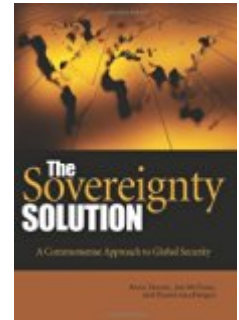


Anna Simons, Joe McGraw, Duane Lauchengco. *The Sovereignty Solution: A Common Sense Approach to Global Security*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2011. ix + 226 pp. \$32.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-61251-050-7.



Reviewed by Arjun Chowdhury

Published on H-Diplo (July, 2012)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

American soldiers have been fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq for twice the duration their predecessors fought in Europe and the Far East during World War II. Despite their sacrifices, these men and women are unlikely to be christened the Greatest Generation, or their wars remembered as worthy causes. Their mission has been unclear, consequently the gains are difficult to ascertain. Yet, even in these prolonged and indecisive conflicts, the U.S. military has implemented a far-reaching shift in its use of force. Faced with an unanticipated insurgency in Iraq, American officers and policymakers conducted a searching self-examination. They concluded that despite their preponderance of power, U.S. forces had been unable to secure the peace. Their reliance on overwhelming force and “kinetic” operations had proved unsuitable to the challenge of building ties with local populations to collaboratively construct state capacity and institutions.

Consequently, the U.S. Army and Marine Corps revised its Field Manual to focus on counterinsurgency (COIN). Mining insights from wars

in Malaya, Algeria, and Vietnam, among other conflicts, military planners led by General David Petraeus, who was the commander of U.S. forces in Iraq and is currently the director of the CIA, have led a change so significant that it “upends the military’s most basic notion of itself, as a group of warriors whose main task is to destroy its enemies.... Under COIN, victory will be achieved first and foremost by protecting the local population and thereby rendering the insurgents irrelevant.... Killing is a secondary pursuit.”[1] Along with a transformation in how soldiers operate came a change in the types of conflict in which the United States engages: longer engagements; restraints on the use of force; and indecisive, or “unsatisfying,” outcomes.[2]

This transformation can be contested on two fronts. First, its efficacy and cost: does COIN actually work—does it achieve “victory”—and even if it does, can the United States afford its labor-intensive, lengthy deployments?[3] The costs, in monetary and human terms, are staggering: the United States spent 525,000 dollars per soldier stationed

in Afghanistan and 462,000 dollars in Iraq between 2005 and 2009; this year, more American soldiers have committed suicide than have been killed in combat.[4] The authors of *The Sovereignty Solution*, Anna Simons (a professor at the Naval Postgraduate School) and Joe McGraw and Duane Lauchengco (officers in the Special Forces) launch a second, more fundamental, line of critique: should the United States be doing the hard yards of COIN when it is far better “at breaking things rather than fixing them” (p. 136)?

The authors argue that the United States has an unclear grand strategy; to the extent it has one at all. To some degree, this reflects the novelty of contemporary geopolitics, where “the world’s dominant power lacks a clearly identifiable competitor” (p. 12). In the absence of a clear rival like the USSR, planners have focused on an array of “asymmetric,” non-state threats from terrorists to cyber-attacks, and advocated altering the military to be more flexible, less reliant on force, and quicker to respond, COIN being one such response. Simons, McGraw, and Lauchengco disagree with this transformation. They argue that the shift to COIN reflects a muddled strategy, focused on nebulous threats, that is particularly ineffective because it departs from the United States’ comparative advantage, which lies in its military predominance and ability to employ overwhelming force. They, therefore, suggest a grand strategy that seeks to utilize and maximize U.S. strength rather than downplay it.

Rather than take “special responsibility” for global security, Simons, McGraw, and Lauchengco argue that the United States should transfer responsibility to governments to police their own territories (p. 43). This “sovereignty solution” can be best understood through an example that the authors provide. Say terrorists attack Chicago, and investigations reveal that they have organizational ties in Bangladesh and the United Kingdom. The United States “demands” that both states share intelligence and dismantle the networks in-

involved (p. 48). How the United Kingdom and Bangladesh respond would determine its relationship to the United States. They may cooperate on their own, in which case they are a “partner.” In case they are willing, but lack the capacity to pursue the terrorist group, they may request assistance from the United States to help them do so, rendering them a “struggling” state. In case Dhaka or London refuses to cooperate, the United States would designate them as an “adversary,” to the extent of possibly announcing a formal Declaration of War. Finally, if there is no functioning central government willing and able to pursue the terrorist group, the United States would designate that country as a “failed” state and act unilaterally.

The “sovereignty solution” therefore is sensitive to the fact that many states do not have the capacity to police their territories effectively. But rather than the United States assuming responsibility to construct institutions in such “weak” states, the authors argue, it should be the populations within these states who should demand governance from their leaders. They assert that there are always some sources of authority, even in failed states, and it is to these figures that threats must be addressed. Their policy is conditioned on the will and ability of states to cooperate with the United States.

By demanding that governments or local sources of authority police their own territory, Simons, McGraw, and Lauchengco seek to “reinvigorate sovereignty” as the basis for international relations (p. 43). As long as states prevent their citizens from attacking the United States, or allowing their territory to be used for such attacks, they are to be left free to pursue their own domestic and foreign policy (p. 89). While acknowledging that states may not be the “ultimate solution” to foreign policy challenges, they argue that the U.S. foreign policy apparatus is organized to deal with other states, and hence a state-centric approach best suits U.S. strengths (p. 45).

And this is the core of the book's message: that the United States must get back to what it does best. Simply put, this is "the application of overwhelming force" (p. 127). The United States has departed from its comparative advantage for two reasons. The first, as discussed, is the nebulous nature of contemporary threats. The second is the political fractiousness and divisions of American domestic politics. To the authors, fixing ambiguity and purposelessness in foreign policy requires a commitment to civic responsibility at home, including some kind of national service. Their subtext, which not all readers will agree with, is the specter of Vietnam. In that conflict, they argue, the Viet Cong exploited the divisions within the American population to sap resolve to prosecute the war successfully. To avoid repetition, and to provide a solid foundation for the "sovereignty solution," they argue that domestic unity must be pursued.

If the "sovereignty solution" sounds blunt, it is designed to be. Simons, McGraw, and Lauchengco take pains to point out that ambiguous messages that follow from an unclear grand strategy have emboldened U.S. adversaries. Further, the effort to contain problems has committed the United States to alliances with leaders who, enriched by foreign aid, no longer need to bargain with their own citizens. The authors urge a cessation to direct aid to all states (they do advocate aid for education and training, however). Putting leaders on notice that they must police their own territories serves two functions. First, it reduces the moral hazard that leaders will not bargain with their people for taxes. Second, by removing U.S. support, the public is less likely to blame the United States for the repression inflicted by their own leaders.

As U.S. troops begin to withdraw from Iraq and Afghanistan, the reader might wonder if events have passed the authors by. Are Simon, McGraw, and Lauchengco criticizing an approach whose time has passed, mostly because COIN has

proven too expensive for a fiscally challenged superpower? Does the emerging reliance on low-cost measures like drone strikes (under the broad rubric of counterterrorism) make the argument in this book moot? The short answer is no: the authors take issue with both an expensive and ambiguous approach to grand strategy, and an inexpensive and ambiguous approach to grand strategy. The targeting of terrorists is, at best, a way to help a "struggling state" eliminate threats in its own territory; it is not a substitute for that state's responsibility to do so. Put differently, the logic of their argument would support an increase in defense spending if necessary, not to improve U.S. ability to police a foreign territory, but to improve U.S. ability to demand compliance from the government responsible for that territory. The "sovereignty solution" is less demanding of the U.S. military than counterinsurgency, but it is more demanding of foreign governments than our current counterterrorism policies.

In conclusion, *The Sovereignty Solution* is an unambiguous statement about the United States' use of force in a world of asymmetric threats. By arguing that the United States should use its superior military capability to demand that other governments police their territories to eliminate threats against the United States, it challenges the contemporary focus on expensive counterinsurgency and/or inexpensive counterterrorism. In direct contrast to the expectation of long, indecisive conflicts with a reduced emphasis on the use of force, Simons, McGraw, and Lauchengco call for short engagements, conducted with overwhelming force, with the objective of decisive victory. Finally, the book challenges U.S. citizens and policymakers to formulate a clear strategy before demanding sacrifices from a fraction of the population. In this, it is a worthwhile contribution to what should be a pressing matter of public debate, especially in an election year.

Notes

[1]. Dexter Filkins, "The Next Impasse," *New York Times*, February 24, 2011.

[2]. John Nagl, "The Age of Unsatisfying Wars," *New York Times*, June 6, 2012.

[3]. Giad Gentile, "Time for the Deconstruction of Field Manual 3-24," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (2010): 116-117.

[4]. Amy Belasco, "The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations since 9/11," Congressional Research Service, RL33110, March 29, 2011; and Timothy Williams, "Suicides Outpacing War Deaths for Troops," *New York Times*, June 8, 2012.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

Citation: Arjun Chowdhury. Review of Simons, Anna; McGraw, Joe; Lauchengco, Duane. *The Sovereignty Solution: A Common Sense Approach to Global Security*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. July, 2012.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=35936>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.