

Restraint
Barry Posen

Covering a grand theme, painted with broad strokes – Written before Ukraine and Iraq

The thesis of this book is that the United States is overstretched. The country is spending more than they can afford on defense. We are currently protecting countries which would be better off protecting themselves. We could defend our national interests with less of an outlay. In fact, reducing our presence elsewhere in the world would reduce the level of antagonism against America.

Posen's focus is on conventional military power and conventional strategy and tactics – warfare between states. His assumption is that the tools and tactics of the existing military will be appropriate to combat the threats he sees, but it is a question of balance.

Posen would like to see more military strength focused on "the commons," the oceans, skies, space and the communications sphere, and less on land-based armies. The United States' greatest assets are its geographic location, isolated, with access to two oceans, and its technology. It should exploit those.

This book anticipates non-state aggression such as that we are observing today (June 2014) in Iraq. While he proposes countermeasures, he does not anticipate that this will be the major form of threat to be countered.

More significant, Posen did not anticipate the 'hybrid war' being waged in Ukraine. What is special about it is that the new technologies are being used simultaneously, combining hard and soft power. It is a war of information, disinformation and propaganda; of intelligence and counter-intelligence; cyber warfare; use of highly trained commandos, "green men" with no insignia; use of the non-government actors, including business, NGOs, religious organizations, criminals, and private persons; state use of terrorist)tactics using women and children as human shields in attacks on military and civil objects; energy warfare; economic warfare; corruption to compromise the loyalty of the political and military leadership. It involves the use of bloggers – some might even comment on this review!

This hybrid war is designed to frustrate conventional countermeasures. So far it has enjoyed the "blitzkrieg" factor, the advantage that new and unconventional tactics always enjoy for at least a while.

Posen introduces two concepts that I find very useful. Cheap riders, similar to free riders, enjoy the benefits of American defense protection without paying the costs. Germany and Japan had this list, although it includes most of Europe. Reckless drivers are countries that take advantage of the immunity provided by American defense guarantees in order to provoke enemies in ways they should not. Chief among these is Israel, although others such as the Georgia could be named.

Posen talks about Liberal hegemony, the world order which emerged after World War II. The United States is the leader of this hegemony, supported by the vast number of supposedly democratic states which depend on the United States for protection and trade relations, and which to some extent or another share in the modern Western culture.

In Posen's words "Despite some important disagreements among its proponents, it is liberal because it aims to defend and promote a range of values associated with Western society in general and U.S. society in particular— including democratic governance within nation-states, individual rights, free markets, a free press, and the rule of law. The spread of these values is not only seen to be good in its own terms, it is seen to be positive, if not essential, for U.S. security."

The United States has worked to expand its Liberal hegemony, attempting to change the fundamental nature of other countries to make them more like itself. This has been a clear failure in the Middle East. The rich countries of the Far East still retain their Confucian or Buddhist character, including their own inscrutable and undemocratic power structures, despite American attempts to impose Western liberalism via constitutions and the so on.

In doing so the United States has put a lot of pressure on Russia, Iran, China and other players. Their hostility is in American long-term interests. Dealing with that results in short-term costs.

Posen would recommend that we be content to leave people the way they are.

Posen's assessment of the United States and the West in general is guardedly optimistic. He talks about how the crisis of 2008 could easily have provoked a widespread depression, but appears sanguine that the problems are in hand, not merely postponed. He does not mention the underlying causes, which appear to have only worsened: the demographics of the labor force and dependent populations; levels of national debt; the inability to balance national budgets; the growing disparity between educational attainment and ability on one hand, and labor market needs on the other.

The book assumes – it has to assume as a baseline – that the United States loses its relative financial power only gradually. The book could not factor in "black swan" events, although simply given its breadth and time horizon supposedly unpredictable events seem more likely than not. He is content to note –give him credit, as a man of the center for being this brave, that:

" It is difficult to tell whether the anemic growth, high unemployment, eroding middle class living standards, deteriorating infrastructure, and fiscal imbalances presently plaguing the United States are transitory difficulties or represent some deeper set of structural problems that will continue to erode our economic vitality, and hence our power."

Posen is right to say that America is wrong to project its almost uniquely sectarian culture onto the rest of the world, remaining blind to the fact that

"National identities often integrate within them ethnic and religious roots but nationalism is a modern idea. It holds that a group, united by language, history, and culture, should be protected by the power of a state that it controls"

He writes that "" Liberal Hegemony cannot rest on its laurels. It is inherently expansionist and seems destined to drift regularly into military action." Though Posen does not say as much, this bias towards action is certainly influenced by the political structure of America. Eisenhower's military-industrial complex remains a powerful player. He does mention Israel's disproportionate influence on American policy making.

His conclusion is a very accurate summary of the book:

"In this book I have explained why Liberal Hegemony has not worked particularly well. The strategy has precipitated some balancing by other nation-states and will likely precipitate more as the relative power advantage enjoyed by the United States wanes, and others feel more capable of tilting against the United States. The strategy has made the United States the center of political attention in a world undergoing rapid social, political, and economic change. The United States is sufficiently strong and omnipresent to be blamed by the losers but not strong enough to do much affirmatively to alleviate the stresses and strains that rapid development often causes. The strategy underrates the enduring power of nationalism and the inclination of self-aware peoples to resist direction by outsiders. And the strategy overlooks the extent to which the capacity for organized violence has diffused, rendering even relatively small counterinsurgency efforts hugely expensive. Finally, the strategy leads directly to the issuance of blank security checks to U.S. allies. Some cash the check for increased welfare spending in their own societies, as do the European allies and Japan; they cheap ride. Others cash the check to pay for their own extravagant security adventures; clients as different at Afghanistan and Israel drive recklessly. For all these reasons, Liberal Hegemony has proven an expensive and counterproductive grand strategy."