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REVIEW ESSAYS

THE CASE FOR HARD POWER

Dov S. Zakheim

The Big Stick: The Limits of Soft Power & the Necessity of Military Force, by Eliot A. Cohen. New York: Basic Books, 2016. 285 pages. \$27.99.

Eliot Cohen's *The Big Stick* is a well-crafted paean to muscular interventionism. Its central argument is that only the United States can ensure international stability; that it can do so only if it continues to maintain the military superiority that has enabled it to dominate international affairs since the Second World War; and that to be credible it must be both ready and willing to employ force even when its more narrowly defined national interests are not being challenged. The book is neither a neoconservative nor a liberal-interventionist tract. Yet it is noteworthy that these are the only two political ideologies that essentially escape Cohen's critical pen.

Cohen argues that America, and only America, can preserve global order. He recognizes that Americans are war weary; the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are well into their second decades, with no end in sight. Yet he asserts that, just as withdrawal from either country would harm American interests seriously—he notes that President Obama belatedly came to the same conclusion—so too would American reluctance to go to war whenever and wherever the international order again comes under serious threat. For that reason he rightly has very little good to say about neo-isolationism, or, to be more precise, a return to America's strategic posture prior to its entry into the First World War. It is no longer enough, he posits, to focus solely on narrow self-interests and

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self-defense, even if leavened by participation in the global market and membership in the United Nations. There simply are no good alternatives to American leadership. The kind of global order that a China or a Russia might impose, assuming that it has the ability to impose any order at all, would undermine the values that Americans and the citizens of their allies hold most dear.

In making his case against not only neo-isolationism but the downgrading of the centrality of force in American security policy, Cohen critiques five variations of arguments to support a modern-day version of the posture first articulated by George Washington in his Farewell Address. Cohen is highly skeptical of the case put forth by Steven A. Pinker, among others, that the world is becoming a more peaceful place and America no longer need act as the world's policeman. Cohen rightly points out that the trends that underlie Pinker's calculations are belied by the horrific number of deaths in the two world wars, in particular. Moreover, Cohen argues that a significant reason for the decline in the number and magnitude of wars since the end of the Second World War is the dominant, and generally benign, influence of the United States on the international security environment. Statecraft matters: the choices politicians make can and do mean the difference between war and peace. As he puts it, "the deliberate action of one state above all—the United States—has had something to do with the relative peacefulness of the world after 1945. . . . [I]t follows that an American decision to stop acting that way could yield a far nastier twenty-first century than the one Pinker expects" (p. 10).

A prominent critic of the Trump administration during its first months in office, Cohen also assails the notion—dear to both the Clinton and Obama administrations (especially the latter)—that it was the employment of soft power that most effectively furthered American interests worldwide. *Soft power* is the concept that Harvard University professor Joseph Nye developed to describe the noncoercive ability to shape the preferences of others through the attractiveness of culture, political values, and foreign policies. Cohen does not reject the notion of soft power entirely, but his argument is that without the availability, and at crucial times the employment, of credible hard power, soft power cannot be relied on to protect America's interests and those of its allies or others whom it might wish to support. He focuses on the limits of sanctions, and offers examples to underscore his contention that soft power is not enough. Sanctions may have brought Iran to the negotiating table, but they did not put a halt to its nuclear program. Nor have sanctions stopped Russia from annexing Crimea or supporting Ukrainian separatists. Sanctions are indiscriminate, and often penalize a state's innocent populace more than its guilty leaders. Once sanctions are removed—as they were, for example, under the terms of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, better known as the Iran nuclear deal—they are almost impossible to restore.

Cohen acknowledges that sanctions are an important tool of foreign policy, and at times are highly effective, South Africa and Southern Rhodesia being prime examples. Given the limitations of sanctions, however, Cohen feels that hard power needs to be mustered to assure the United States that its policy goals will be met; in the case of Iran, he seems to call for a blockade of that country's shipborne commerce. He fails to examine what the Iranian reaction might be—the very second- and third-order consequences that worry him when discussing sanctions—or whether a blockade would involve the United States in yet another Middle Eastern war. Nor does he outline how hard power might be applied to prize Crimea from Vladimir Putin's clutches.

Cohen has little time for those who argue that America should not act as the world's policeman simply because of its “irreducible strategic incompetence” (p. 19). He examines several variants of their position, all of which derive from the assertion that America's wars since the Second World War have not been particularly successful. For example, some argue that America's bureaucratic “pathologies” prevent it from exploiting American military power to its greatest effect, while others go further and assert that American intervention is more destructive than salutary.

Cohen rightly notes that inaction can be as dangerous as action. Moreover, not all American wars have been failures: both the Korean War, which literally saved South Korea, and the 1991 Gulf War are very much examples to the contrary. Cohen goes further, however. Even the Vietnam War was not, in Cohen's view, a complete failure, since, as Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew put it, the war “bought time for the rest of southeast Asia.” Cohen may go too far in seeking a silver lining for the Iraq War. Perhaps, as he asserts, “the story is not yet fully written” (p. 21). Still, it is a bit much to argue for the value of removing a dictator with nuclear ambitions when those ambitions were not remotely realized, and in the face of both ongoing chaos in Iraq and Iran's increasing domination of Iraq, to a degree that would have been impossible had Saddam remained in power.

Cohen quickly puts paid to the argument, enunciated by President Obama, that the United States should concentrate on “nation building at home.” He notes that defense spending as a percentage of gross national product was considerably lower during the Obama era than during most of the Cold War, which nevertheless witnessed major domestic initiatives ranging from Medicare and Medicaid to the Clean Air Act. The Trump administration actually agrees with its predecessor that one cannot acquire both guns and butter on a massive scale, but its budget assigns a higher priority to increased defense spending at the expense of numerous domestic programs. Cohen's advocacy of higher spending for both military and nonmilitary programs reflects a cherished view common to all interventionists, whether of the neocon or the liberal variety. It is a policy that was enunciated

forcefully by the liberal Democratic senator Henry M. Jackson, a consistently strong supporter of the Vietnam War, whose acolytes include interventionists such as Richard Perle, Paul Wolfowitz, Frank Gaffney, and Elliott Abrams.

Cohen reserves his most trenchant critique for so-called realists. He ascribes to realists the view that “the world having resolved itself [after the Second World War and the Cold War] into a more familiar pattern of competing powers, the United States has far less need to meddle in matters abroad” (p. 11). Just as Cohen cites Nye as the father of soft-power theory, so he cites John Mearsheimer as the archetypal “realist.” But whereas Nye truly did conceive of the concept with which he is associated, Mearsheimer hardly represents all, or even most, realists. After all, Mearsheimer considers interventionist foreign policy elites to be, as Cohen puts it, “the chief threat to the United States”—a position that actually mirrors the “irreducible strategic incompetence” school of thought.

More characteristic of the realist position are the views, and the actions while in office, of President George H. W. Bush, his Secretary of State James Baker, and Brent Scowcroft, his assistant to the president for national security affairs (known as the national security adviser). That team, which many consider to have constituted the most competent national security leadership since the Second World War, was hardheaded enough to play at most a limited role as the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact collapsed, and, for that matter, with regard to intervening on behalf of the Kurdish and Shia uprisings in the aftermath of the First Gulf War. Yet it did not hesitate to mass and deploy over a half million troops to push Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait, or, on a far lesser scale, to invade Panama and spirit that country’s military dictator Manuel Noriega to Miami, where he was sentenced to forty years in prison. Realists, *pace* Cohen, do believe in intervention, only that it should be far more selective than what interventionists, whether of the neocon or liberal “responsibility to protect” variety, would prefer.

Cohen himself is inconsistent when writing about the Bush team’s policies: in one place (p. 5) he states that the 1991 war was an example of “ample quantities” of hard power; elsewhere (p. 32) he writes that the United States went to war “with the strong belief that it knew the lessons of Vietnam—make wars short, violent, conventional and end cleanly,” implying that otherwise Bush would not have employed hard power to save Kuwait. Yet Bush and his advisers had no way of knowing how long the war would last; in fact, they seriously overestimated the capabilities of Iraq’s forces. They also assumed that Hussein might resort to chemical weapons; they went ahead and attacked anyway. When Cohen then notes that the result of that war was an “escalating military action against a still defiant Iraq through the 1990s,” he neglects to point out that the Air Force’s operations over both northern and southern Iraq resulted in no losses and with monetary costs (not to mention human costs) that were a tiny fraction of those

incurred during the 2003 war and its ongoing aftermath. Moreover, it is Cohen himself who argues that a key element of hard power is the ongoing deployment of forces after fighting has died down, if not ended—which is exactly what Operations NORTHERN WATCH and SOUTHERN WATCH were all about.

Cohen also asserts that realists consider hydrogen bombs to be “the great equalizer of international politics” and, in effect, welcome nuclear proliferation. This too is a mischaracterization of all but the most extreme positions on this issue. Certainly the George H. W. Bush team did not take that position, nor do the vast majority of realist thinkers.

In Cohen’s view, “the most fundamental principle of contemporary realism[—] . . . that all states are alike, that they have interests, and will use power to protect and further those interests” (p. 12)—is true only to a point. He argues that “even a slight knowledge of history” would demonstrate that Hitler was not Bismarck, and that the reichsführer was prepared to go to far greater murderous lengths than the Iron Chancellor ever would have contemplated. Yet this argument is beside the point: it is the very nature of realism to recognize a threat for what it is. The British and French in the 1930s refused to recognize the threat that Hitler posed, not because they were realists, but because they were appeasers.

Finally, Cohen argues that “realists have trouble taking sub-state or trans-state actors seriously” and fail to appreciate the intangibles, such as the power of faith and ideology. Moreover, when he calls realists “coolly detached secularists themselves . . . [who] find it difficult to take seriously talk of caliphates or hidden imams” (p. 13), he appears to be referring to the so-called realism of Barack Obama, who is not, as it happens, devoid of religious instincts. Indeed, many neoconservatives as well as liberal interventionists are themselves highly secular and do not have the faintest idea regarding the religious motivation of people in other parts of the world, be they substate actors or government officials.

Cohen’s critique of realists, many of whom, such as Scowcroft, opposed the intervention in Iraq, does not mean that he views the Iraq War as an unmitigated success. Still, even as he bemoans the American missteps in addressing the aftermath of the 2003 war, he seems to grasp at any opportunity to downplay the effects of those missteps. Thus he posits that “behind the intent to overthrow the regime was a desire not so much to remake the Arab world altogether, but to inflict a blow that would shock it” (p. 35). It is not at all clear that this was the case. For some officials, the intent was indeed to remake the Arab world. For others, it was to create a liberal democracy in Iraq, which proved to be nothing more than a pipe dream. Cohen also argues that the cost of the war was far less than some have estimated. He is probably correct; but nonetheless the opportunity cost of a war that consumed at least half a trillion dollars was massive.

Finally, while Cohen admits that waterboarding and similar techniques were politically counterproductive, he argues that they “probably” yielded useful information. He is correct if referring to a case in which a prisoner had actionable intelligence about a so-called ticking bomb. Yet former military officers ranging from Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis to Senator John McCain, himself a former prisoner of war, insist that more-benign techniques would have been far more successful and would not have violated international law—the latter a point that Cohen does not address at all.

Ultimately, Cohen acknowledges that the Iraq War was “a mistake,” one that cost America dearly in terms of its alliance relationships. But, having argued so strenuously against the war’s critics, his admission seems nothing more than a grudging concession to reality.

Turning to America’s diminishing military arsenal, Cohen argues vigorously for a major naval and long-range aviation buildup, which would be the most effective way to deter China in particular. He also calls for accelerated modernization of the American strategic nuclear arsenal, on the grounds that nuclear weapons actually could be used. China, Iran, North Korea, and others are expanding their arsenals; presumably they have not ruled out employing these weapons during, or even at the start of, a conflict with an adversary.

Cohen also joins the growing call for significant reform of the Department of Defense acquisition system. And he argues for maintaining, and therefore funding, America’s network of overseas bases, which not only reassure allies but ensure that conventional conflicts will not touch American shores. None of these programmatic efforts, he argues, should come at the expense of America’s unconventional forces, which will continue to be a necessary instrument for fighting nonstate actors such as jihadists, as well as for training friendly but less developed forces. Indeed, his chapters on the threats that China, Russia, Iran, and jihadists pose provide the meat of his argument for hard power and the justification for both his policy and programmatic prescriptions.

Cohen stresses the importance of space and cyberspace, which, together with the oceans, he terms “the commons,” all of which America is best positioned to defend. And he strongly advocates investments to protect American interests in all three of those domains. He also calls for American intervention in what he labels *ungoverned space*, meaning states that have collapsed or are on the verge of doing so. He recognizes that America cannot intervene in every civil war, but seems more willing to have Washington engage in such conflicts if they take place in the Middle East than in sub-Saharan Africa.

Cohen’s final chapter is a critique of Caspar Weinberger’s oft-repeated principles regarding the use of military force, which first were enunciated in 1984. He challenges Weinberger’s assertion that the United States should not commit

forces to overseas combat unless they are protecting America's vital interests or those of its allies. He notes that American interventions in Grenada, Bosnia, and elsewhere hardly affected those vital interests. Indeed, it can be argued that America should not have intervened in Bosnia, just as it did not intervene in the far worse situations in Cambodia and Rwanda, where, since genocide was involved, the moral imperative for intervention was much stronger. But Weinberger presided over the invasion of Grenada because American citizens were being held hostage by a regime supported by Communist Cuba; surely, protection of the country's citizens is an American interest. Perhaps Weinberger's definition should now include "friends and partners" as well as allies, but the principle of national interest, broadly defined—as it was with respect to Grenada—is still sound, unless, as Cohen appears to postulate, the bar for American military intervention overseas should be considerably lower.

Cohen challenges Weinberger's second condition for intervention, which calls for "the clear intention of winning." Cohen asserts that the term *winning* is not as clear as Weinberger indicates. But Weinberger's point was that the intention should be to win; if not, what exactly should be the reason for committing American blood and treasure to an overseas adventure?

Weinberger's third point was that America should commit forces to combat only if the political and military objectives are clearly defined, and if there is a clear understanding of how those forces are to achieve those objectives. In this case, Cohen is correct that there is no way to predict the outcome of the use of force. Still, there should be a clear sense of why those forces are being committed, even if the outcome is uncertain. Indeed, it is arguable that Weinberger was fully aware of the difficulty of predicting outcomes; it is evident in his fourth maxim, that the relationship between American objectives and the forces committed to achieving them must be reassessed continually and adjusted if necessary.

Cohen claims that Weinberger's fifth principle, that the United States should not commit forces to battle without "some reasonable assurance" of popular and congressional support, "assumes too much. It is often the case that the American people lend their support to successful enterprises and turn away from unsuccessful ones" (p. 215). Cohen misunderstands Weinberger's intent; "reasonable assurance" is not a guarantee. Weinberger's point was that if there was significant doubt that congressional and popular support would last throughout the lifetime of the military intervention, one should question whether to launch it in the first place.

Finally, Cohen asserts that Weinberger's principle that committing U.S. forces to combat should be a last resort "falls apart upon close inspection" because "one always has the option of giving the enemy what it wants." It is true that appeasement is an option, but Weinberger, who was hardly an appeaser, clearly did not

see it as a viable one. Moreover, Cohen implies that the use of military force should not be a last resort, yet throughout his volume he advocates the importance of diplomacy, which the United States presumably should employ prior to committing forces overseas. In sum, it is not Weinberger's principles, which reflect the views of most realists, that are not viable; they fall apart only if one adopts Cohen's interventionist philosophy.

Cohen outlines six principles of his own, none of which really contradicts Weinberger's. His first principle is "understand your war for what it is, not what you wish it to be"; that is, avoid rigid comparisons with previous conflicts. He is correct, of course, but nowhere did Weinberger advocate "fighting the last war," or any previous kind of war, for that matter. Cohen's second principle calls for adaptability as a conflict progresses and its nature changes. In so doing he is echoing Weinberger's admonition that the relationship between wartime objectives and the forces committed to conflict calls for continual reassessment.

Cohen's third principle is that the nation must be prepared for a long war even if its objective is a short one. Weinberger's emphasis on the importance of clearly defined military objectives while stressing the need for reassessing the link between forces and objectives would appear to indicate, in agreement with Cohen, that if a war must be fought for a longer period than originally anticipated to meet national objectives, then forces must be committed to that longer-term effort.

Weinberger's six principles did not address Cohen's fourth: "while engaging in today's fight, prepare for tomorrow's challenge." However, Weinberger certainly would have agreed with Cohen; the former actually coauthored (with Peter Schweizer) an entire volume on that very subject, entitled *The Next War* (Regnery, 1996). Weinberger identified possible future conflict scenarios with China, North Korea, Iran, and Russia (all of which Cohen discusses at length) and even Japan(!) (which Cohen does not). Interestingly, the book's introduction was written by Margaret Thatcher, who as prime minister led her country in a successful war that no one anticipated, the 1982 Falklands conflict, and who herself identified yet another potential threat that Cohen addresses, that of Islamic extremists.

Weinberger also would have agreed with Cohen's fifth principle: "adroit strategy matters; perseverance usually matters more." The former Secretary of Defense simply put it differently when he asserted that "if we decide to put troops in a combat situation, we should do so wholeheartedly and with the clear intention of winning." Winning may well mean something different in the twenty-first century than in Weinberger's day, but if that is not the objective, why expect the nation to persevere?

Indeed, Cohen himself refers to winning in his final principle: "a president can launch a war; to win it, he or she must sustain congressional and popular support." Weinberger's principle on this account was not really all that different:

he simply stated that a president should not commit forces to combat “without reasonable assurance” of popular and congressional support. As already noted, “reasonable assurance” is not a cast-iron guarantee. It calls for constant monitoring to validate that assurance—exactly as Cohen requires.

That Cohen’s disagreements with Weinberger may be less substantive than he feels they are should not detract from the value of his own set of principles. Indeed, the breadth of Cohen’s book is striking, and his analyses are always cogent. Finally, agree with him or not, Cohen makes one of the strongest cases on record for a robust interventionist policy. If for no other reason, his book should be required reading for analysts, strategists, and policy makers when they evaluate options for strengthening what is perceived widely as America’s currently diminished influence on the world stage.