

Interview – David Galbreath

Written by E-International Relations

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David J. Galbreath is Professor of War and Technology in the Department of Politics, Languages, and International Studies at the University of Bath. His research focuses on how technology shapes how we think about and do war. He has also been researching European security from European militaries and the trans-Atlantic relationship to resurgent Russia and the war in Ukraine. His current research is on what digital innovation tells us about the future of war. He has been the editor of *European Security* (2008-2015), *Defence Studies* (2014-2016), and Associate Editor of the *European Journal of International Security* (2016-2020). He is the co-editor (with John Deni, US Army War College) of the *Routledge Handbook of Defence Studies* (2019). Along with Aaron Brantly (Virginia Tech) and Manabrata Guha (Australian National University), he is co-editing the *Routledge Handbook on War and Technology* (forthcoming).

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

The understanding of our relationship with technology is something that I am keen to understand and I think that much of the literature in environmental philosophy is one way that we could think of trying to conceptualise this and perhaps to understand it. I think that as a whole, understanding International Relations as something that includes things outside of, or prior to, the human experience will be important going forward.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

My understanding of the world has continued to change as time, space and decision-making have continued to be crunched into smaller bits, what Paul Virilio talks about as fundamentals to 'Pure War'. But, I think it was my chance encounter with Ruth Miller's book, *Snarl: In Defence of Stalled Traffic and Faulty Networks*, that first brought to my attention a different way of understanding International Relations as beyond policies, agents and institutions. Miller showed that our inability to think about networks outside of ourselves means that networks will always fail. I see this being repeated in IR all the time.

Could President Trump's approach of using pressure and coercion be more effective than traditional diplomacy? How might this impact long-term stability in regions like Ukraine?

I think that this is a loaded question. The Trump administration may be able to do what others have not been able/ or sought to do but this is not the same as asking whether Trump will do what the Biden administration would have sought to do but could not. Trump as a negotiator has always been transactional and power-orientated. I don't think we should see this as not part of 'traditional diplomacy'. Beyond a narrowly defined idea of what the United States can get from a peace deal, I am not sure that Trump and Biden could be considered together. They have a different understanding of how the world works and should work.

With countries like China and India continuing trade with Russia, how do you see the balance between economic interests and geopolitical goals in shaping global affairs?

We have never seen a time in International Relations where economic interests and geopolitical goals did not shape

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global affairs. See how the US militarised the national economy as a national interest in the Cold War. China and India continue to trade with Russia because they can and do not see Ukraine as being related to their own national security or interests. I suspect that there has been some consternation in Beijing and Delhi over why the US continues to find Ukraine in its own national interest, though clearly that is starting to change under the Trump administration which has shown that Ukraine, and Europe, is not in the US national interest. So I would argue that Chinese and Indian trade with Russia is business as usual and not a harbinger of great change in International Relations.

You discuss the concept of “freeriding” within NATO, with the US bearing a disproportionate share of the alliance’s defence costs. Have European nations been overly reliant on the US, or has this been a reasonable arrangement given the circumstances?

The freeriding of European governments on American power can be seen in two ways. The first is that European governments have been rationally determining that they can spend as a percentage of GDP less on defence than they did in the Cold War as their direct territorial security is less but security is required overall. The US military then becomes like insurance.

The second way to think about it is the ‘American Empire’, as Michael Cox talked of it in his 2004 *Review of International Studies* article. European governments are caught between the US striving for supremacy in International Relations while looking to be seen as loyal parts of the empire. As long as the imperial ‘principle’ thinks that the empire works for them, the controlled ‘agents’ will benefit from the imperial good of security and defence not to mention trade and shared values. However, once the principle begins to think that the empire is not working for them, then agents are caught between seeking to show their value to the empire while preparing for the time when those imperial goods are no longer available. Either way, European governments are in a tricky position.

You make the case that the US is now focused on countering China rather than defending Europe. How do you think this reorientation will impact global security, particularly for smaller countries that rely on US power for protection?

A classic challenge in realism for states with and without power is whether to balance or bandwagon. If we think that these are the only two options, then smaller European states must seek to bandwagon on the power of larger European states, even as these larger European states are themselves set adrift with the likely end of the trans-Atlantic security community. Before this happens though, both large and small European governments will seek to reassure the Trump administration that US national interests are served through a European bandwagon. If this is not successful then we are likely to see the development of a European security treaty organisation that will seek to bring large and small states together to recreate a multinational force that resembles many of the structures and standard operating procedures of NATO.

With European leaders considering increasing support for Ukraine, what challenges does the EU face in balancing security interests with the risk of further escalation with Russia?

As it stands, the EU has little to worry about in terms of antagonising Russia. Firstly, the European support for Ukraine is largely bilateral, between individual EU or NATO member-states and Ukraine. The second is that the UK and Norway remain outside of the EU which are both NATO member-states. Therefore, a likely solution will be to create an entirely new security treaty organisation that includes all European NATO member states. Naturally, one key aspect that this also misses is the future of Canada in any treaty organisation should the US withdraw from NATO or change the treaty to remove NATO’s Article V collective defence clause. Either way, I do not think the EU will be the focus of Russia’s concerns but rather whatever comes after NATO.

Is a US backstop critical for ensuring Europe’s security in the long run, or can Europe develop a self-sustaining defence capability on its own?

European militaries do not have the weapons systems needed to punish the Russians in Ukraine in the same way

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that American weapons and systems have. While Europeans have given Ukraine more in terms of aid and weapons, the US has had an overwhelming impact on the front line and beyond in Ukraine and Russia. The Americans have offered far sharper weapons than the Europeans. This means that any European future defensive alliance will need to develop similar weapons systems and that is difficult to imagine before 2040 if not even later.

Take for instance the British Army's 'Future Fires' programme which sought to seek an artillery weapons system that would be fit for 2040 but instead, the British Army agreed to the RCH 155 which is not only currently available but is already in action in Ukraine, though the British Army variant will be different (using the Boxer driver module). Despite the British Army's best efforts, it will have to come up with a new budget line for future fires for 2040. Planning for the future is difficult when investment in defence has been left to decay outside of major operations in the former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq. And this can be applied to all European militaries.

What are the prospects for deeper integration of European defence forces? Could a unified European military better address emerging threats like cyber warfare and instability?

At this point in time, I think we are unlikely to see a unified European military though the Treaty of the EU would allow something like this to happen. The immediate challenge is what to do with the UK and Norway, who are not in the EU, and states like Austria and perhaps Ireland who are at least neutral on paper, though Ireland has given weapons systems to Ukraine. Yet I think the more pressing challenge would be bringing so many national militaries together in a unified command, not to mention so many languages, national defence industries and military cultures. Such a military would also go beyond what any military has been able to do which is nearly always either based on a state or an empire of states. NATO has been a great halfway house in allowing national militaries to develop and flourish while also building commonalities that allow for multilateral operations to happen. While NATO is not a unified military, it can act a lot like one once in battle. This is why NATO is perfect for the role and why it is likely to be the basis on which a new treaty alliance is established.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

I firmly believe that International Relations needs intellectual investigations that go beyond what we think of as politics. Politics is important and I think that it makes sense that most IR studies are in politics departments throughout the world. However, if you are interested in a topic in IR that is not about politics then we must look for those theories and concepts that help us understand that topic more. What we should not be doing is shoe-horning theories of IR into everything because international relations is bigger than IR.