

Jakub J. Grygiel, A. Wess Mitchell. *The Unquiet Frontier: Rising Rivals, Vulnerable Allies, and the Crisis of American Power.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016. 240 pp/ \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-16375-8.

Reviewed by Zachary Selden

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

There is no shortage of books seeking to answer the central question of American foreign policy: how and when should the United States use its power in the international environment to best ensure the stability of the existing political and economic order? Jakub J. Grygiel and A. Wess Mitchell make an important contribution to the literature on this critical question and in doing so point to the flaws of strategies of retrenchment or restraint. They underline the critical role of alliances in the maintenance of American global power and show why current policies both undermine the confidence of American allies and embolden potential rivals. This volume was clearly intended as a critique of the direction of American foreign policy in the Barack Obama administration, but it has enduring relevance regardless of who occupies the Oval Office.

The authors outline how rising regional powers challenge American hegemony through a strategy of probing. This is a low-risk strategy that has potentially high rewards. Rather than challenge a hegemon directly, it is better to probe the strength of the hegemon's commitments to its weaker allies. As they note (citing Machiavelli and Thucydides), a failure to come to the aid of a weaker ally would indicate a lack of resolve by the hegemon, thus undermining the credibility of

the hegemon or forcing it to respond to multiple provocations over minor issues. But while the issues on the periphery may be minor to the hegemon, they are often critical to the weaker ally. By skillfully exploiting this gap in salience, a challenging power can pick away at the basis of the American hegemonic system. The United States faces a particularly difficult situation because of its global interests and alliance network. It therefore has an extensive, "periphery or frontier problem that invites probing" (p. 52).

In Grygiel and Mitchell's recounting, the United States is pursuing a policy of accommodation with regional powers that neglects the importance of America's alliances. This is in part due to American geographic isolation from other regional powers and its technological military superiority, but a significant driver is ideological. For those operating from a liberal perspective, such as President Obama and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the ideological assumption is that the world is composed of potential partners that only need the institutional framework to translate their common interests into mutually beneficial action. For those operating from a more realist perspective, the inclination is to believe that the international system is "self-balancing" and that the intervention of the United States is not needed

to check the rise of regional powers because the states around them will do so in their own interest. As they summarize, “American overseas commitments are detrimental according to the argument of a self-balancing world, while they are not needed for the liberal vision” (p. 27). The 2016 presidential campaign features both of these perspectives in stark relief with Donald Trump representing the self-balancing camp in his dismissal of the utility of alliances, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and Hillary Clinton articulating the liberal vision that focuses on great power accommodation within a community of common interests.

The authors conclude with a series of recommendations: first, focus American attention where it geographically matters most; second, build and demonstrate American political will to maintain the existing system; and third, bolster the alliance network in particular ways in East Asia and central and eastern Europe where it is most subject to regional powers’ probing attempts. These are all valid points and worthy of discussion, particularly in light of the authors’ important observation that the alliance system created in Europe when all European states shared a threat may require reconsideration in the current strategic environment. Compared to the Cold War, “America’s frontier allies today face a very different situation. They exist in places that revisionist states often desire to possess or control and are not mere highways for armored columns to pass through en route to other parts of the alliance” (p. 166). Yet the problem is in how to actually implement their recommendations, which require material and political assets that appear to be lacking in the current environment. It is one thing to point out the need to strengthen the American commitment to its allies, but quite another to detail how to do this in the face of the financial pressures that are likely to constrain American defense spending well into the future.

The Unquiet Frontier is clearly written more for a policy audience than as an academic study of alliances. It is mercifully free of the theoretical jargon that can overcomplicate volumes aimed at academic audiences. While this is a positive feature, it does leave some missed opportunities. Grygiel and Mitchell engage with some of the scholarly literature on alliances, power transition, and other points central to their argument. Yet there are many places where that engagement seems truncated or more of an afterthought. This is likely a conscious choice on the part of the authors to produce a relatively slim and timely book of interest to the policy community, but it does potentially sacrifice some influence they might have on the academic study of international relations and American foreign policy.

These are minor critiques, however, compared to the broader significance of this work. It is a useful counterpoint to the ideas of retrenchment and restraint that have gained popularity in recent years. Even if the recommendations are often highly generalized, the purpose of this work is to underline the importance of alliances in the maintenance of the American-led international order and offer policymakers a worldview that forces a reconsideration of an American retreat from global affairs. As the authors note, “these are broad principles of policies rather than specific technical recommendations” and they serve as an important call for an attitudinal adjustment on the part of American leaders rather than as a detailed roadmap to executing policy (p. 187).

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