

BOOK REVIEW

Dana H. Allin & Erik Jones, *Weary Policeman: American Power in an Age of Austerity*, London: The International Institute of Strategic Studies, 2012.

The ascendancy of the United States of America over world politics has been a direct consequence of its economic durability, its unquestionable authority and military dominance relative to other great powers; and the ability to project this economic and military power over the entire spectrum of the globe. Over the decades since the last World War that brought America to the forefront of world politics as one of the two ‘superpowers’ – USA and USSR – over the Cold War years, and then as the ‘sole superpower’ with the end of the Cold War, policymakers and academics have written and debated extensively on the question of complimenting the maintainability, by America, of this ascendancy with the need to maintain a balance in and among its national programmes. This question has been paramount among presidents and policymakers in America from Dwight D. Eisenhower to Barack Hussein Obama.

Weary Policeman: American Power in an Age of Austerity authored by Dana H. Allin and Erik Jones seeks to analyze the question of how America will lead in the face of economic crisis at home, a military over-stretch and fatigue of two wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, reluctant allies, particularly Europe, which is no longer willing to shoulder the burdens of American wars because of their own economic troubles, and the rise of new powers centres such as China and India.

The authors begin by laying down a theoretical framework for analysing American aspirations for world leadership. Interpretation of America’s role in the world, they contend, has formed the core of the debate by U.S. officials and academics such as Robert Kagan and Madeline Albright representing the idealist school of thought who argued that the United States must police the world because it is uniquely competent to do so ((p. 17), and, that the U.S. is the “Indispensable Nation” (p. 18). Former national security adviser, Brent Scowcroft on behalf of the realist school, argued against overt triumphalism, cautioning George H.W. Bush to husband the country’s resources and discriminate when picking fights (p. 19). People in the U.S. remember Scowcroft as the one who cautioned the Senior Bush against capturing Baghdad and the costs such an action would entail. The realist perspective argued deployment of other power resources at the disposal of the United States such as ‘soft power’ and ‘smart power’, which argued against over-commitment in favour of

flexibility in the exercise of power and which was adopted by the Obama Administration following the ‘long war’ in Afghanistan.

The *Weary Policeman* puts forth the argument that both the idealist and realist perspectives cannot ignore the changes that are taking place in world politics, and this is where the pluralist view (p. 22) comes in the debate that will set the course of American politics in future. In the context of the pluralist view, the U.S. cannot ignore that the world is now inevitably plural, and that American hegemony is unnatural, unsustainable and corrosive to both its domestic political economy and the international system. Imperial pretensions are dangerous, it argues. This perspective, the authors suggest, is not an abdication of American leadership, rather, it is a call for the U.S. to lead only where it matters most. Other countries should be required to shoulder the burden of the world order that will be based on the distribution of benefits from international commerce.

The authors believe that by withholding security and forcing other countries to look out for their own interests, the U.S. governments will not only slow the process of creeping over-commitment, but also exercise a form of influence that otherwise would not be available.

The thesis in a nutshell is for the American policymakers to concentrate on strengthening the American prosperity which in turn will be inextricably interconnected with security. It is American prosperity that will make it that much more likely that other countries will contribute to American security as well. As the authors contend throughout the narrative, the end of American prosperity will be the end of influence as pointed out by Stephen Cohen and J. Bradford DeLong in their book *The End of Influence* title published in 2010.

The arguments in the book speak more frankly about the U.S. ability to maintain global leadership not by playing the global policeman, but by a more cautious approach involving other rising powers and countries through three core policy themes, namely: redistribution, restraint and restoration. In the consequent chapters, the authors take the reader through the changing global order and the American approach, specifically of the current Obama Administration, and the future one, in dealing with a wide spectrum of issues, including for example: the rise of China and the idea of a strategic pivot towards Asia-Pacific that can be accomplished without necessarily provoking a destructive arms race; the Arab Awakening that has already underlined the limits of America’s ability to anticipate and control events of seismic importance, and in similar vein, balancing relations with Russia which today has emerged as a more open society than its Soviet predecessor. While Iran’s nuclear ambitions are of concern, the

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authors maintain that the Obama administration hopes to prevent the emergence of the country as a nuclear weapon state through diplomacy rather than force. Categories of states that are neither direct adversaries nor reliable partners, such as Pakistan, will pose obstacles to devolution of American responsibilities. The challenge with Pakistan, the authors point out, will be to minimize Pakistani disruptive behaviour as part of the broader task of getting all neighbours to adopt more benign roles towards Afghanistan (p. 191).

While the authors have maintained in their narrative that America would need to work in cooperation and partnership with other emerging powers, they do sound a note of caution that is evident throughout the book that this partnership cannot be taken for granted. For example, the quasi-Gaullist tendencies of Turkish leaders put the country at odds with mainstream U.S. opinion on Israel and Iran, or that while partnership with India has become deeply anchored; America maintains very different visions of international order (p. 194).

Given the diminishing appetite of the Obama Administration for lengthy ground campaigns, and the propensity for offshore balancing for a superpower that feels depleted by lengthy ground wars, the challenge, according to the authors, will be for the Obama Administration, and the future ones in America, to balance the realist recognition of American limits with the robust assertion that there needs to be an international community with a responsibility to protect civilians from crimes against humanity.

And nowhere is this more evident today, as readers are bound to note, than in the American efforts to deal with the current crisis in Syria.

The book is recommended as essential reading for anyone interested in learning about the American struggle to maintain and sustain an inclusive and equitable position of global leadership.

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