past eight years and makes what might be considered a first draft of history in evaluating the Obama Administration's national security policy. It is not a favorable assessment. Examining the Obama record through the lenses of international relations theory, American diplomatic traditions, and its implementation in practice, Kaufman finds the Obama record to be rather *sui generis*, not fitting squarely into any particular theoretical school or historical type. Thus his description of Obama as "an unrealistic defensive realist with a strong disposition to multilateralism minus the mitigating grace of liberalism" (38). Kaufman's concluding chapter sets forth his own prescriptions for American foreign policy under the rubric of "moral democratic realism" (191). He also offers six plausible albeit anodyne principles to guide policymakers going forward.

⁴ Robert Kagan, *The World America Made* (New York: Knopf 2012); Bret Stephens, *America in Retreat: The New Isolationism and the Coming Global Disorder* (New York: Sentinel, 2014), Colin Dueck, *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), and Paul D. Miller, *American Power and Liberal Order: A Conservative Internationalist Grand Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press 2016).

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Unlike Cohen and Kaufman, Lieber does not put forth his own six rules/principles/guidelines, but he does engage in the most thorough geopolitical analysis of the three books. Assessing a combination of secular trends and policy choices made by the Obama Administration, Lieber sees the diminished American role on the global stage as producing deleterious effects for the international system, especially in Europe and the Middle East. (Curiously, while he addresses the rise of China, Lieber has comparatively less to say about the Indo-Pacific as a region). Lieber blends cyclical and volitional elements into his analysis, and while he sees America's current posture of retrenchment as a deliberate path charted by the Obama Administration, he also sounds a note of inevitability in his conclusion that "sooner or later, the United States will return to a more robust role" (137).

What accounts for this outpouring of like-minded books? Certainly part of their nativity stems from their stated purposes of critiquing the Obama Administration's legacy and trying to chart a better way forward for American foreign policy in the midst of serious geopolitical challenges. Here I am in broad agreement with the argument that each author makes, and have previously written similar, albeit briefer, critiques myself⁵. But it seems that the deeper story underlying these books is the perennial tension between structure and agency in shaping the role the United States plays in the world. Even though the prescriptions are different, this same conceptual tension also seems to underlie the calls for restraint and offshore balancing offered by Mearsheimer, Walt, and their fellow travelers.

The question, then, is to what extent can the prevailing global instability and weakened American posture be attributed to structural shifts in the international system, and to what extent do they instead reflect deliberate policy choices made by American leaders? Two systemic changes in the international milieu seem most consequential. First, the international distribution of power has experienced structural evolution over the past quarter century. This is most pronounced with the rise of China and (to a lesser extent) India; the decades-long stalling of Japan's ascent; the decline of European powers such as the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, as well as the European Union as an institution; and the resurgence of Russia as a meaningful geopolitical actor. The brief window of American global hegemony at the end of the Cold War appears in hindsight even more evanescent.

Second, the international threat environment has become more complex and arguably more menacing since the early post-Cold War years. The September 11th 2001 decade marked the first phase of the new threat environment, when militant jihadism lent the strategic focus of a clear adversary (even if some of the tactics in addressing the terrorist threat were controversial and ambiguous, such as the Iraq War). The second phase of additional complexity came when a proliferation of challenges to international order emerged, such as the nuclear programs of North Korea and Iran, the Middle East's cavalcade of civil wars and collapsing states, Russia's aggression against its neighboring states, and China's bellicose assertions of territorial control in disputed areas. Undergirding all of these developments has been a diminishing of faith worldwide in democratic capitalism as the most advantageous political-economic system, which has further eroded America's influence. While critics of the Obama Administration will point to instances where American

⁵ See, for example, Kim Holmes and Will Inboden, "The United States Needs a New Foreign Policy Agenda for 2014," *ForeignPolicy.com*, 28 August 2014. Available at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/08/28/the-u-s-needs-a-new-foreign-policy-agenda-for-2016-a-four-part-series/> and Will Inboden, "When Asian Leaders Look at Obama, They See Ukraine and Syria," *ForeignPolicy.com*, 23 April 2014. Available at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/04/23/when-asian-leaders-look-at-obama-they-see-ukraine-and-syria/>

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action or inaction may have exacerbated these challenges, as an analytic point it seems fair to say that the challenges themselves are largely changes in the international milieu.

What, then, of the contingent factors of human agency, particularly the Obama Administration's policy choices in response to these global shifts? This review forum is not the venue to relitigate the almost infinite number of policy decisions made over the last eight years. When taking the Administration's strategy and specific policies in the aggregate, however—including its more conciliatory posture towards adversaries, its disposition against intervention, and its reduced military spending—a picture emerges of a presidency that has self-consciously internalized a belief that the United States is in decline. In this respect it is interesting to revisit the profile of the Obama Administration's foreign policy by Ryan Lizza in the *New Yorker* in 2011. The article is most famous (infamous?) for the “leading from behind” quote that gave much fodder to Barack Obama's critics, but in context it offers what appears in hindsight as a prophetic depiction of the trajectory that the administration would follow over the ensuing five and a half years and the eventual emergence of an “Obama Doctrine”:

Nonetheless, Obama may be moving toward something resembling a doctrine. One of his advisers described the President's actions in Libya as “leading from behind.” That's not a slogan designed for signs at the 2012 Democratic Convention, but it does accurately describe the balance that Obama now seems to be finding. It's a different definition of leadership than America is known for, and it comes from two unspoken beliefs: that the relative power of the U.S. is declining, as rivals like China rise, and that the U.S. is reviled in many parts of the world.⁶

This seems to capture well the Obama White House's assessment of the structural changes in the international system, and its approach to managing the balance between systemic constraints and policy agency.

However, the very act of interpreting structural changes is itself a matter of volition. Here the Obama Administration's reading of the international system seems to have colored and been colored by its policy choices. A different interpretation of the international system would note that while there have been meaningful changes in global power distribution, the actual position of the United States has not declined much. Rather, in international power assessments the relative rise of China in particular has come instead at the expense of major European nations such as Germany, France, and the United Kingdom. The United States has in contrast remained in a relatively stable power position. Measured in tangible terms such as military and economic power, or less tangible terms such as diplomatic and cultural influence, the United States remains the most powerful nation on earth.⁷ The authors of the three books under review all make

⁶ Ryan Lizza, “The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring Remade Obama's Foreign Policy,” *The New Yorker*, 2 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/05/02/the-consequentialist>. See also Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic*, April 2016. Available at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>

⁷ For a thoughtful exposition of the United States' continued power predominance, see Josef Joffe, *The Myth of America's Decline: Politics, Economics, and a Half Century of False Prophecies* (New York: Liveright, 2014) and Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy*

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similar assessments of the power distribution in the international system. As Cohen puts it, “despite all the disappointments and losses of recent years, America is immensely strong, across many dimensions of power...no other country, or collection of countries, has a better hand to play in international politics” (63).

The question now is how the incoming Donald Trump Administration will assess these questions, particularly on the structure of the international system and the concomitant policy choices to take. Judging from his campaign rhetoric, there is some evidence that Trump may share the general viewpoint of the academic realists, albeit often expressed in cruder terms. For example, Trump frequently downplayed America’s ability to influence conditions in other countries, disparaged its alliance commitments and dismissed many of its allies as free-riders, and described the United States as a weakened and diminished power. Yet some of his nominations for national security positions and some of his actions during the transition period seem to indicate a more assertive internationalist posture. In truth no one can know, not even a President-Elect himself, how the world will appear from the Oval Office, until the President sits in the seat at the desk.

(Princeton: Princeton University Press 2008) and *America Abroad: The United States’ Global Role in the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

Review by Matthew Kroenig, Georgetown University

If someone had told me in January 2009 that, after eight years of an Obama presidency, Russia would be invading a country in Europe, China would be employing military coercion to take contested territory from U.S. treaty allies in Asia, and there would be a terrorist caliphate in existence in the Middle East, I would not have believed it. It would have seemed too farfetched. Yet here we are.

Three recent books in one way or another attempt to analyze President Barack Obama's many failings as a foreign-policy president and provide advice on how to avoid repeating such failures in the future. In *Dangerous Doctrine* and *Retreat and its Consequences*, Robert Kaufman and Robert Lieber, respectively, identify the key elements of Obama's foreign-policy doctrine and assess its consequences. In *The Big Stick*, Eliot Cohen ponders an element of national power that was underutilized and sometimes poorly employed in the Obama years: the threat and use of military force. All three books tell us something important about the period of world history from which we have just emerged and what the future may hold. All are also must-reads for serious students of American foreign policy.

Kaufman and Lieber begin by delineating the principles that have undergirded Obama's foreign policy. Other recent writings on this subject have argued that Obama's foreign policy failures were the result of inexperience, naïveté, or disinterest. For example, Colin Dueck's *The Obama Doctrine* maintains that Obama was primarily concerned with pushing through his domestic political agenda and, therefore, his foreign policy vision, to the degree that he possessed one, was preoccupied with avoiding and unwinding foreign policy entanglements in order to concentrate on domestic affairs.¹ In contrast, Kaufman and Lieber aver that there are core tenants to an identifiable Obama doctrine. Kaufman delineates 12 such principles (10-26), including the belief that: many of the world's problems are the result of too much, rather than not enough, American power and engagement; if the United States pulls back, other, new centers of power will emerge and share responsibility; the United States should be reluctant to act abroad without international partners or multilateral coalitions; military force should be used sparingly and as a last resort; Washington should rely more on soft power than hard power; and that an important objective of U.S. foreign policy is to convert old enemies into friends.

Kaufman and Lieber argue that these premises are wrongheaded, but they also acknowledge that this set of ideas, taken together, borders on a coherent worldview. The question they ask next then, is largely an empirical one: how has it worked? Has the Obama Doctrine advanced U.S. interests around the globe? The authors examine the effects of Obama's foreign policy in the three most important geostrategic regions affecting U.S. interests: Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. The results, they conclude, have been disastrous. The proper names change by region, but the story is the same. It is a tale of increasing disorder, emboldened enemies, and nervous friends.

Some Obama supporters may argue that the U.S. president had no choice but to retrench. They may claim that America was overextended or that there was no domestic political appetite for continued American

¹ Colin Dueck, *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today*, 1 edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

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engagement. Lieber forcefully and persuasively rebuts such claims in a final chapter, making the case for why the United States can and should continue to lead.

If the central argument and structure of the Kaufman and Lieber books sound similar it is because they are. There are, however, differences. Kaufman articulates the elements of the Obama doctrine in more detail and delves more deeply into how Obama's worldview fits in with those of past U.S. presidents and with international relations theory. At one point he argues that Obama combines the worst elements of the major IR paradigms, merging liberals' misplaced faith in international institutions with realist prescriptions to ignore domestic political regime type, even when it comes to dangerous, autocratic adversaries, such as Russia, China, and Iran (37-38). Lieber, for his part, provides a more textured look into the domestic politics of the nations inside Europe, Asia, and the Middle East affected by Obama's foreign policy and devotes more space to advocate for continued American leadership. Both, however, are excellent, well-written, and carefully-researched books that make a compelling case against the Obama doctrine.

Cohen's book also touches on many of these themes (he too, for example, maintains that the United States is playing a stronger hand than any other nation and that continued U.S. primacy is beneficial both for the United States and for the world), but his central focus is not evaluating the Obama years, but understanding the proper role of military force in foreign policy and to anticipate the military challenges that lie ahead.

His central argument is that "the United States will need more and better military power in the future." And that "the United States will find itself using military power chronically, and at varying levels of intensity, throughout the early decades of the twenty-first century." He notes that "this last is a prediction, not a desired outcome." (xii).

Anticipating one possible set of objections, the book begins by reflecting on America's past fifteen years of war. Critics might claim that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrate the limits of military power or America's war weariness. He acknowledges that the record of this period is decidedly mixed, doles out a fair share of criticisms to both the Bush and Obama administrations, and flatly writes that "the Iraq war was a mistake" (59). Yet, he also maintains that these wars were less costly and in some ways more successful than many critics recognize. Moreover, as the rest of the book makes clear, regardless of how one makes sense of this period, the United States faces future challenges for which military power will be necessary.

The majority of the book focuses on what he describes as the four most important military threats the United States faces: China; Jihadis; dangerous states; and the commons, including cyberspace. Interestingly, the "dangerous states" chapter groups Russia with regional powers Iran and North Korea, and not with China in some kind of great-powers chapter. Readers in Moscow will not be flattered by this comparison, but, since Russia's economy is smaller than Italy's, this ordering is at least as logical as the alternative.

Cohen concludes the book with rules of thumb for managing these challenges and those that must be avoided. Given the variety of threats these actors and domains pose, Cohen concludes that grand strategy sloganeering from the past, such as containment, will not do. Rather the United States needs to be prepared for a great deal of strategic uncertainty and must enhance its military capabilities (aiming for defense spending of 4% of GDP) to deal with a wide range of possible contingencies. The analysis of these challenges and rules of thumb for how the United States should respond is both masterful and engaging.

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The most biting criticism of these books might deal with whether the analysis stands up in light of recent events, including the U.S. presidential election. The foreign policy vision of America's new President-Elect seems to stray in important ways from the views articulated in these books. One might, therefore, conclude that the muscular internationalism these authors promote is no longer sustainable under either Democratic or Republican administrations. Alternatively, perhaps the conclusion one should draw is that the incoming administration can usefully study the lessons in these books in order to avoid repeating the worst mistakes of its predecessors.

Review by Erin M. Simpson, CEO, Archer Avenue Consulting; senior editor, *War on the Rocks*

Despite some macro-indicators to the contrary, it is easy to see the world today as being in a state of disarray. Whether it is the “return of geopolitics,” mass atrocities in Iraq and Syria, rapidly accumulating evidence of climate change, or state-directed cyber-warfare there is ample cause for concern. The question is: what is the source of this instability? And what should the United States do about it?

These are not new questions. Scholars and practitioners have asked them repeatedly since the end of the Cold War. What is new is the waning of the unipolar moment of the 1990s. Is this the result of underlying changes in the distribution of power in the international system? Deliberate policy choices stemming from misguided wars? Or a disinterest (or distrust) in American primacy? Sadly these questions are not asked directly by Eliot Cohen, Robert Kaufman, or Robert Lieber, though the answers are clearly telegraphed.

For all the upheaval in the international system, there is remarkable agreement within this group over the threats or challenges the U.S. faces going forward. China tops the list for each author; as Kaufman notes, “Despite the president’s denials, concern continues to soar in Asia that declining American power, credibility, and commitment will leave the way open for Beijing to exercise dominance over the region” (184). Cohen is more succinct: “America’s greatest challenge is China” (99). Each is also concerned about “radical Islamic extremism,” which Cohen notes is the most immediate threat due to the jihadis’ “murderous convictions” (149). And the authors all offer thorough discussion a host of gnarly revisionist states. Russia, as Kaufman argues, is “still the greatest threat to America’s vital interest of keeping Europe stable, open, democratic, and cooperative” (62). “Iran,” Lieber contends, “though not a Great Power, has emerged as the most dangerous actor in the Gulf and Levant” (8).

And Cohen notes that “North Korea is a strategic problem, and not a nuisance, for multiple reasons...It is by no means inconceivable that Pyongyang, at some moment of desperation or exuberance, would think it in its interest to conduct a nuclear demonstration shot in the proximity of a close American ally, or even at the United States itself.” (162-163). He also adds less “traditional” threats, such as cyber and space, to the list of challenges facing the United States.

Each of these volumes takes a slightly different approach to assessing the current strategic context, describing facets of the Obama administration’s foreign policy, and proposing a new approach. But while these authors each hit different notes, they are largely singing the same, familiar tune: the U.S. remains the indispensable nation, President Barack Obama’s approach was one of conciliation and weakness, there is no substitute for hard power, and the U.S. must reassert its place atop the global order. Lieber warns that “a slow but perceptible trend of American retrenchment has contributed to a more dangerous and unstable Middle East. Elsewhere, a pattern of conciliatory policies toward Iran and Russia has had spillover effects on traditional allies. These regional cases and their wider implications lend support to the broader argument for American engagement for sustaining global order and the adverse consequences of a diminished role” (4). Kaufman agrees that “President Obama has imprudently abandoned the venerable tradition of muscular internationalism... Instead, the Obama doctrine paved the way for ending the indispensable role the United States has played since World War II” (4). And he concludes, “It will take decades, as well as a series of Republican presidents in the hawkish internationalist tradition, to restore the American power and prestige that the Obama Doctrine has so imprudently squandered” (211). For Cohen, changing the course of

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American foreign policy in a new administration is critical: “The American stake in the global order is enormous—if it does not take a lead in maintaining it, its own prosperity and freedoms will suffer as well” (28).

I do not intend to litigate all those claims here. But the question as to whether the current U.S. position is a result of broader system changes or flawed policies still stands. One need not be a declinist (or a structural realist) to note, as Lieber does, that power is less concentrated and more diffuse than it was twenty years ago (6, 71-74). Indeed Lieber highlights the continued economic weakness of key American allies (7, 17, 23-24, 28, 31-32), lingering effects of sequestration (86), and growing Chinese power as features affecting America’s strategic choices. These shifts in the global security environment are driven by a number of domestic factors and largely independent of U.S. foreign and defense policies, which suggests at a minimum that there may be some difficulties in (re)asserting American primacy. Lieber ultimately argues that America can and should continue to provide “global public goods” (a phrase I found compelling, especially in noting the inability or unwillingness of other states to provide the same). He echoes Michael Mandelbaum: “They will not pay for it; they will continue to criticize it; and they will miss it when it’s gone” (85).¹ I tend to agree. But providing public goods is distinct from establishing global hegemony. With weaker allies and potentially stronger adversaries, there are significant headwinds against American leadership.

Cohen is, for the most part, less troubled by these doubts. He also, of the three, offers the fewest direct criticisms of Obama’s policies (avoiding long discursive analysis of any so-called Obama Doctrine), and focuses his dismissive ire on traditional realists and smart power advocates. He suggests that “the most fundamental principle of realism is that all states are alike, that they have interests, and will use power to protect and further those interests” is “true only up to a point” (12); that realists “have trouble taking substate or transstate actors seriously” (13) and “are unrealistic in their failure to appreciate the intangibles, to include the power of faith and ideology” (13). While realists may have a flawed understanding of global politics, Cohen argues smart power advocates misunderstand power:

Power is the ability to get people to do things they would not otherwise do. It implies purposiveness—the ability to make things happen. Much of what is termed soft power is not controllable, that is, cannot be directed with precision—and indeed sometimes cannot be directed at all. This turns out to be true even of sanctions. (16)

Cohen offers a fairly positive assessment of current conditions. While he notes the financial crisis and sequestration in passing, he focuses his attention on the impact of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have had on American willingness to use military force. He notes that the Iraq war was a mistake that weakened “America’s most important global partner [Great Britain]” (59). But he is sanguine bordering on optimistic with regard to the impact on the U.S. itself. He suggests that public opinion is not so hostile to the use of force; nor were the costs of these wars really so high.

Here, I wished for a greater discussion on the role of public opinion in constraining or informing foreign policy. Would his recommendations be different if public opposition to the use of force was stronger or more persistent? Consistent with his Hamiltonian preferences, Cohen largely treats such opposition as an obstacle

¹ Lieber quoting Michael Mandelbaum, *The Case for Goliath* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005), 226.

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to be overcome by an energetic executive. In the concluding chapter, Cohen instead implores future presidents to sustain popular (and Congressional) approval for military action (and presumably, for international engagement more broadly). One of the many implications of the 2016 election is the need to consistently and persuasively make the case to the American public regarding the importance of American alliance partners and key global institutions. As Lieber recognizes, providing “global public goods” (6, 72) can be a thankless task and we cannot take public support for granted (131-35).

One element that distinguishes Cohen’s effort is his discussion of “America’s hand,” that is, the underlying social and economic elements that support American predominance and elements – and that are often found in competitive net assessments. (Lieber provides a shorter, more materialist review of American power.) Cohen observes that the American “hand” remains quite strong, emphasizing large and competent armed forces, favorable demographics, and a productive economy (63). There is room to quibble with these assessments: there is, for example, little discussion of the impact of de-industrialization or automation on the U.S. economy, and I am less sanguine than he is on the useful functioning of U.S. domestic political institutions (see also Lieber, 134-136). The government shut-down in 2013 over the debt ceiling and Senate refusal to even hold committee hearings for a Supreme Court nominee suggest a somewhat willful dysfunction—to say nothing of Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential election. Indeed, Donald Trump’s election also threatens to undermine two other strengths identified here: the U.S. as a nation of immigrants and America’s strong alliance portfolio (93-94). Regardless, Cohen’s account remains an important discussion, one I found largely lacking in other accounts of the U.S. role in the world.

Cohen offers an elegant way forward: a return to hard power. Indeed, true to form, the chapter on the “Logic of Hard Power” is the strongest in the book and could be the basis for a roundtable all its own. For example, his discussion of “mobilization” provides an implicit turn toward force employment concepts favoring mass over precision as a way to hedge against strategic uncertainty (209-211). He writes, “In a mobilization based military it is possible that the high-end forces of peacetime, equipped with F-35 fighter aircraft, would fight alongside mass provided, improvised swarms of less sophisticated aircraft...” (210-211). While this does beg the question of the purpose of “high-end forces of peacetime,” it provides a window into Cohen’s thinking with regard to the “software” of strategy and concept development vice the “hardware” typically discussed in most defense analyses. Force employment matters, operational concepts matter. If they remember nothing else, readers should take note of Cohen’s emphasis here.

Further to that point, Cohen emphasizes “the intellectual formation of the men and women who lead its armed forces” (209). And while I am always suspicious of those who profess there is a “right intellectual culture for thinking about hard power” (209), I share in the broader sentiment. It is interesting to contrast this view with Cohen’s admonition against wasting time with grand strategies. He laments, “The very idea of grand strategy, then, runs on the rocks when it confronts the power of accident, contingency, and randomness that pervade human affairs” (205). For Cohen, hard power comes not from grand ideas but skilled application. And skilled application derives from deep understanding of the uses of force and how people, weapons, and politics combine in the art of war.

But what would a turn to hard power look like if Cohen’s suggested reforms are not enacted? As he notes, higher defense spending and new technologies will not amount to much if they are not married to a greater investment in strategic thinking and a new understanding of utility of military force. Many in the national security community will recognize these reforms and find themselves sympathetic to the ideas advanced here. Who hasn’t wanted to set the Quadrennial Defense Review on fire or radically modernize the services’

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personnel systems? But they have not come to fruition as of yet, and not for lack of trying. It is hard to envision a world in which these measures are actually enacted (especially now), and Cohen does not provide a roadmap. Perhaps General James Mattis will have some leverage as Secretary of Defense to return the War Colleges to more selective footing, generating the cadre of strategists that Cohen requires. But an insistence on hard power in the absence of these changes is folly.

Shifting gears, Kaufman and Lieber each devote significant attention to the question: what is the Obama Doctrine? (Again, Cohen largely focuses on more academic debates than specific policy choices.) Focusing on Obama speeches and interviews, they largely agree on its contours. Each notes that Obama places more faith in international institutions than the use of force, believing that international norms create global self-governance in many arenas. And they highlight Obama's seeming dismissal of regime type or ideology when engaging with foreign leaders (leading to missteps with Russia and Turkey among others). Both also observe Obama's statements about "rebuilding at home." These factors combine to create a policy of retrenchment and conciliation.

President Obama's approach to foreign policy reflected a clear preference for reducing US power and presence abroad, a deep skepticism about the use of force, an emphasis on working in and through international institutions, an 'extended hand' to adversaries...a de-emphasis on relationships with allies, and a desire to focus on domestic priorities. (9)

Kaufman devotes the most space of the three authors to an elucidation of Obama's approach. But the book gets bogged down in its criticism with whole chapters laboriously linking Obama's policies to a particular school of IR theory or historical foreign policy. No foreign policy in practice conforms to the dictates of theoretical or historical ideal types. If the point is to clearly document how Obama's foreign policy is unmoored from theory and tradition, Kaufman's discussion ultimately yields more heat than light, leaving readers more confused than when they started.

To my surprise, rather little attention is paid to the more revolutionary elements of Obama's foreign policy. For example, there is passing mention of his support for nuclear disarmament, but no detailed discussion. More interestingly, despite the detailed analysis of Obama speeches and interviews, there is no reference to Obama's skepticism of using military force to signal resolve and credibility during international crises. As noted in his interview with Jeffrey Goldberg, Obama has contempt for the whole concept.² This strikes me as a much more radical departure from foreign policy orthodoxy than Obama's eclectic mixture of realist restraint and liberal commitment to international institutions.

More broadly, for three books focused on questions of power and credibility in U.S. foreign policy, there is no formal discussion of deterrence, signaling, or the bargaining model of war.³ Indeed there is very little discussion of war at all. These concepts are clearly implied in each discussion of credibility and how diplomacy and force interact. They are also implied in the criticisms of Obama, such as when Lieber notes Obama's, "lack of appreciation for the fact that diplomacy is far more effective when it's backed by power"

² Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic* (April 2016), <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

³ See Dan Reiter, "Exploring the Bargaining Model of War," *Perspectives on Politics* 1:1 (March 2003): 27-43.

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(102). The idea that Russian aggression in Syria is a result of U.S. appeasement of Russian encroachments in Ukraine is an argument about extended deterrence and credible signaling across domains.⁴ But we get little empirical exploration of those topics, nor how they should inform foreign policy decision-making. Indeed, only Cohen makes explicit the role of force in questions of credibility (166-168), though his book too neglects escalation dynamics.

In reading these accounts of once and future U.S. foreign policy, I was left asking: who is the audience for these books? And what is their purpose? Are these authors looking to inform the public? Contribute to ongoing debates surrounding IR theory and the formation of foreign policy? Persuade DC policy wonks? None of these books is traditionally academic; there are no new theories developed, no hypotheses tested, and there are relatively few empirical claims made (though Lieber comes closest in his discussion of the impact of liberal hegemony) (4, 83-86). These works offer little comparative analysis of how foreign policy is created, nor any systematic review of the impact of those policies. Each author links elements of Obama's foreign policy to various schools of international relations theory, but none dissects the process of foreign policy decision-making in the Obama administration or compares it to alternate configurations.

Instead, these books advocate for an alternate foreign policy agenda and, in doing so, document the perceived failures of the current one. All will find some audience amongst D.C. foreign-policy types, who will now have to digest and incorporate these ideas in a world of even more uncertain U.S. foreign policy interests in the Trump Administration. Will Trump be more conciliatory or confrontational than Obama? Will his hostility toward international institutions validate the criticisms here? And will Trump's actions help or hurt public support for the use of force and an America engaged in the world? It is obviously far too early to say. But it is unlikely that any of these three authors will find much comfort in his policies or process.

⁴ See also, Lieber, 97, 101; Cohen, 167.

Author's Response by Eliot A. Cohen, Johns Hopkins University

Like all authors who find themselves in this invidious position, I gratefully accept the compliments and reject the criticisms offered in these reviews. A bit more seriously, I would ask my reviewers, especially Dr. Simpson, not to take me to task for not having written the book they would have preferred me to write. *The Big Stick* was not intended, for example, as a critique of the Obama administration and hence is perhaps different from the books by Kaufman and Lieber. To be sure, I make some stringent comments about that administration but also about its predecessor (in which I served). I do not, however, conclude that we are where we are simply because of the blunders of the men who have had the most difficult job in America from 2001 onward.

Nor was my book intended to make a contribution to international relations theory, a subject that in its contemporary manifestation I usually find obscure, tedious, and irrelevant to the study of politics. I would also point out, *pace* some of the comments, that I was quite clear about its audience—anyone who, from professional interest or a sense of a citizen's responsibility cares about the American role in the world. Nor do I ignore the question of public opinion: I refer readers to page 92, and the numerous citations to polling data in Chapter 3, footnote 41, page 246, which document the remarkable continuity over long periods in American willingness to engage in the world.

I share (I hope) much of Henry Nau's anxiety about the United States' predicament, which is one of the reasons I am so down on grand strategy as an organizing concept. We have a strong hand—but one that is relatively weaker than it has been. The U.S. has a capable military—but one that is under resourced, undercapitalized, and less intellectually agile than it need be. America cannot avoid standing for its values, because they are what it is, but neither can it embark on fruitless crusades and it has to admit that sometimes they will clash with narrower interests. The virtue here is prudence, and the skill required is statecraft, which is what the book is really about (particularly in the final chapter, on the actual employment of military power).

The more serious question that seems to me legitimate here is: well, what about Donald Trump? He does not buy off on the premises of American foreign policy that constitute the consensus establishment view, even across the Bush and Obama administrations, to include the need to weave together interests and ideals. He is uniquely erratic, uninformed, and impulsive. He has said crazy things that undermine such pillars of American policy as NATO, and has periodically seemed to threaten preemptive or even preventive war against North Korea and elsewhere.

For more on this, see my forthcoming afterword to the paperback edition of *The Big Stick*. But for now, I would make the following observations. The first is that Trump's election was a contingent event, aided and abetted by an extremely weak Democratic candidate as well as normal disgust with any incumbent party in the White House after eight years. But it also reflected the emergence of tendencies, impulses and opinions that have long been present in the American body politic. Indeed, Trump's unabashed invocation of "America First," suggested as much. The foreign policy establishment can be fairly criticized for having ignored the large (though minority) segments of American opinion that yearned to be closed off from a world that seems threatening or merely alien.

But whereas the original America First movement attracted some of America's best and brightest, Trump's vision of a world littered with bad deals, in which Russian President Vladimir Putin is a killer but the U.S.

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government is a killer too, and most importantly, in which American values and ideals have nothing to say about American foreign policy, is profoundly unpopular. He is governing against elite consensus, which even permeates his own White House. Call it The Swamp, or The Deep State, or merely a collection of experienced professionals, it is clear that his own Secretaries of State and Defense, and his National Security Adviser, adhere to the consensus and are trying to contain their erratic boss.

They may not succeed forever, to be sure. But despite the droning of libertarian isolationists or offshore balancers (who are perpetually disappointed with everybody), there is not a compelling alternative out there. And there will not be, because there cannot be. The idea of an international system that ticks pleasantly along without some kind of leadership is a chimera: and to a firm conviction that that is the case I happily plead guilty. We can blow that belief up, but if and when we—or America's current Commander-in-Chief—do, we are likely to find a world of chaos, in which nuclear proliferants abound, and war and coercion become the means of resolving disputes. We have seen that in the Ukraine and the Middle East. And in the aggressive use of political warfare and subversive techniques by Russia we see one example of that awaits us if norms and standards that the United States has upheld, in consort with her allies, are abandoned in a fit of foolishness.

That could happen. But it is equally likely that the Trumpian moment will be just that, and a more normal kind of administration (perhaps beginning under President Pence, or under a Democratic successor) will try to pick up the pieces. Globalization is here to stay, and so too is American power, blessed as the United States is, Trump or no Trump, with vast reservoirs of talented people, research and business institutions of extraordinary skill, financial depth, abundant energy and water, and a powerful military. It is possible to blow the American hand badly, but it remains a powerful hand.

My argument, though, is that the task of retaining leadership would have been difficult enough in the best of circumstances, without the disruption wrought by the outcome of the 2016 election. In the aftermath, the damage may be severe and lasting. We do not know, and cannot tell for some time if we are at a watershed. If that is indeed the case, a different kind of book will be needed, one that explores what can be done once Americans come out from under the rubble of a foreign policy produced by whim and ego, but abetted by academic voices that have over many years suggested that the United States can safely shrug off the burdens it accepted in the aftermath of World War II. Any sane person, and not just a scholar of foreign relations, should hope not to have to write that book.

Author's Response by Robert G. Kaufman, Pepperdine University

The three books reviewed here mesh well thematically and prescriptively. Each warns of the consequences of the ill-advised strategic retrenchment that President Barack Obama pursued and that President Donald Trump may continue. Bravo to Robert Lieber and Eliot Cohen for their fine books that the Trump Administration should read with care.

What follows responds briefly to two aspects of the reviews. This author considers vital what Erin M. Simpson criticized as distracting—situating the Obama Doctrine's theory and practice in International Relations theory and the traditions of American diplomacy. Commentators across the spectrum have misunderstood Obama's foreign policy precisely because of their neglect of the infelicitous synergy of the theoretical premises impelling it. President Obama appropriated the worst features of an unrealistic realism which depreciates the importance of regime type for identifying friends, foes, threats, and opportunities. He appropriated the worst features of multilateralism as arbiter of legitimacy for when and how the United States acts in the world. He is neither Niebuhrian, nor a retrencher, but rather a conciliator who believes American power needs more constraining than illiberal foes. Obama discarded the virtue of realism's emphasis on the importance of hard power while marinating in liberal multilateralism while vastly inflating the significance of soft power as an effective substitute for dealing with the major challenges the United States faces. This perverse synergy accounts for the abject failure of his foreign policies in the three most important regions geopolitically: East Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. A combination of the Obama Administration's improvident defense cuts, the President's preternatural self-confidence in his unique abilities to bridge differences with adversaries, and his conviction as a man of a left obsessed with arrogance of American power lowered the barriers to China's aspirations to dominate East Asia, which is the world's paramount power center for the twenty-first century, Russian President Vladimir Putin's gambit to reverse the outcome of the Cold War, and the rampage of radical Islamism, particularly Iran's bid to cross the nuclear threshold that Obama's nuclear deal with that execrable regime has enabled.

An analysis of the theoretical underpinning of Obama's dangerous doctrine serves, too, as a point of departure of making the case for 'moral democratic realism,' a concept that is congenial with Henry Nau's 'conservative internationalism,' as the best practicable alternative.¹ Moral democratic realism takes due measure of the centrality of power and the constraints that the dynamics of international anarchy impose without depreciating the significance of ideology and regime type. It grounds American foreign policy in a Judeo-Christian conception of man, morality, and prudence that inoculates the United States against two dangerous fallacies: a utopianism that exaggerates the potential for cooperation without power; and an unrealistic realism that underestimates the potentialities for achieving decency and provisional justice even in international relations. It rests on a conception of self-interest, one that is well understood, respecting the opinions of mankind, without making international institutions or international public opinion the polestar of American action. The moral democratic realism most characteristic of Presidents Harry Truman, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush, which was also deeply influential in the other Cold War Administration's before Nixon's, yields six enduring principles that should inform any contemporary prudential alternative to an imprudent Obama Doctrine that was at odds with the lessons of American diplomatic history.

¹ Henry Nau, *Conservative Internationalism: Armed Diplomacy under Jefferson, Polk, Truman, and Reagan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

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First, the United States should remain the world's default power ensuring—in vital geopolitical regions—“that the bad guys know us and they leave us alone” as the fabulous Beach Boys deliver with glorious gusto in “I Get Around.” Coalitions of the willing can supplement but never substitute for American hard power, particularly American military power.

Second, a strong defense is the best deterrent. The greatest dangers to the United States typically arise not from vigilance or the arrogance of American power but from unpreparedness or an excessive reluctance to fight. Historically, retreat, retrenchment, and disarmament pave the road to moral and geopolitical disaster by example.

Third, regime type matters vitally for discerning friends, foes, threats, and opportunities. Not all regimes behave alike. A grand strategy anchored in moral democratic realism would give precedence to defending decent democratic friends rather than resetting relations with an increasingly authoritarian Putin who is striving to reverse the outcome of the Cold War; an increasingly repressive China which is striving for hegemony in East Asia; or tyrannies in the Middle East that are enemies of the United States.

Fourth, the United States should rank threats, interests, and opportunities on the basis of geopolitical criteria rather than abstract, vague, and unenforceable principles of cosmic justice. Although it should wish liberty well everywhere, the United States must concentrate primarily on the most important things; first, preventing hegemony from emerging in East Asia, Europe, or the Middle East; then, to the extent that it is prudent, consolidate and expand the democratic zone of peace in these major power centers where the absence of liberty could prove most perilous.

Fifth, American leaders should champion American exceptionalism resting on the trinity of separation of powers, a dynamic market economy, and a Judeo-Christian moral/cultural system. Truman, Reagan, George W. Bush, and the Cold War Presidents (excluding Jimmy Carter) did not consider the United States a perfect nation, but a great, good, and unique one, its power indispensable for achieving any decent world order where freedom could survive and thrive. They were right.

Sixth, different times call for different strategies to best preserve the national interest. Until the twentieth century, the United States could safely pursue a strategy of non-entanglement beyond the Western Hemisphere when it could take the effective operation of the European balance of power for granted. Those options became untenable in the twentieth century. Likewise the strategies of deterrence and containment that were effective against the Soviet Union during the Cold War and are successfully applicable to China and Russia today did not work with rogue regimes such as Iran or Saddam Hussein's Iraq, which were more prone to run higher risks. Presidents must have prevention and preemption in their repertoire of options against such rogue regimes rather than reflexively relying on past strategies. ²

A grand strategy anchored in moral democratic realism thus incorporates the transcendent noble principles of the founding while rendering due appreciation for the perennial imperatives of power and geopolitics. Its categorical commitment to sustaining American military preeminence and championing American exceptionalism not only enhances deterrence, but reduces the costs of the wars that the United States

² Robert G. Kaufman, *Dangerous Doctrine: How Obama's Grand Strategy Weakened America* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016), 191-198.

sometimes must fight to avert the greater moral and geopolitical evil. The Obama Doctrine unwisely repudiated this venerable tradition of muscular moral democratic realism to the peril of the United States' democratic friends and the delight of its illiberal foes.

It is hazardous to speculate what Donald Trump will do internationally and where his foreign policy stands in relation to the Obama Doctrine or other foreign policy traditions. He comes to office with no experience and a propensity to volatility. Neither consistency nor systematic thinking have previously loomed large for Trump. Although not discounting the plausibility of Eliot Cohen's dire warnings that Trump's temperament and zero-sum-game economic nationalism could spell disaster,³ this author takes a provisionally less pessimistic position. Granted, Trump is no moral democratic realist. His appropriation of the 'America First' moniker, his flirtation with Putin, and his disdain frequently expressed on the campaign trail for NATO and the Mutual Defense Treaty with Japan raise legitimate fears of what comes next. Yet Trump has also made decisions that should give—again provisionally and tentatively—moral democratic realists plausible reasons to hope rather than despair. One, Trump has reaffirmed the special relationship with Great Britain, asking the British to return the bust of Winston Churchill that Obama ostentatiously sent back to distance himself from Churchill's legacy. Two, Trump will substantially increase the defense budget, which is the single most important measure his Administration can take to repair the serious damage to American credibility and capability that the Obama Doctrine has wrought. Three, General James Mattis, Trump's outstanding choice for Secretary of Defense, qualifies a moral democratic realist, par excellence.⁴ If Trump listens to the better angels of his administration—Mattis and Vice President Mike Pence—his foreign policy may turn out to be substantially more in accord with America's vital role as the world's default power than much of Trump's rhetoric would suggest. This wish leads to my non-delusional thought that Trump's relation to moral democratic realism is perhaps less adversarial than Eliot Cohen predicts. Woe is us if not.

³ Eliot A. Cohen, "A Clarifying Moment in American History," *The Atlantic*, 29 January 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/01/a-clarifying-moment-in-american-history/514868/>.

⁴ "The Middle East at an Inflection Point with General Mattis," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 22 April 2016, <https://www.csis.org/events/middle-east-inflection-point-gen-mattis>.

Author's Response by Robert J. Lieber, Georgetown University

I appreciate the thoughtful and substantive responses to *Retreat and Its Consequences*. The reviewers have fairly summarized the argument I have made and the book's central theme: that the foreign-policy strategy of retrenchment carried out by the Obama administration during its two terms in office has harmed America's own interests and national security, weakened regional and international order, disheartened U.S. allies, and emboldened rising revisionist powers.

As the reviewers note, I argue that in its own national security interest and that of a less dangerous and more stable world, the U.S. needs to return to playing a more deeply engaged international role. In doing so I ask the question of whether it still possesses the capacity to do so and answer that despite some erosion in its relative margin vis-à-vis other states, it retains that capability. In making this case, I incorporate both agency and structure. That is, *Retreat and Its Consequences* emphasizes the adverse consequences of policy choices made during the Obama presidency, but the book also takes into account a continuing and even increasing diffusion of power in the international system. This entails growing economic and/or military capabilities among other regions and countries, especially revisionist states such as Russia and Iran, and most notably China. It also includes the relative weakening of longtime U.S. allies, especially the Europeans and Japan.

In making the case that America retains the ability to engage and lead, I acknowledge not only a more challenging international distribution of power, but also problems within the United States itself including political polarization and the constraints imposed by the growth of entitlement programs and the national debt. All the same, the United States continues to possess unparalleled strengths including almost all the human and material attributes by which national power is measured. These continue to provide comparative advantages in competition with adversaries and other rising powers.

One critique of my argument rests on the idea that the U.S. no longer has the capacity to be a global hegemon. But that sets up a false test. Even at the height of its relative power, in the first decade after the end of World War II (1945-1955) and again in the decade and a half after the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991-2005), the U.S. was never omnipotent, nor could it always achieve the results it sought. In the earlier period it could not prevent Soviet domination of Eastern Europe and subsequent acquisition of nuclear weapons, and it could not avert Mao's victory in the Chinese civil war or avoid a stalemate in the Korean War. In the mid-1960s it saw President Charles de Gaulle withdraw France from the integrated NATO military command and in the early and mid-1970s was unable to prevent a Communist victory in Vietnam. In the post-Cold War years, it failed to halt the North Korean and Iranian nuclear programs and could not fully secure its military objectives in Afghanistan and Iraq. In economic and political terms, it faced disputes with the European Union, had difficulty bringing peace to the Balkans, saw increased competition with China including Beijing's predatory trade practices, and stood by in the face of the Rwanda genocide.

Critics of active reengagement often make a reductive argument, asserting that the alternative to retrenchment means the use of force. That was a repeated trope of the Obama administration, but the claim ignores the complex choices and very wide range of options between inaction and war. Indeed, diplomacy is most effective when backed by power and the credibility that comes with the understanding that a country has the will to utilize its power when necessary.

This brings us to the question of President Donald Trump's foreign policy. For now, it remains premature to draw conclusions about strategy or policy. Trump's presidential campaign statements, though more blunt and

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robust in their references to American power, implied even more retrenchment, as in his remarks disparaging allies, referring to NATO as ‘obsolete,’ suggesting that Japan and South Korea might just as well develop nuclear weapons, offering back-handed praise for the Russian President, and dismissing the United Nations as irrelevant. Yet Trump’s subsequent statements and actions as President have minimized or reversed many of these positions, for example in reference to NATO. Moreover, his appointees to senior foreign policy positions constitute one of the strongest and most capable such teams in a generation. They include Defense Secretary James Mattis, National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, CIA Director Mike Pompeo, Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats, and UN Ambassador Nikki Haley. It remains to be seen, of course, whether Trump will follow their advice on major questions of foreign policy.

In turn, hard-core realists also have urged that Trump adopt neo-isolationist policies, including withdrawal from major commitments in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, further reductions of U.S. military forces, and the adoption of offshore balancing.¹ These and other comparable arguments, including complaints about allied free-riding, fail to take into account the consequences that result if the U.S. does not remain credibly engaged. In the absence of American power, international order is likely to be seriously weakened and collective action problems among allies are much more likely to become unresolvable. Rather than balancing against regional threats from Russia, Iran, and China, smaller and middle-sized countries will have reason to pursue policies of *sauve qui peut*, and some may opt to bandwagon with these revisionist powers instead of balancing against them.

To the extent that Trump’s impulses have been evident, these suggest a Jacksonian attitude toward the outside world. As defined by Walter Russell Mead, this denotes a nationalist and populist outlook. In Mead’s words, a “*Jacksonian* believes that the most important goal of the U.S. government in both foreign and domestic policy should be the physical security and the economic well-being of the American people. . . . Jacksonians believe that the United States should not seek out foreign quarrels, but when other nations start wars with the United States, Jacksonian opinion agrees with Gen. Douglas MacArthur that ‘There is no substitute for victory.’”²

A few more specific remarks about each of the three reviews are in order. Matthew Kroenig has deftly distilled the argument of my book, especially the proposition that far from lacking a coherent approach to foreign policy, President Obama did indeed possess and seek to implement a distinct world view of his own. I share his cautionary observation that Trump could undertake a similarly mistaken approach if he failed to appreciate the importance of the U.S. in sustaining world order. Unlike other countries, America does not have the luxury of becoming a free-rider.

In turn, I agree with William Inboden that the actual power position of the United States has not eroded to the extent that many observers claim. I also share the view that shifts in the international distribution of

¹ Christopher Layne, “The Big Forces of History: Can the Era of America’s Global Dominance be Sustained?” *The American Conservative* (January/February 2017); John Mearsheimer, “Donald Trump Should Embrace a Realist Foreign Policy,” *National Interest*, 27 November 2016; Robert J. Lieber, “John Mearsheimer’s Unrealistic Realism,” *National Interest*, 30 November 2016.

² Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World* (New York: Routledge, 2002), xvii.

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power, including the weakening of liberal democracies, makes the task of reengagement more complicated and more difficult.

Finally, in reply to Erin M. Simpson's review, I would note that erosion of U.S. power is relative but not absolute. I believe that I do address the waning of the U.S. unipolar moment, finding it due both to changes in the international distribution of power *and* to fateful policy choices made by President Obama. Simpson sees it as harder to reestablish American leadership due to the problems I cite, especially weaker allies and stronger adversaries. My reply here is that this would be the case if the aim were true global hegemony, but that active reengagement does not require such an unrealistic status.

As for the question of the audience to whom the book is addressed, it is meant for all those who are attentive to U.S. foreign policy, as practitioners, analysts, or voters, and it is meant as a caution about the costs of disengagement and the risks of wishful thinking about America's world role.