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Review Essay 33

Derek S. Reveron, Nikolas K. Gvosdev and Mackubin Thomas Owens. *US Foreign Policy and Defense Strategy: The Evolution of an Incidental Superpower.* Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015. ISBN: 9781626161580 (hardcover, \$89.95); 9781626160910 (paperback, \$29.95).

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The Donald Trump administration seems to value change for its own sake. The new President appears intent on rethinking all foreign-policy rules and norms, from diplomatic protocols to staffing to relationships with traditional allies. The next four-to-eight years may prove to be a watershed for U.S. grand strategy, a challenge to fundamental assumptions that forces security experts to re-examine their most deeply held beliefs. Or, perhaps little will change. At the very least, the Trump administration will test the notion that U.S. foreign affairs are marked far more by consistency than by change.

The essential continuity of U.S. foreign policy is a theme of *US Foreign Policy and Defense Strategy*, which was written before the Trump administration took office. The book makes the case that although presidents come and go, national interests remain constant, and as a result variation in policy tends to take place on the margins. Its thesis, like so many like it, will be challenged as the next few years unfold.

The immediate appeal of the book might not be obvious to those unfamiliar with the U.S. security community, where the three co-authors are not only top defense intellectuals but represent quite different ideological traditions. Derek Reveron's work generally aligns with the liberal internationalist wing of that community. Over the years, he has expressed confidence in both the positive role the United States can play in the world and in the institutions (both national and international) that can be used toward its benevolent goals.¹ Nikolas Gvosdev, on the other hand, is a realist. He is the former editor of *The National Interest* and

¹ See Derek S. Reveron, *Exporting Security: International Engagement, Security Cooperation, and the Changing Face of the U.S. Military*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2016).

senior fellow at the Nixon Center, as well as one of the leading public experts on Russian foreign policy.² Finally, Mackubin Owens is a long-time proponent of primacy, whose writings place him solidly in the neo-conservative camp.³ He, like many in that school of thought, tends to have faith in the hard power of the United States to forge and maintain a liberal, peaceful world order.

Although attaching labels to complex thinkers is always unfair, in this case it might be forgivable, since it emphasizes the intriguing tensions at the heart of the book. It is hard to imagine a more diverse group of authors, or at least one that would have enough in common to cooperate on a single volume. Given these differences, I expected to see chapters written by each author explaining and defending his various positions. Instead the book is an entirely collaborative effort, which means that its insights exist in the area of the Venn diagram where these three traditions overlap. The book is heavily historical, as one might expect, because the authors can certainly agree on basic facts. Perhaps the book's most prominent contribution is to provide students with a brief, readable, understandable story of the evolution of post-war U.S. security beliefs, institutions, and strategy.

The central, unifying argument of the book is that the United States arrived at its global position as the result of neither a secret hegemonic plan nor a fit of absent-mindedness. Its rise to prominence was never the goal of its leaders, but neither was it an accident, as it has become fashionable to claim.⁴ Instead the authors suggest that U.S. power was *incidental*, a secondary result of its pursuit of interests, and probably one that was unavoidable given both the United States' vast potential and external challenges. The book is essentially a series of semi-related essays along that theme. The chapters make the case that, despite apparent partisan acrimony, a broad consensus has driven the evolution of U.S. foreign and defense policy since the end of the Second World War. Administrations change but fundamental interests do not.

The first couple of chapters are historical overviews, explaining how the United States arrived at its position atop the international hierarchy. The authors cover the rather sudden rise of U.S. power and the parallel development of its national security establishment, paying special attention to the drastic changes that took place as the Cold War began. During this era the United States did not seek to be the most powerful country in the world, but neither did it shun its responsibilities. Overall these summaries are rather uncontroversial and comprehensive, and would provide excellent introductions to the uninitiated. President Trump would certainly benefit from reading them—if he read books—but so would all students seeking to understand US foreign and security policy.⁵ Indeed, the book is perfect for both the undergraduate and graduate classroom,

² In addition to his regular columns, see Nikolas K. Gvosdev, "The Value(s) of Realism," *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 25:1 (Winter-Spring 2005): 17-25; and Nikolas K. Gvosdev and Ray Takeyh, "The Decline of Western Realism," *The National Interest* 117 (January/February 2012): 8-19.

³ See Mackubin Thomas Owens, "A Balanced Force Structure to Achieve a Liberal World Order," *Orbis* 50:2 (Spring 2006): 307-325; and "The Bush Doctrine: The Foreign Policy of Republican Empire," *Orbis* 53:1 (Winter 2009): 23-40.

⁴ Peter Zeihan, *The Accidental Superpower: The Next Generation of American Preeminence and the Coming Global Disorder* (New York: Twelve, 2014).

⁵ Asked in May 2016 by Fox News's Megyn Kelly about the last book he read, Trumo responded, "I read passages, I read areas, chapters, I don't have the time." See Jason Silverstein "Trump Needs Single-Page Memos Filled

since all its chapters include comprehensive, unbiased, concise, and quite readable reviews of the major concepts and debates regarding the subjects they cover.

Next the book turns toward civil-military relations, where one expects that Owens took the lead. The chapter explains why it is helpful to think of the relationship between the military and the society it protects as a bargain, one that needs to rest on a foundation of mutual trust to be successful. The problems that post-Cold War presidents have had in building and maintaining that trust receive special attention, which whets the reader's appetite for Owens's longer work on the subject.⁶ Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama all faced opposition by both active-duty and retired flag officers, which at times threatened to damage that bargain.

One of the book's most interesting sections is a contribution to discussions of the American "way of war" begun by Russell Weigly nearly forty-five years ago.⁷ The authors suggest that no single unified approach to warfare exists in U.S. defense circles today, identifying instead three competing schools of thought: traditionalists (those focused on peer competitors), modernists (technophiles who tout the 'revolution in military affairs'), and the irregular school (where counter-insurgency is taught). They suggest that since conventional warfare is actually the exception in U.S. history rather than the rule, perhaps it would be best to prepare to face a non-traditional, 'hybrid' foe like Hezbollah. A few general principles do exist, however: the U.S. military today prides itself on being comprehensive, multi-domain, joint, and internationalized, and will probably remain so no matter what choices are made by the new administration.

The authors then review the "American way of peace," which is reliant on the political and economic institutions the United States essentially founded early in the Cold War. After a review of the utility of those institutions, the authors argue that, unlike many countries, the United States has generally tried to aid rather than punish vanquished enemies. If one compares the U.S. attitude toward the Central Powers in 1918 with those of its European allies, or its behavior regarding Western Europe and Japan to Stalin's rapine of the east, it does seem possible to conclude that something is different about American behavior. From Vietnam to Iraq to Afghanistan, it has often been Washington's practice to help former opponents to get back on their feet (or at least to try to do so). This "way of peace" extends back at least to President Abraham Lincoln, who favored a gentle approach to the rebellious southern states. This post-war benevolence can easily be overstated, as the various Native American nations and Mexico would no doubt suggest, but a good case can be made that U.S. behavior after conflicts has often not resembled that of other countries. Rarely has the United States been content to, if one can paraphrase Tacitus, create a desert and call it peace. Colin Powell might not have

with Charts and His Name for First Foreign Trip," *New York Daily News* (17 May 2017), available at <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/trump-short-memos-charts-foreign-trip-article-1.3173655>.

⁶ Mackubin Thomas Owens, *U.S. Civil-Military Relations after 9/11: Renegotiating the Civil-Military Bargain* (New York: Continuum, 2011).

⁷ Russell Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (New York: Macmillan, 1973).

articulated the “Pottery Barn Rule” until 2003—“if you break it, you own it”—but U.S. leaders often reflexively (and for good strategic reasons) followed its basic tenets.⁸

Finally, the book turns toward economics, a curiously under-analyzed subject in security circles. National-security professionals enter the field because they are interested in military tools of influence, generally speaking, and learn about economics only grudgingly as their careers progress. People with endless patience for the minutiae of nuclear weapons treaties often become quickly bored when the conversation turns to the details of trade deals, reserve currencies, or foreign aid, even though the latter group is likely to prove far more important to U.S. security in years to come. The book discusses all these issues, in what would be a useful primer to even the most econophobic of scholars.

Perhaps the book’s most interesting page is its final one. While most of the previous 245 pages extoll the virtues of U.S. internationalism, defending what is sometimes called “deep engagement” with the world, page 246 strongly implies that a reduction of U.S. presence would not lead to much chaos. “The United States can afford to retrench,” the authors write. “A change in the maximalist deployment of US power will not invite a collapse of the international order favorable to US interests.” With these words, the liberal internationalist, realist, and neo-conservative apparently embrace strategic restraint, as an unfortunate reality perhaps but nonetheless without alarm. When representatives of these three schools of thought coalesce around one strategic idea, perhaps policymakers should take notice.

Unfortunately, these days it is not clear that those who make U.S. policy are paying attention to any strategic guideposts. Despite what some Trump administration officials have suggested, “America First” has not proven to be a foundation for a coherent grand strategy.⁹ While it is hard to put the new administration’s policies into any of the widely acknowledged camps that Reveron, Gvosdev and Owens review (237-240), it is early yet. Most of the major changes promised on the campaign trail have yet to materialize. The ubiquitous buzzword describing the new administration’s approach to foreign affairs – ‘transactional’—is meaningless without some concept of the goals the transactions should pursue. Deals are means, not ends. ‘Transactional’ is just the latest in a series of strategically vapid descriptors employed to describe presidential policies, fated to join such forgettables as confrontational, cerebral, pragmatic, patient, and belligerent.

One cannot help but wonder what these three authors would think about events that have unfolded since they wrote. To say that U.S. foreign policy is in disarray would be to understate; with so many senior positions unfilled, it is unclear exactly when a sense of normalcy will return to Foggy Bottom or the Pentagon. Then again, with the rather glaring exceptions of Russia and trade policies, the Trump administration has mostly backed away from its most serious proposed alterations of U.S. policy. The new President took a call from the Taiwanese leader in the early days of his administration, but has subsequently backed the longstanding ‘one China’ policy. The Iran nuclear deal remains in place. NATO’s article five has been reaffirmed. Continuity seems to have returned.

⁸ Quoted by Bob Woodward in *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 150.

⁹ For an early defense of the Trump foreign policy, see Gary D. Cohn and H.R. McMaster, “The Trump Vision for America Abroad,” *New York Times*, 13 July 2017, A23.

Perhaps Trump will prove Reveron, Gvosdev and Owens right regarding their assumptions of essential consistency in U.S. policy. Perhaps the next few years will show that the interests of the incidental superpower are indeed eternal, and not open to much alteration by even the most unconventional of administrations. Perhaps continuity will survive the Trump test. Even if it does not, however, it will remain true that the key to interpreting any new era is understanding how it arose. Those interested in a good discussion of the pre-Trump United States, as well as in the issues facing the current president, could do a great deal worse than to begin with *US Foreign Policy and Defense Strategy*.

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