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REVIEW ESSAYS

CLOSING THE “LIPPMANN GAP” AND THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN GRAND STRATEGY

Karl Walling

American Grand Strategy in the Age of Trump, by Hal Brands. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2018. 256 pages. \$25.99 (paperback).

Republic in Peril: American Empire and the Liberal Tradition, by David Hendrickson. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2017. 304 pages. \$34.95.

These two books reach dramatically different conclusions, but both authors start from similar premises. David Hendrickson is deeply rooted in what one might call the Old Testament in American foreign policy: as the American founders established it, with a heavy emphasis on neutrality and nonintervention in foreign conflicts—that is, restraint. Hal Brands is no less rooted in what one might call the New Testament in American grand strategy: as practiced from the Cold

War to the present, and focused on preserving the post–World War II, American-led liberal international order, which he sees as dependent on continued American primacy.

Each man is troubled by heresy, so to speak, with Hendrickson fearful that the American people have come to worship the “golden calf of empire” and Brands worried that in the age of President Trump they will throw away all they built from the rubble of the Second World War. This quasi-religious terminology seems appropriate, because both Hendrickson and Brands understand

Karl Walling has written frequently on Thucydides, strategy, and grand strategy. He is also the author of Republican Empire: Alexander Hamilton on War and Free Government (Univ. Press of Kansas, 1999) and coeditor, with Brad Lee, of Strategic Logic and Political Rationality (Frank Cass, 2003). He has taught for the Naval War College for seventeen years, first in Newport, Rhode Island, later in Monterey, California. His current book project is Political Science and Political Medicine: Thucydides, the Federalist Papers, and the Future of Liberal World Order.

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that—whatever partisan differences Americans may have—American grand strategy depends on a consensus akin to what Abraham Lincoln called a “political religion” about what the strategy is for. Both authors agree on something fundamental, made famous at the dawn of the Cold War by the journalist Walter Lippmann: that the grand strategic dimension of foreign policy entails “bringing into balance, with a comfortable surplus of power in reserve, the nation’s commitments and the nation’s power” (Brands, p. 128; Hendrickson, pp. 172–75).

As Brands discusses the issue, there are three generic solutions to this problem: (1) “decrease commitments, thereby restoring equilibrium with diminished resources”; (2) “live with greater risk,” either by gambling that adversaries will not test vulnerable commitments or by employing riskier approaches, such as nuclear escalation or cyber warfare, to “sustain commitments on the cheap”; or (3) “expand capabilities and thereby restore strategic solvency” (Brands, p. 128). Moreover, both writers express some admiration for Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger for attempting a grand strategic reassessment meant to correct American overextension by reducing some commitments and shifting some burdens to American allies during the Vietnam War (Brands, pp. 115, 118, 140; Hendrickson, pp. 175–80). The difference is that Hendrickson stresses reducing commitments, while Brands stresses increasing capabilities, to close what can be called the Lippmann Gap. In theory, either solution might work; but which is best?

That depends, in part, on how one understands what grand strategy is for. Hendrickson is emphatic: Americans have lost their way. Like an Old Testament prophet, he tries to recall us to the original covenant. Primacy, or empire, was never the ultimate purpose of the American republic. The purpose of the American regime is to secure republican liberty, not everywhere—however much one might wish well to those who seek it elsewhere—but at home, with the survival of liberty in America a beacon of hope to those other places. So Hendrickson stresses the primacy of domestic policy. All grand strategic decisions must be evaluated not merely in terms of how well they secure life and material prosperity but, ultimately, and most fundamentally, in terms of how well they secure liberty for ourselves and our posterity.

Like Brands, Hendrickson is aware that the pursuit of continued primacy, or the ability to dominate in any conflict, has animated the grand strategic visions of every American president since the end of the George H. W. Bush administration. Both agree that there is far more continuity than change in this pursuit; usually disagreements occur over different emphases. These include soft versus hard power; with allied support or not; and through forward presence in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, at the risk of encouraging free riders, or by some light footprint meant to limit American liability and avoid local and international

blowback. For Hendrickson, however, the primary issue is how well these approaches serve liberty at home and American principles of liberty abroad.

Hendrickson is damning in his critique of primacy as a threat to just about everything the American republic is meant to stand for. Empires tend to need emperors—which leads to imperial presidencies. Since September 11, 2001, presidents have used the original authorization to use military force against Al Qaeda to justify interventions, well, almost everywhere in Northeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, and Congress has failed to provide a serious check. And the increasing growth of the national security state—what Dwight D. Eisenhower, who was no liberal, called the military-industrial complex—constitutes an enormous transfer of power to unaccountable elites. Drunk on the ideology of spreading democracy everywhere, Americans, as John Quincy Adams long ago warned might happen, have gone abroad in search of monsters to destroy but have become monsters themselves, wreaking havoc with unnecessary wars and creating anarchy in Libya and Iraq in the name of regime change.

So Hendrickson advocates restraint, although it looks a lot like retrenchment. Fearful of aggravating conflict further, he suggests that American grand strategy focus on avoiding giving unnecessary offense. It would be prudent, he thinks, for the United States to adopt a policy of self-limitation—which others might see as accepting spheres of influence, for Russia and China especially. War with a resurgent Russia and a rising China would be less likely if the United States changed its policy, and also its strategy. Forward deployments of American military forces give unnecessary offense and should be minimized. Maritime strategies to fight anywhere near the coast of China are unduly provocative and probably doomed to fail, while attritional strategies on the high seas have better odds of success. Consistent with the Nixon Doctrine, the United States should shift the burden of defense and deterrence as much as possible onto regional allies, and hold its forces in reserve until required. Hendrickson's approach, by limiting American reach, might prevent strategic overextension, which he sees in political more than military or economic terms. The more the United States acts like an empire, the greater the threat to the republic, so restraint is essential to the true purposes of an *American* grand strategy.

Not so fast, says Brands, to all advocates of restraint today. Yes, the Iraq War was almost certainly a mistake, but the New Testament in American grand strategy has accomplished unprecedented good. The American-led liberal international order has prevented great-power war—the greatest killer in history—since 1945; that is, for over seventy years. In Europe and Asia especially, this has produced a security community with a degree of wealth and liberty almost unimaginable a hundred years ago. It is based on two premises: the reality of security, economic,

and other forms of interdependence; and the continuing indispensability of the United States as the hegemon (not to be confused with emperor) of a voluntary and usually cooperative network of alliances, in Europe and Asia especially, and more problematically in the Middle East.

Of course, Hendrickson, like many other advocates of restraint, does not want to throw this extraordinary accomplishment away; he supports preserving the American network of regional alliances, but at the lowest possible level of cost, risk, and effort, to minimize the dangers the national security state might pose to liberty at home. In contrast, Brands warns against attempting to hold the liberal international order together on the cheap. Prudence requires understanding that as Americans retrench, allies may not pick up the slack, or even might “bandwagon” over to the side of challengers. And Brands is at his best critiquing theories of offshore balancing and limited liability as ways of closing the Lippmann Gap. Maybe retrenchment might lower short-term costs, but it also might increase the risks that other powers will fill a vacuum, which would lead to higher costs later if Americans decided to reintervene, as they did in Iraq after the rise of ISIS. Costs might be lower with a sustained, minimal presence in theaters deemed strategically vital to the United States—but only maybe. So Brands is unapologetic in insisting that the best grand strategy for our time is to increase capabilities substantially—on the level of the increase of the Carter and Reagan administrations, that is, by 50 percent, although he insists this would amount to no more than 4 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), much lower than during the hottest periods of the Cold War. So, ironically, he too seems to think there are cheap solutions to America’s grand strategic problems.

In truth, both Hendrickson and Brands are living in semi-ideal worlds. Even in the age of President Trump, the option of Lippmann’s that Americans are most likely to pick—deliberately or through inertia—is the one about which neither Hendrickson nor Brands talks much: accepting higher risk. Americans do not yet wish to downgrade commitments to the level Hendrickson advises, nor to pay the cost of increased capabilities at the level Brands advocates. This is obviously a dangerous predicament, but not unlike those of the Cold War, when, to cut costs, Americans accepted greater risks by threatening massive nuclear retaliation and the escalation that might ensue.

But, as Clausewitz teaches, strategy, even grand strategy, is about the imaginative search for options, and then selecting the best, according to such criteria as cost, risk, theory of victory, and probability of success. Brands is so much a part of the New Testament orthodoxy, and so fearful of the heresies of the 2016 election and its aftermath, that he says nothing—absolutely nothing—about the dangers to the American republic arising from the quest for primacy. And Brands is too

facile on the subject of “democracy promotion” as an end of American grand strategy. As a student of John Quincy Adams, Hendrickson is all too aware that this can lead, and often has led, to a form of democratic imperialism incompatible with American principles, rightly understood. Yes, the Old Testament is old, but it is not “overcome by events.” It is still worth reading precisely because it calls us back to first principles.

Are there any other grand strategic options? Of course. One such might split the profound difference between Hendrickson and Brands. It would accept the necessity of primacy, but not at all times and all places against everyone—a recipe for strategic overextension and moral decline, with the United States risking emulating the Roman Republic in becoming a new Roman Empire. It would suffice for the United States to be *primus inter pares* (first among equals) within the liberal order, which it built, not altruistically, but to serve American security and principles. Limited primacy—to lead a coalition, not to dominate the globe—might preserve the liberal international order, so long as burdens are adjusted more equitably.

Hard military power is largely a function of economic power. Today, the United States produces 24 percent of global GDP; the European Union 23 percent; Japan 4.1 percent; and South Korea 1.8 percent—the latter the same as resurgent Russia’s! China has 18.5 percent, and its share is growing; but, given its demographics and other problems, how long that will remain true is unclear. Throw in some other possible allies, such as India or Vietnam, and the United States and its current allies—sometimes called the West, even when some reside in the East—are still in the catbird seat.

These countries just have to work together as members of a team—a questionable proposition in current political circumstances, but not inconsistent with practice since the end of the Second World War. It just requires the United States to lead, rather than divide, its own team.

SEA POWER DOES EUROPE STILL GET IT?

Martin N. Murphy

The Decline of European Naval Forces: Challenges to Sea Power in an Age of Fiscal Austerity and Political Uncertainty, by Jeremy Stöhs. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2018. 290 pages. \$36.95.

This is a lucid *tour d'horizon* of a dispiriting subject: Europe's navies. With the partial exceptions of the British and French navies, and the peculiar exceptions of Norway and Sweden—which exist under the dark shadow of Russia—all other European navies have suffered from deliberate neglect, wishful thinking, and poor decision-making. Furthermore, they appear to view the world as Europe's politicians want it to be rather than as it is.

Underpinning all this credulity is the assumption that America will ride to Europe's rescue; most of Europe's navies could not operate without at least some degree of U.S. support. President Donald J. Trump's harsh warning that North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies—Germany especially—need to increase their defense spending should be repeated regularly until they do. They should not see the U.S. Defense Department's recent actions—deliberations about whether to maintain a carrier regularly in the Mediterranean to counter an increasingly assertive Russian naval presence in the region and the announcement from the Chief of Naval Operations that the Second Fleet will be reestablished because of the marked rise in Russian submarine activity in the North Atlantic—as excuses to believe that things have returned to some faux-Cold War normal and they once again can shelter under a U.S. umbrella.

To be sure, Russia is breathing down Europe's neck, but it is China that presents the real danger. The world's seas are gaining importance: for trade, fish, energy, minerals, and, of course, great-power confrontation. Key to all these is sea control underpinned, from a Western perspective, by a freedom of the seas that China is seeking to deny to others except on its own terms. The front line lies in the waters around Taiwan, stretching down into the South China Sea and slowly extending into the eastern Indian Ocean.

So far, the only state standing in China's way is the United States, with Japan in support. The United States already is concentrating its forces in the Indo-Pacific theater and making it clear that it is looking to other states to join it and

Martin N. Murphy is a research fellow at the Corbett Centre for Maritime Policy Studies at King's College London and an associate fellow of the Royal United Services Institute.

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internationalize the pushback against the fundamental threat that China presents to the existing global maritime order. Europe's problem, in other words, is that not only is the United States largely leaving Europe to fend for itself in its own waters, but it is expecting its allies to join the only fight that counts (pp. 18–19, 23, 27).

Britain and France alone are taking steps to support the United States and Japan. However, the help they can provide is largely moral, given the damage that a quarter century of cuts has imposed on their fleets and absent a substantial recommitment to their naval capabilities. Unless other navies join this effort and their political leaders support it, then, as Stöhs writes, Europe will have “relegated itself to the outer fringes of a world centered on the Pacific” (p. 8).

Stöhs, who is an analyst at Kiel University's Institute for Security Policy and an adjunct at its Center for Maritime Strategy and Security, describes his main objective as giving readers an insight into the developments and changes that have occurred in Europe's navies since the end of the Cold War. He succeeds admirably. He examines all of Europe's principal naval powers comparatively from a platform-centric point of view, using graphs to illustrate the steep declines in their military expenditure and warship numbers.

Stöhs shows how little Europe's current navies resemble their Cold War predecessors. Britain and France remain powerful, but even they are no longer in the first rank of naval powers. The disappearance of the Soviet threat after 1991 left politicians across the continent eager to spend the so-called peace dividend and their navies scrambling for something to justify their existence.

Like the U.S. Navy, they mostly found that justification in power projection and expeditionary operations, first in Iraq and later in support of humanitarian assistance and the war on terror. However, each of these functions sacrificed the skills and equipment to fulfill traditional naval missions, a decline that is most noticeable at the upper end of the conflict spectrum. Germany is the most egregious example; effectively, it is taking advantage of its neighbors' sea power as Europe collectively takes advantage of the sea power of the United States. As Stöhs puts it, numerous indicators suggest that “Germany will remain unwilling to conduct any form of high-intensity warfighting in the foreseeable future” (p. 129). In other words, although naval forces across Europe look powerful on paper, that strength—with the partial exceptions of Britain and France—is concentrated at the lower level of the intensity scale.

This stands in stark contrast with Indo-Pacific navies that are configured for war fighting. Europe's smaller navies, moreover, have continued the Cold War practice of niche specialization as an answer to inadequate funding. To make that work, great strides have been made to improve interoperability. However, what was justifiable and practical as part of NATO in the face of the relatively narrow

range of Cold War threats looks imprudent now in the face of challenges that are less predictable and more distant. Many European states rely on the naval forces of neighbors (and the United States) to fill capability gaps to make them relevant at all (pp. 187–89).

This is an important and timely book. Europe lies on the periphery of America's vision. It catches our eye largely because of Russia's newfound adventurism. Yet it remains important to us, not least because of the growing confrontation with China that is driven by rival values as well as by rival power. Europe should be our ally. Given the importance of the sea in future power balances, economic as well as geopolitical, and Europe's reliance on the sea for its own economic well-being, our mutual interest should be obvious across a continent whose history is so rooted in sea power.

But it is not. As Stöhs notes, it is difficult to persuade any nation's taxpayers of the sea's importance, especially in the absence of clear political leadership, and across Europe that leadership, political and military, cannot agree on common goals (pp. 182, 192). These divisions well may widen when Britain leaves the European Union (EU) and the European Commission attempts to boost its much-vaunted "defense union" at the expense of NATO.

NATO operates on consensus, which it is hard to believe will extend to the East Asia littoral absent a clear and present danger, a recognition that is muddled by the economic leverage that China has gained over powerful political interests in several member states. The EU, despite its political posturing, is largely irrelevant for the moment. If that changes, from a defense perspective as it already has from an economic one, Europe is likely to become more insular, less global, and even less naval in its outlook.

Sea power, both economic and military, will play a critical role in the world's future. The question Stöhs raises (p. 6) for Europe is: Whose sea power will it be?