

BOOK REVIEWS

THE UNQUIET FRONTIER

Review of Jakub J. Grygiel & A. Wess Mitchell (2016) *Rising Rivals, Vulnerable Allies, and the Crisis of American Power*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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In times when the public, political and academic discourses flourish with contributions that deliberate on whether it is ‘all quiet on NATO’s Eastern flank’, Jakub J. Grygiel and A. Wess Mitchell are among a handful that dare advance a straightforward argument on the ‘unquiet frontier’ with their 2016 book *The Unquiet Frontier: Rising Rivals, Vulnerable Allies, and the Crisis of American Power*. The authors – one a renowned academic, the other a think-tanker – have successfully managed to address the topic from both academic and policy-oriented perspectives. The book dismantles the current US strategy in relation to its allies – but also vis-à-vis growing revisionist powers – and advocates for both continued US presence abroad as well as the strengthening of ties with US allies worldwide.

The book begins with outlining who the US frontier allies and revisionist powers are, and why they are so important in global power dynamics. The authors argue that current US policy, if continued, could jeopardize global stability and increase US foreign policy expenditures. They point out that a decay in US extended deterrence encourages revisionist powers to engage in probing, which in some cases has already resulted in war (p.12). Grygiel and Mitchell argue that the Obama administration is not taking the importance of allies seriously enough and they stress the significance of frontier alliances to US prosperity and security (p.15).

The authors outline the historical reasons for the *de-prioritization of alliances* which they call the '*three temptations*': (1) geography and the unique position of the US on the world map which keeps them safe and gives them confidence of defeating any potential threats; (2) technological supremacy which erases the need for allies; and finally, (3) both in the liberal and the self-balancing view of the world, a decreased US overseas presence and military interventions which will lead to increased US security (p.17). However, today, it is clear that none of these hold true. The authors explain the growing popularity of de-prioritization of alliances as a long-term result of perceived and practiced US self-sufficiency as well as its incremental focus on domestic programs (p.32). US technological superiority remains a factor in alliance de-prioritization, albeit it is 'in a broader temptation to approach security threats through technological solutions alone rather than by combining them with political involvement, including alliances' (p.38). Drones, airpower and missile defense are mentioned as technological temptations due to which costly invasions and political involvements could be avoided in the future. Finally, the authors argue that while alliances are vital for smaller countries and their security, the US fears it could get entrapped in allies' local conflicts, and with this lack of support for an exposed ally comes a posture of accommodation towards the rival power (p.41).

The book further discusses how revisionist powers probe weakening US influence in their areas. The authors go into details of '*probing behaviour*' of revisionist states where they explain its purpose, features, benefits and much more (p.44). 'Probing' is an act of testing a nation's power and its will to maintain security and influence in a region, rather than a direct attack on a rival's ally (albeit war is indeed a possible extension of successful probing). Probes help to identify who the rival is, what threats they present and where these threats may materialize, in other words, probes are beneficial in terms of being able to better prepare for possible aggression from the revisionist state (p.75).

For the past couple of decades, US allies were able to direct all their focus on their economies as they were certain that the US was both capable and willing to back them up in case of military confrontation (p.77). However, today, signs of a weakening of the extended deterrence of the US gives frontier allies reasons to worry. Even though the first

choice for most frontier allies is still US-backed security, alternative solutions to make up for the lack of support from Washington have been used. Most often this has been 'military self-help' (p.80). Asian countries significantly increased defence spending, investing mostly in naval capabilities. Similarly, the Gulf states found themselves preparing for a future war with nuclear-armed Iran, and the CEE countries – in response to Russian aggression – have been investing more and more in their military capabilities. In short, US allies are preparing to be able to defend themselves on their own, which again illustrates the diminished perception of US deterrence credibility. In some cases, they are even acquiring offensive capabilities and gravitating towards offensive doctrines (p.91). Furthermore, regional alliances are mobilising in order to increase defence capabilities – closer cooperation within ASEAN countries in Asia or the GCC countries in the Middle East can be seen. The same trend can be observed within Europe, for instance in the V4 group (p.95) which is increasingly cooperative. An alternative way of coping with revisionist powers and declining US support is adopting strategies of accommodation (p.101), evidence of which can be seen in all regions coping with revisionist powers.

There are many ways that the US benefits from alliances. From the geopolitical point of view, alliances can be seen as war prevention mechanisms which dissuade revisionist states from attacking, as containment tools which keep the rival from expanding and potentially becoming a global superpower, as balancing tools by having influence in allied countries and preventing large powers from becoming too powerful, and finally as a way to preserve the status quo of international relations (p.118). From the military point of view, allies can be seen as capability aggregators which significantly increase American military power and as power projection tools strengthening America's deterrent effect, reassuring allies and, finally, overcoming large distances between the US and Eurasian continent through the use of foreign military bases (p.137). Last but not least, geo-economic benefits of alliances are exemplified by allowing US control of global trade choke points around the world via allied countries (p.148).

Grygiel and Mitchell argue that the value of alliances is going to increase in the future, especially that of frontier allies located nearby revisionist

states that themselves grow in power (p.154). The geopolitical advantage of the US will be less reliant on their advanced military technologies due to the narrowing gap between the US and rival countries, and will be more reliant on alliances, which is why revisionist powers aim to undermine US relations with its allies (p.156). The dangers of accommodating the daring great-power demands and how this can intensify the abandonment fears of US allies are well pointed out by the authors. An alternative to accommodating rivals' demands is offshore balancing which seeks to place the burden of managing regional problems on allies. Even though this is increasingly attractive, long term disadvantages outweigh the temporary advantages stemming from this approach (p.159).

The authors suggest that the best option for the US is the strengthening of alliances, starting with frontier states which are most exposed to rivals. This is to be based on two pillars – political will and military effectiveness. In each region – CEE, Middle East or Asia, there are allies which are more exposed and need to be given priority in this regard (p.165). The risks of rearming US allies are highlighted and the authors argue that local defences need to be developed amongst frontier allies, as well as limited offensive capabilities (p.182). Grygiel and Mitchell conclude that the US losing its allies would be much more devastating in the long run than possible entrapment of the US in local conflicts.

In conclusion, *'The Unquiet Frontier'* is a very well written book which goes straight to the point and depicts in full what the authors have labelled as 'The Crisis of American Power'. Examples are provided throughout the entire book to help readers to put things into perspective and the authors present convincing arguments on the importance of allies to the US security and prosperity.