In Challenged Hegemony: The United States, China, and Russia in the Persian Gulf, Katerina Oskarsson and the late Steve A. Yetiv have taken on the monumental task of making sense of the relationships of three world powers with the countries of the Persian Gulf. In a moment of apparent upheaval in that region, this topic makes for timely reading. Listed in Stanford University Press’s catalog on security studies, this book is chiefly concerned with the idea of oil security. The fundamental question underlying their book is which world power will be in the strongest position to guarantee the smooth functioning of global oil markets in the near future. Yetiv and Oskarsson define the Persian Gulf region as the entirety of the eight countries that border that body of water. It is refreshing to see Iran and Iraq recognized as crucial parts of the Persian Gulf region alongside the Arab monarchies of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Unfortunately, it must be pointed out here that, in a particularly egregious example of the copyediting errors that dog their book, the authors erroneously list the eight countries on which they focus as "Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates" (p. 14).

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Since Yetiv and Oskarsson take a state-centric approach to international relations, that means they have set for themselves the unenviable task of trying to keep track of twenty-four separate relationships—that is, three foreign powers times eight countries in the region. Accordingly, many chapters of Challenged Hegemony are divided into smaller sections, usually only a few pages long and sometimes as short as a single paragraph, dealing with the various themes as they apply to particular pairings of countries. In general, these sections are the most useful parts of this book. A reader who takes an interest in, for example, China’s investment in Iraq’s oil sector since 2003 or Russian bilateral energy deals with Gulf countries will find impressive and exhaustive summaries laid out under convenient topic headings. Most sections contain a formidable barrage of statistics, which makes for challenging prose. Nonetheless, it is apparent that Challenged Hegemony could serve as a helpful reference book for somebody looking for straightforward catalogs of economic arrangements between most of the twenty-four country pairings.

One difficulty with Yetiv and Oskarsson’s decision to focus on so many international relationships is that they are continually forced to interrupt the flow of the book by jumping in with two-to-three-page sections of historical background. To do justice to these numerous historical sections, any author would have to have a strong command of the secondary literature on a great many vital international relationships in the twentieth century. For the most part, Yetiv and Oskarsson do an admirable job of condensing the historical context into short sections. In some cases, however, the need to be brief has led them to oversimplify. For example, their assertion that Moscow was “Iraq’s Cold war patron” glosses over the complexities of a rocky relationship (p. 117); elsewhere in the book, they clarify that they are referring mainly to a few years in the early 1970s when Moscow and Baghdad were briefly on close terms (p. 105).

One particular oversimplification in a historical back-
ground section deserves special mention because it reflects one of the larger problems with this book. Yetiv and Oskarsson dismiss entirely the history of China’s relations with the Persian Gulf countries prior to 1978, with the exception of a vague note that China pursued a project “to generate anticolonial sentiment in the region” (p. 72). In fact, China had many connections to the region between 1949 and 1978, all of which continued to have important ramifications for Chinese ambitions in the Gulf in the period under study in this book. Some of the specific linkages that Yetiv and Oskarsson neglect to mention include Beijing’s enthusiasm for ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim following the Iraqi revolution of July 1958, to the point of overtly supporting Qasim in his feud with Gamal Abdel Nasser following the 1959 Mosul uprising; the deal negotiated with Saudi Prince Faisal in 1955 to permit Chinese pilgrims to make the hajj to Mecca; the residence in Saudi Arabia of a significant population of overseas Chinese, including the high-ranking Nationalist general Ma Bufang; and Beijing’s popularity among and material support for Marxist insurgents in Oman in the 1960s and 1970s. Any of these topics could have provided a starting point for the authors to delve into the complicated question of how the perceptions of Chinese communist ideology in the region have changed over time.

In their chapters about China, Yetiv and Oskarsson have missed the opportunity to build on the renaissance in scholarship about China’s relations with the Middle East that has taken place in the past several decades. A new generation of younger researchers has taken advantage of the increased availability of sources in both China and the Middle East to transform the scholarly understanding of relations between these parts of the world. With respect to China and the Persian Gulf region in particular, it is worthwhile to highlight here the work of anthropologist Jackie Armijo on religious and educational ties between China and the Arab world, political scientist Makio Yamada on the economic relations between East Asian countries and Saudi Arabia, political analyst and historian Mohammed Al-Sudairi on the religious and ideological dimensions of China’s outreach to Saudi Arabia, and historian Shuang Wen on economic and cultural encounters in the early twentieth century.[1] Each of these scholars has conducted research in both Chinese and Arabic. And while none of these scholars has explicitly framed his or her work as a contribution to the field of “security studies,” each of them offers insight into the thorniest dilemmas of international politics and global security.

These individuals exemplify the current standard of scholarship in 2018 for academic work in all disciplines about China and the Middle East. The best work poses difficult questions, pays attention to a wide variety of non-state actors (including those from marginalized communities), engages with the diverse and growing recent literature about China and the Middle East, and is based on substantial research in both Chinese and Arabic. Yetiv and Oskarsson’s Challenged Hegemony fails to meet this standard. While the chapters on Russia contain a sprinkling of citations to sources in Russian, the book cites only one source in Chinese (a government report; see chapter 5, endnote 14) and none in Arabic or Farsi. The overwhelming majority of Yetiv and Oskarsson’s primary sources are news reports in English and published government statistics. They have not tapped into the kinds of source bases that might have made an original contribution to our understanding of international relations: no close analysis of the rhetoric of the relevant governments, no interviews with policymakers in Russia or China, no attempt to trace how intellectuals in one country learn about issues in another, and no fieldwork among expatriate communities.

Overall, Yetiv and Oskarsson are skeptical about the abilities of China and Russia to rival the United States for hegemony in the Persian Gulf region. They note that, despite the obvious increase in China’s military and economic influence, Beijing remains reluctant to challenge American preeminence overtly, in part because the Chinese economy relies on the global oil markets that the United States keeps secure. Similarly, they assert that Russia is so interdependent with other oil producing countries that it has clear incentives to cooperate with the United States to keep flows of oil stable and consistent. Consequently, Yetiv and Oskarsson conclude that the United States will retain its preeminent position in the Persian Gulf region despite apparent challenges from other nations.

It is reasonable for Yetiv and Oskarsson to expect China and Russia to be cautious in their approaches to the Persian Gulf region. Readers may be left wondering, however, whether those countries could become more assertive if Washington steps back from its international commitments in the region. After all, we have already seen one circumstance elsewhere in the Middle East in which China and Russia have been presented with new opportunities to gain influence in the wake of a decision by the administration of Donald Trump to abrogate a leadership role traditionally occupied by the United States. That situation occurred when Trump announced in December 2017 that the United States would recog-
nize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, effectively ending Washington’s ability to serve as a mediator between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas responded to that decision by immediately dispatching envoys to Beijing and Moscow, publicly declaring that he hoped one of those countries could step in as the main guarantor of the two-state solution. [2] Even if China and Russia had previously intended to tread cautiously in the Middle East, the potential for American disengagement from the international community raises the possibility that they might become emboldened sooner than expected.

I mention this possibility because, as I sit down to write this review, it is less than one week after Trump’s announcement that the United States will withdraw from the 2015 international agreement over Iran’s nuclear program. Yetiv and Oskarsson, to their credit, hedged their bets about the future of the Iran nuclear deal. They judged that it was “not likely to become a tectonic shift in the region” (p. 27). They also held out the possibility that the deal might falter in the event of “a change in administration in Washington or Iran” (p. 151). This caveat seems jarring to read today, since we already know which of those two capitals has experienced regime change since this book was written. Academic publishing, of course, is notoriously slow. Challenged Hegemony was published in early 2018, but it is obvious that the manuscript was written in 2016 or before. Tellingly, Hillary Clinton’s name appears three times in the index, while Trump’s is not mentioned at all. A reader would be justified, therefore, in wondering how much longer the conclusions of this book will remain valid.

One way that Yetiv and Oskarsson have tried to ensure a longer shelf life for their book is by focusing narrowly on the concept of oil security. They are especially interested in the capacity of the United States to protect the flow of oil, something that they believe Washington will prioritize regardless of other changes in national or regional politics. It is frustrating that the authors are committed to the idea of oil security without examining recent literature from economists and political scientists who have called into question whether superpower intervention in the Middle East has any impact on the flow of oil at all. Robert Vitalis, for example, has contracted to publish a book titled Oilcraft, a word he coined by analogy with “witchcraft.” In an influential essay in 2016, Vitalis charged that none of the “deeply held ideas about threats to access, [about] the capacity to control Middle East energy resources, and about dependency on [Saudi Arabia] withstands scrutiny.” Instead, Vitalis continued, the attachment to the idea of oil security “tell[s] us more about the contemporary folkways of oil in the United States.” After explaining that “old ideas about scarcity and conflict” are “rooted in nineteenth-century social Darwinism, neo-mercantilism, geographical determinism, and scientific racism,” Vitalis concluded that these “ideas themselves are not true.”[3] Considering that the arguments advanced by Vitalis and other similarly minded scholars have the potential to undermine the premise of Challenged Hegemony, it is disappointing that Yetiv and Oskarsson have not made any attempt to engage them.

But whether or not one accepts the basic assumptions about the relevance of oil security, a bigger problem with Yetiv and Oskarsson’s book is their failure to acknowledge that the eight countries of the Persian Gulf region could be relevant to the international community in the twenty-first century in any way other than as producers of oil. Even China, the country whose economy is most directly dependent on oil imports from this region, has a host of other vital interests that deserve attention. The authors might have considered the ramifications of the Chinese government’s relationship with Saudi Arabia on its strategies for managing its Muslim population within China. Or they might have traced how rich Arab donors have funded mosque construction and Islamic education throughout China and asked what impact this phenomenon will have on the development of Chinese Islam. Or they might have noticed that public intellectuals in the United Arab Emirates and other Gulf monarchies have embraced China’s recent history as an authoritarian model for economic development. Or they might have explored Gulf expatriate communities in China or Chinese expatriate communities in the Gulf. Or they might have investigated China’s efforts to promote soft power in the region at a time when state-owned Chinese companies are investing heavily in Emirati television channels and lavishly funding cultural events. For the authors’ framing of this book as a study of oil security to make sense, they must explain that choice by contextualizing oil security with reference to other possible approaches to understanding the international relations of the Persian Gulf region.

On the whole, Challenged Hegemony might have been more useful if presented in a format other than a monograph. Since the most valuable work the authors have done has been to collect and categorize a significant number of security agreements and oil deals, one could envision the contents of this book being helpfully repurposed into some kind of searchable online database. Not only...
would such a format save readers from having to make a
difficult slog through turgid prose, but it would also ob-
viate one of the most exasperating flaws in this book: its
index. Many entries in the index are out of alphabetical
order (“Iraq” comes before “Iran”; “Crimea” comes before
“Clinton, Bill”). Seemingly at random, about half the Chi-
nese names are alphabetized according to surname, while
the other half are alphabetized by given names (“Xi, Jin-
ping” with its gratuitous comma comes right next to “Xi-
aoping, Deng”). And most, but not all, Arabic names be-
ginning with the definite article are alphabetized under
“al” (so one finds “al-Abadi, Haider” in the “al” section,
though for some reason “Assad, Bashar al” is in the “as”
section). These defects are not mere minor annoyances
but representations of a more serious issue: sloppy edit-
ing has left a book that would be useful mainly as a ref-
erence text nearly impossible to use in such a manner.

Notes

[1]. Jackie Armijo, “Muslim Education in China: Chi-
nese Madrasas and Linkages to Islamic Schools Abroad,”
in The Madrasa in Asia: Political Activism and Transna-
tional Linkages, ed. Farish Noor, Yoginder Sikand, and
Martin van Bruinessen (Amsterdam: Amsterdam Univer-
sity Press, 2008), 169-187; Makio Yamada, “Saudi Ara-
bia’s Look-East Diplomacy: Ten Years On,” Middle East
Policy 22 (2015): 121-139; Makio Yamada, “Islam, En-
ergy, and Development: Taiwan and China in Saudi Ara-
(2015): 77-98; Mohammed Al-Sudairi, “The Communist
Party of China’s United Front Work in the Gulf: The ‘Eth-
nic Minority Overseas Chinese’ of Saudi Arabia as a Case
Study,” Dirasat 34, King Faisal Center for Research and
Islamic Studies (2018); and Shuang Wen, “Imperial Me-
diation: Arab-Chinese Connections at the Turn of the
Twentieth Century,” book project in progress.

[2]. Dov Lieber, “Abbas Sends Envoys to China, Rus-
sia to Seek US Replacement in Peace Process,” Times of
Israel, December 19, 2017.

Jadaliyya, March 9, 2016.

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