

***The Unquiet Frontier: Rising Rivals,
Vulnerable Allies, and the Crisis of American Power***

By Jakub J. Grygiel & A. Wess Mitchell

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The Unquiet Frontier is above all a response to current dynamics of international competition and the role the U.S. plays, or ought to play, amongst other major players. The underlying phenomenon in the book is that the U.S. has been in retreat for quite some time now. Its leadership role as a hegemonic power has been brought into question by rising rivals and vulnerable allies, and a new world seems to be emerging— a world that the U.S. should not want to see emerge and ‘yet, in many ways, it is a world that current U.S. policy is helping to create’ (p. 11). Two questions arise from this new scenario in the international sphere. First, whether such a retreat has been by choice or necessity, and by to what extent. And second, whether the world is indeed a better, safer place with the U.S. leading the way. Answering these questions is the book’s main goal. Jakub Grygiel and A. Wess Mitchell articulate a thorough explanation of current state of international affairs, while they present a provocative argument in favour of revitalizing U.S. foreign policy strategy towards historic global competitors, a perspective that the authors underpin with insightful and robust recommendations.

Over the past century, it has constantly been proven that there is neither a better friend, nor worse enemy, than the U.S. However, the U.S. finds itself challenged by a number of autocratic states which aim to resurrect old empires. *The Unquiet Frontier* explains how these nations, especially Russia, China and Iran, aim to expand their area of influence by

exercising control over neighbouring countries. They sense that U.S. global network of alliances has weakened and thus its role has declined, and they constantly test its strength by targeting weaker allies at the borders of U.S. power. Grygiel and Mitchell develop an interesting explanation of this phenomenon by revisiting some classic geostrategic theory. They provide a test whose goal was rooted in Machiavelli’s *Discourses*: if an American friend is assaulted, either the U.S. will respond to this infraction and the offender will be threatened with military action, or by not reacting, the offender will uncover the U.S.’s weakness or faithlessness in not defending an ally. Indeed, creating strong and long-lasting alliances is a difficult task and preserving them is even harder, especially when tested. But it is of vital importance since these more vulnerable allies need guarantees of their own survival. The U.S. is for them ‘the ultimate guarantor of their national independence and security provider of last resource’ (p. 3). And when these precious objectives are not secured, they are tempted to find guarantees elsewhere. And they are wise to do so.

The authors show how nervous ‘U.S. historic allies are creating diversified “menu cards” characterized by a number of separate options that allow them to reduce their reliance on the U.S. without fully committing to a single alternative in its place’ (p. 80) and the threat it poses to U.S. power and influence. For luxury of choice is a luxury but also a curse, since it introduces doubt about the reliability of the U.S.

as an ally. And historic predatory superpowers are using that doubt at America's expenses.

Not only do the authors revisit classic political theory, but also more recent strategists such as Walter Lippmann, Sir Harold Mackinder and Nicholas Spykman. Grygiel and Mitchell often invoke the arguments of Mackinder and Spykman in stressing the importance of strengthening the "global rimland"—populated by free and stable states that would present an uphill climb to revisionist superpowers in their challenge to U.S. hegemony and leadership. Therefore, Mackinder's famous expression 'as go the rimlands' includes here a slight modification, adding 'so goes U.S. global power' (p. 164). The authors argue that this principle becomes a true necessity; it becomes the "rimland imperative"—the notion that American prosperity and security are highly dependent upon supporting allies in the peripheries of revisionist states.

Despite the fact that Grygiel and Mitchell acknowledge the obvious benefits of alliances, they argue that the idea that small states on the periphery of the Eurasian rimland are vital to U.S. security is unconvincing. However, they agree that the U.S. cannot defend every far post in the world. According to them, to defend everything is very close to defending nothing. Therefore, they recommend that the U.S. role should be to defend specific states against specific threats rather than pursue some abstract global architecture.

The book starts with a brief introduction and it continues by studying the loss of importance of alliances in American global strategy. Grygiel and Mitchell then focus on geographic, technological and ideological issues that have tempted the U.S. 'to ignore the historic need for strong alliances, especially those with the most exposed states at the periphery of its power' (p. 16).

They then discuss some revisionist powers as rising rivals and how they challenge the U.S.-dominated Western liberal order. In particular, the authors focus on "probing" as the dominant strategy of these challengers. Grygiel and Mitchell define the concept of probing as 'a low-intensity and low-risk test aimed at gauging the opposing state's power and will to maintain

security and influence over a region' (p. 43). This behaviour of those challenging U.S. prominent role in the global scenario is analysed extensively—in particular, the increasingly aggressive methods rival nations are using to test U.S. power in strategically critical regions of the globe.

The book then focuses on the behaviour of vulnerable U.S. allies in the Middle East, Asia and Central and Eastern Europe—especially Israel, Taiwan and Poland—contextualized by studying recent actions taken by Iran, China and Russia respectively. Each is identified as a response to perceived American retreat. Grygiel and Mitchell discuss main strategies adopted by historic allies and historic challengers in a well-documented historic review that brings the reader a detailed picture of global political dynamics. The net result of strategies taken by U.S. allies, they argue, would be 'highly destabilizing for regional security orders, stymieing US efforts at containment, fuelling disputes among allies, and creating a greater critical mass in support of revisionism in the global balance of power' (p. 114). The book then makes the authors' case for rescuing and strengthening the US alliance system by demonstrating how beneficial it was in the past and can be today. Finally, Grygiel and Mitchell present a series of specific recommendations aiming 'to restore American credibility and thus the strength of our alliances' (p. 157). And they do it in an excellent fashion, by including some refreshing and yet well-grounded arguments. They also introduce some practical guidance on how to combat revisionist powers' probing behaviour on the borderlines of American power.

The Unquiet Frontier contemplates western liberal order as a desired starting point of analysis and thus presents the U.S. weakened role as a threat to global order. Such a perspective could have been indeed tempered with a more aseptic view. Nonetheless, the arguments Grygiel and Mitchell present are overwhelmingly convincing. Their history-based perspective of world dynamics grant their theory, at least, the advantage of having been proven right. And therefore, it is others who must prove them wrong instead. Besides, their tackle on international affairs and the U.S. role is accepted

by even those who disagree with the international liberal order but nevertheless accept and defend the U.S. role as the absolute hegemonic power. Perhaps the most paradigmatic example of these proponents is Niall Ferguson in *Colossus* (2004). The authors state that a world where the U.S. has the greatest power is the most beneficial one for us all. But this is not taken for granted. On the contrary, the entire book represents an attempt to back-up such statements with history, political theory and an outstanding mastery of international relations theory and practice.

The strongest critiques of the book will centre on the weak of explanation of domestic debates and the argument used by advocates of U.S. withdrawal from regional and local conflicts. Perhaps a deeper analysis of the opposite calls, coming from both sides of the political spectrum would have clarified and better defined the authors' perspective. Especially if the book represents a 'call to action'; a claim against those pushing for an American military and political retreat from the world, variously labelled as 'offshore balancing', 'restraint' or 'isolationism', as well as an indictment of America's neglect of its global web of alliances.

Nonetheless, *The Unquiet Frontier* is overall an outstanding work. An exceptional example of how scholars should study foreign policy. All the arguments are displayed in a well-articulated manner and they are truly persuasive and the authors' understanding of classic and modern geopolitical strategists produces an enlightening depiction of U.S. international behaviour as a result of an in-depth analysis of current dynamics. Grygiel and Mitchell present a brilliant case as to why U.S. policy should seek to restore American credibility and thus the strength of its alliances.

Finally, regardless of where one stands on the issue of American relative decline or retrenchment and one's feelings about it, the mere existence of such a debate is a source of concern because it points to an absence of clarity on the geopolitical scene. And that debate ought to be carefully followed by the whole world. We will surely witness how the diplomatic, economic and military U.S. machinery is set in

motion, aware of the indubitable fact that the result will define the geopolitical landscape, distinguishing between rising rivals and vulnerable allies. Allies that ought to be extremely well taken care of. For there is no better strategy than investing in alliances.

About the authors:

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