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Sustainable Security: Rethinking American National Security Strategy

edited by Jeremi Suri and Benjamin Valentino. Oxford University Press (2016), 432 pp.
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One might suppose that a book entitled *Sustainable Security* is about environmental factors, such has been the normative use of that word in recent times. Rather, this volume considers how the US could or should sustain its security posture financially in the very uncertain security landscape we are now experiencing. Although this edited volume was compiled before Donald Trump secured the presidency in the US, the range of issues and debates it raises could hardly be more prescient given the way that global politics has unfolded at the end of 2016 and beginning of 2017. This is a most useful volume of essays for students and observers alike, not only those concerned with security studies but also those with an eye to global geopolitics and economics, such is the breadth and importance of the issues tackled.

The central premise of this book is actually quite close to the range of difficult questions that Trump has raised in the early weeks of his presidency, even if the prescriptions offered do not always match those of the new president. In [her chapter](#) assessing the US's defence relationships with allies in East Asia, Jennifer Lind nicely encapsulates the range of dilemmas currently faced by policymakers in the US and indeed across the Western world. In the current political and economic climate, which can be characterised by worsening financial constraints and a more complex and heterogeneous competition between threat-actors, should the US retrench from its grand strategy of 'deep engagement' or should it maintain its dominant defence capability in ensuring global peace and security? If it chooses the latter, how does it avoid a galloping and ultimately unsustainable defence budget; a tendency by allies to 'free ride'; and a defence posture that is increasingly out of step with the complexity of threats faced?

The book is divided into two sections, with 13 chapters in total from an impressive range of academic commentators. The first section deals with broad questions of American military strategy and policy going forward, with chapters on the economic and fiscal difficulties of remaining a global power by Kirshner, Williams, Suri, Hall, Drezner and Hite-Rubin; questions of institutional reform within the American security agencies addressed by Inboden; and the question of climate change, and the potentially existential threat it will pose, by Busby. The second section ~~of the book~~ deals with the particularly important question, raised notably in recent times by Donald Trump, of whether and how the US deals with allies

and regional defence relationships. Questions concerning the Middle East, East Asia, Afghanistan, Europe and the NATO alliance are discussed variously by Valentino, Wohlforth, Lind, Ganguly, Cronin, Byman and Moller.

Given the complexity of the environment, it is unsurprising that what results in this book is a range of arguments and suggested strategies which do not always agree with one another. Trump's reassertion of primary American rights among allies and competitors, as characterised by his difficult questions on declining European contributions to NATO, might suggest a strategy of retrenchment on defence commitments around the globe. And yet the policy – insofar as it can be determined – seems to be characterised most recently by a proposed *increase* in defence spending and a more assertive military involvement in international crises.

There is broad agreement in the book that the world is becoming more heterogeneous in terms of economic, military and political power, and that this poses existential questions of the US's 'global constabulary' role. Kirshner suggests that China and Europe will inevitably achieve economic power parity with the US in time, and this will inevitably cause a rethink in the strategy. However, Inboden warns against dangerous US 'declinism' and suggests that competing powers are a very long way from challenging the US's dominance. On the threats itself, Wohlforth puts forward a convincing argument that both terrorism and Russia are more paper tiger than existential threat, and that this allows for a continued policy alternative of 'muddling through' with little change to the strategy.

There is no doubt that the US continues to spend nearly half the planet's total defence budget, and spends as much as the next eight biggest defence spenders combined. At the same time, Williams reminds us that, following the 2007 financial crash, national debt is almost at historically unprecedented levels. Given that raising taxes or cutting social security are both politically unpalatable (although Trump might offer some leeway on the latter), cutting the massive defence budget seems inevitable. Hall, meanwhile, suggests that the problem is not so much financial as ideological: the grand strategy vision of the US's place in the world seems increasingly 'indefensible'.

There is some interesting and detailed lateral thinking in this book about defence policy, in that the challenge may not be so much about simply cutting defence budgets ~~as, but~~ perhaps about thinking more creatively and working smarter with what is left. This reflects much recent strategising ~~by~~ Western governments about developing armed forces which can be deployed and reconstituted in more flexible, dynamic, and – crucially – more cost-effective ways. It also speaks to a more intelligent and nuanced relationship with allies,

whereby the questions are posed not in blunt terms of GDP contributions, but in terms of thinking about policy objectives and the best way to collectively deliver them.

In the context of East Asia, Lind suggests that expensive ‘terminals’ can be reconfigured as more useful military ‘hubs’, although perhaps does not suggest how this might be cheaper. On Afghanistan, where the US has just completed the longest military engagement in its history, Cronin offers an entirely logical policy suggestion of neutralisation, although arguably underplays the spoiling power of the Taliban and the degree to which it will challenge the very weak Afghan state. Such complexities perhaps weaken historical comparisons with European contexts of the past.

There are elements of liberal thinking in this book whereby the existential financial threats to traditional defence thinking might offer opportunities for a more peaceful world. Resolving Kashmir, or North Korea, or Afghanistan would mean greatly reduced military threats in the future, and thus a need for much smaller defence budgets. There is no doubt the US is at a ‘strategic crossroads’, as the book’s editors remind us, and that this could be seen as much as a moment of opportunity as of threat. At the same time, there are snippets of Trumpian sentiment in this book: as Suri and Valentino say in the introduction to the volume, the defence free-riders around the world ‘know who they are’. Of course, the current US president’s thinking on defence is as unpredictable at the time of writing as the global threat landscape. While we grapple the issues, this book represents an important and very thought-provoking range of ideas and perspectives on the challenges the US faces in trying to rethink its vision and role on the global stage.

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