



The Unquiet Frontier: Rising Rivals, Vulnerable Allies, and the Crisis of American Power by Jakub J. Grygiel and A. Wess Mitchell.

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The study of geopolitics engages historians and strategists of all hues, and it is useful to have some sense of how the two approach their subject. They are often either “lumpers,” who find patterns and order in the havoc and upheaval of life, or “splitters,” who are preoccupied by its uniqueness. They also tend to be backward or forward looking in their analyses and to stress world stability or instability. By this template, Jakub Grygiel (Johns Hopkins) and Wess Mitchell (Center for European Policy Analysis) are lumpers who identify patterns in world events and US strategy, look back to a golden age of American predominance, and believe the fragile world balance of power is about to spin out of control.

We are at a dangerous moment in global geopolitics. The international system that the United States has built and maintained for the past several decades is still in place, but it is very fragile. For the first time in the post-Cold War era, the continuation of this system can no longer be taken for granted; virtually every element in its foundation is increasingly in question. If current trends hold, the U.S.-led global alliance network could unravel in coming years through a combination of external pressure from opportunistic powers convinced that America is in decline, internal pressures of allies that are unconvinced America will still support them in a crisis, and the failure of U.S. statecraft to prove both views wrong. (13)

The methodology of *The Unquiet Frontier* is polemical: find a problem, make it a crisis, propose a remedy. The problem is US strategy in the twenty-first century as other great powers emerge and exert pressures on neighboring states or those within their geopolitical reach. The crisis, the authors claim, arises from the threats that, specifically, China, Russia, and Iran direct at their neighbors as a way of probing American resolve; the intent is to cause those neighbors to doubt both themselves and the credibility of US protection. The remedy involves “using forward-deployed alliances in the rimlands of Eurasia [as] a cost-effective tool for managing the international system ... reversing the erosion of [US] frontier alliances and countering the probes of its rivals to ensure stability in the early decades of the twenty-first century” (14). All this sounds very like American grand strategy (and justifying rhetoric) during the second half of the Cold War.

After a brief introductory chapter outlining the problem, three chapters survey what is being done to and by America’s allies. The last two chapters concern the benefits of alliances generally and make policy recommendations. The book is engagingly written, but its intended audience is unclear. A work of neither scholarship nor journalism, its tone evokes a briefing for members of Congress or wealthy political donors.

The chapter on allies paints a dire picture: the United States has begun ignoring its need for allies under the spell of three mistaken beliefs: that a country surrounded by oceans and distant from centers of conflict can choose to address or ignore global problems; that its navy, nuclear, and missile technologies make it safe; and that “there exists a harmony of interests among all states, and consequently cooperation is likely to arise” (25). The authors recognize that strategists and political leaders in the United States and elsewhere long ago abandoned the notions of geographic and technological

security. But they argue that proponents of liberal internationalism—Hillary Clinton and President Barack Obama are singled out—and its doctrines of “restraint,” “off-shore balancing,” and “liberal institutionalism” have created harmful tendencies in US foreign policy. These include trying to solve all problems in a global context, assuming that rivals and friends alike should be treated as “partners,” and expecting the world to be spontaneously self-balancing. All these propensities support policies of fewer American military interventions and a smaller presence abroad. However, instead of adducing particular instances of actual deprioritizing of American allies, the authors remain on the level of ideology. They condemn what they call US “accommodation” of Russia, China, and Iran in hopes of striking some illusory “grand bargain” that will in reality oblige the United States to offer concessions that will weaken its allies.

The book’s discussion of “probing behavior” by revisionist states also proceeds on an almost purely ideological and theoretical level. In a chapter of thirty-four pages, spanning history from the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC) to the nineteenth-century wars in Europe, only two pages offer any specifics. The authors do provide a useful definition 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” (43); they aptly cite Russia’s seizure of Crimea and sponsorship of the war in Ukraine as examples of such testing. They note the backlash against Russia by some Eastern European states and the counterbalancing reactions of the United States and its allies to China’s moves in north Asia and the South China Sea. They conclude that the probing power may fail and damage its own interests, as the targeted states react adversely and strengthen their alliances and capabilities. In their view that has not happened.

Doubting US guarantees, America’s allies have begun, Grygiel and Mitchell contend, to rethink their foreign and defense policies (77). Among other steps, they have variously built up their militaries, sought alliances with neighbors, adopted neutrality regarding regional issues, and accommodated the probing power. Of these, the most common is military buildup. In a display of detail missing in earlier chapters, the authors provide statistics for increases in military spending by states such as Vietnam (70 percent increase from 2010 to 2011), the Philippines (doubled in 2012), Indonesia (tripled from 2006 to 2012), Persian Gulf states, Poland, Romania, Latvia, and Lithuania. They give a fascinating glimpse into the increased military cooperation in the Eastern European Visegrád Group (V-4), whose members—the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia—have agreed to set up a joint military force by 2016. But the group’s capabilities are insignificant, other than as an indicator of current strategic thinking.¹ The authors correctly observe that the lessening of America’s global presence and its growing reluctance to use military force have not led to greater stability or a willingness among allies to balance against threats: “the reality is more complicated and inherently dangerous than expected” (116). In short, countries close to China, Russia, and Iran still require a “U.S. security presence” best achieved through alliances (116).

In the next chapter, Grygiel and Mitchell rehearse the benefits of alliances in general, again with little reference to contemporary events. They see alliances as “tools of geopolitical management,” namely deterrents to aggression: allies can confine large rivals to their own region, deny access to important areas, protect the weak and facilitate a balancing of power, allow the buildup of military power, and “extend the reach of U.S. forces by providing access to bases outside the Western hemisphere” (144). They also provide the security essential to international trade and investment.

1. In 2015, the entire Slovakian military comprised 16,000 soldiers, Poland’s 100,000, Hungary’s 24,000, and the Czech Republic’s 24,000. See further Peter Kiss, “Eastern European Defense Review: Defense Cooperation within the Visegrad Group. Unexplored Opportunities?” *CSIS* (25 Feb 2011) – www.miwrs.com/rd/1609.htm.

Against this background, the authors close with a plea for the strengthening of US alliances, “because it would address probes at their intended source: allied perceptions of American confidence and power” (157). This would mean avoiding big power bargaining and recognizing the “hidden costs” of off-shore balancing (147–51). The authors identify the countries bordering Russia, China, and Iran as “the dangerous outer edge of the rimlands,” deserving the most attention and resources. By their calculus, Estonia and Taiwan are more vital to US security interests than France and Australia (163). Other imperatives include fully supporting the strongest “rimlands,” such as Poland, Japan, and Saudi Arabia; bolstering weaker nations, like the Baltic and smaller Persian Gulf states; and “nudging” others away from pursuing neutrality or accommodation.

All this amounts to a metastasis of the “great game” of British imperialism, once restricted to a remote hinterland of the empire in India, into a giant tranche of the world, girdling Europe and Asia and reaching from the Baltic Sea, through the Arabian peninsula, passing the Straits of Malacca, and around to northeast Asia. Playing a game of such scope would exhaust the resources of any great power, even one as wealthy as the United States. Gone is the restraint favored by George Kennan and followed, initially, by President Harry Truman and his Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, in limiting the vital interests of the United States to areas able to produce the manpower and technology to invade North America. The authors recommend that the United States fight in defense of all the countries in this huge area (190).

Despite the patina of crisis and frustration the authors create, it is hard to distinguish their practical recommendations from current American foreign policy. For example, although US-Israel relations are strained by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s slights and intrusions into American domestic affairs, US military support for Israel has never been greater. The authors also fail to consider the egregious failures of US interventions outside northern Europe and northeast Asia. From President John F. Kennedy’s administration to President George W. Bush’s, American interventions have been dismal: conflicts in Vietnam, the Middle East, and Africa have, one after another, exposed profound inadequacies in local knowledge, strategy, diplomacy, and war fighting. Such a horrifying trail of failures so costly in blood and treasure ought to counsel caution and humility. Neither is present in this book.²

2. Helpful insights into some of the areas Grygiel and Mitchell address may be found in Michael Mandelbaum, *Mission Failure: American and the World in the Post-Cold War Era* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2016), George Packer, *Assassin’s Gate: America in Iraq* (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), Thomas Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (NY: Penguin, 2006), Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Inside Iraq’s Green Zone* (NY: Knopf, 2006), Dexter Filkins, *The Forever War* (NY: Knopf, 2008), James Mann, *About Face: A History of America’s Curious Relationship with China, from Nixon to Clinton* (NY: Knopf, 1998), John Bradley, *Saudi Arabia Exposed: Inside a Kingdom in Crisis* (NY: Plgrave Macmillan, 2005) and *Inside Egypt: The Land of the Pharaohs on the Brink of Revolution* (NY: Plgrave Macmillan, 2008).