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Book Review

America Abroad: The United States' Global Role in the 21st Century

Stephen G. Brooks / William C. Wolforth
Oxford 2016: Oxford University Press, 274 S.

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Why should someone read a book about the United States' role in the 21st century that was published months before Donald Trump turned US foreign policy upside down? The answer to this question is twofold: First, Brooks' and Wolforth's book is not about a short-term US foreign policy but about the foundational elements of the US's grand strategy in international affairs and hence timeless. Second, the book is extremely well structured and clearly written, with an extensive discussion of the current state of research on international order, great power politics and the rise and fall of hegemonies. From a realist as well as a liberal institutionalist perspective, the authors present theoretically inspired and empirically well substantiated arguments why deep engagement has been, still is and will be the best option for the United States in global politics. Hence, they challenge the current dominant discourse of scholars and politicians that America should pull back to uphold its current status.

Overall, this book seeks to answer two fundamental questions: Is the United States still a superpower and will it continue to be one in the future? Should the United States continue its strategy of deep engagement and shape the world to its own liking, or should it pull back its global engagement or even increase it and fight for more democracy and human rights?

In the first part of the book (chapters two and three) the authors answer the first question by analyzing America's current global position and the likelihood of "change in a one-superpower world". They argue that a superpower must be "capable of pursuing a world-shaping grand strategy" (p. 72) and therefore needs an overwhelming state capacity in three interrelated dimensions, that is, military, technological and economic (p. 14). By proposing this measurement and with their detailed and comprehensive analysis of capacities, the authors admit that China has made remarkable progress in all three dimensions, rising from a great power to an emerging superpower. However, they persuasively criticize the notion that this rise will inevitably continue at the same speed, resulting in the end of America's status as the lone and unchallenged superpower. Brooks and Wolforth are convinced that China's innovation capacity is still dependent on Western (mainly American) companies, and that it will face serious demographic, environmental and economic challenges in its transformation from a middle-income to a high-income country. Furthermore, they argue that China's considerable increase of military spending cannot hide the fact that it invested these resources mainly in areas in which relatively little knowledge is needed and where it can compete with the US (e.g., missile technology). The People's Republic, however, still struggles to develop top-end military equipment and to integrate it into a working system (pp. 60-61). Hence, the authors conclude that China's military capabilities "hardly go beyond perimeter defense" (p. 62) and do not allow to challenge the US in its command of the global commons. Consequently, they refer to Buzan's concept for analyzing the structure of the international system and refine it by proposing the possibility of 1 + Y + X. That is, they characterize the current system as one that is dominated by a superpower, several major powers with limited (regional) capabilities (X), and China as an emerging superpower (Y), that

Jan 30, 2020 I *innsbruck* university press, Innsbruck
OZP – Austrian Journal of Political Science I ISSN 2313-5433 I http://oezp.at/
2019, vol. 48, issue 4 I DOI 10.15203/ozp.3148.vol48iss4
Supported by the University of Innsbruck

is clearly more capable as X but at least in the medium-term not capable of challenging the superpower in its global ambitions.

Based on this assessment, the authors then discuss in the second part of their book (chapters four to ten) the three possible options for an American grand strategy (i.e., deep engagement, retrenchment, deep engagement plus), and present their reasons and evidence why deep engagement is the only sensible strategy from a security as well as an economic perspective. They do so by outlining the general logic of both dimensions and by assessing their costs and benefits.

Against the backdrop of a very dense and comprehensive discussion of the current state of research, the authors come to the conclusion that deep engagement is the preferable option not only because it reduces the likelihood of regional conflicts and wars, and hinders nuclear proliferation, but also because this strategy contributes to a global economic and financial system that favors the US disproportionally and that allows it to block the rise of possible contenders for its superpower status.

Brooks and Wolforth do not withhold the fact that deep engagement is costly from an economic/budgetary as well as a security perspective, fueling regional and global balancing tendencies and putting the US in a constant temptation to misuse its power for unnecessary adventures (which is why they rule out a strategy of deep engagement plus). Nevertheless, they compare these costs not to the alternative of a complete isolationist strategy (which they see not only as unlikely but also as impossible in a globalized world), but to a policy of retrenchment with the option of going global if needed. Deep engagement allows the US to maintain and if needed to adapt a global order that is overall beneficial to its national interests at an acceptable level of costs, and that at the same time puts America in the position to block any effort of rising powers to challenge this order to its disadvantage.

Overall Brooks and Wolforth present a convincing, theoretically inspiring and empirically rich discussion of global order and the challenges for a superpower that is a must read not only for scholars of grand strategy and US foreign and security policy, but also for students interested in world affairs.