

Review - America Abroad

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RICHARD W. COUGHLIN, AUG 23 2018

America Abroad: Why the Sole Superpower Should Not Pull Back from the World
By Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth
New York: Oxford University Press, 2016

America Abroad is a defense of deep engagement against calls for the retrenchment of US foreign policy. This review discusses the meaning of deep engagement, examines the arguments that Brooks and Wohlforth (2016) develop to support it and identifies some of the limitations of their argument.

What is Deep Engagement?

To begin, deep engagement emerged with the formulation of a globally oriented foreign policy on the part of the US after World War Two. It centered on the establishment of security guarantees with Western European and East Asian allies formalized in NATO and SEATO. These security guarantees were backed up by US military deployments in both Western Europe and East Asia, which established trip wires that would credibly trigger a US military response in the case of aggression from either the Soviet Union or China.

Brooks and Wohlforth characterize deep engagement as concerned with both the deterrence of adversaries and assurance of allies (75-77). The US sought to rehabilitate Germany and Japan as junior members of a US led international order. The reconstruction of German and Japanese economic power after World War Two was important for the re-establishment of international trade and investment, without which the US may not have been able to avoid the return of depression era stagnation. German and Japanese military power had to be neutralized in order to avoid the emergence of new security dilemmas between countries that the US wanted to unify into an anti-communist bloc.

Brooks and Wohlforth emphasize the conservative nature of deep engagement. Deep engagement was about the establishment of a US-led international order and the prevention of any alternatives to it. They argue that deep engagement has generated very favorable security, economic and diplomatic returns for the US. Communism was contained while US allies eschewed nuclear proliferation and regional arms races by allowing the US to look out for their security interests. US security provision provided economic leverage for the United States in a variety of different forms. The US was able to secure the emergence of the dollar as an international reserve currency because the security provisions of deep engagement bolstered economic confidence in the dollar (178). The US has also been successful in negotiating favorable multilateral and bilateral trade treaties with its security clients in Western Europe and East Asia, by virtue of the implicit leverage that US security provision established (181-4).

Arguments for Deep Engagement

A central difficulty of deep engagement is that its benefits are not clear to most citizens. They have become part of a taken for granted international order. What has become increasingly salient since 9/11 is the increasing cost of US foreign policy. This has become particularly evident in the form of failed US efforts at nation building and democracy promotion in Afghanistan and Iraq. Brooks and Wohlforth defend deep engagement by distinguishing between three different grand strategies: retrenchment, deep engagement and deep engagement plus. They ascribe most of the

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excesses of post-Cold War foreign policy to engagement plus. In particular, they argue that failed nation building and democracy promotion in Iraq and Afghanistan were clearly outside the parameters of deep engagement. US foreign policy commitments can, accordingly, be cut back to a core mission of deep engagement. They write, "In a world of budgetary pressure, public weariness, and decreasing (if still substantial) margins of US material preeminence, our findings support focusing on and sustaining deep engagement, not curtailing it or moving beyond it" (74). Deep engagement does not at all preclude engagement plus. Rather, sustaining security commitments with key allies creates bargaining leverage for the United States to attain in preferred outcomes across a range of "engagement plus" issues should US policy makers choose to selectively engage these issues.

Retrenchment, on the other hand, implies not only a loss of bargaining power, but a more general loss of control over the international political system. It is important to note that retrenchment is not a retreat into isolation. Advocates for this position (Walt and Mearsheimer, 2016) support offshore balancing. This entails the withdrawal of most US military personnel from foreign territories and increased reliance on offshore power projection capabilities through which the US can maintain for itself a favorable balance of power. Offshore balancing would result in the weakening of US security guarantees to allies and induce allies to become more responsible for their own security. What this represents is confidence that the international state system can order itself through the mechanism of the balance of power.

Brooks and Wohlforth contend that the world cannot be permitted to order itself. This is a recipe for insecurity and chaos. Allies who are left with the ambiguous security assurances of offshore balancing may choose to pursue nuclear proliferation in order to ensure their survival. Brooks and Wohlforth reject the argument that proliferation would establish more stability between states (Waltz, 2012). They note that effectiveness of a nuclear deterrent is based on the credibility of its use. To multiply the instances of nuclear deterrence is to increase the probability of the use of nuclear weapons through misperceptions, failures in the chain of command, aggression by adversaries, or theft of fissile materials by terrorists or criminal organizations (107-110). Take away extended deterrence and the result is the irruption of centrifugal forces that will lead to a more disordered and dangerous world. This is the alternative reality that deep engagement has sought to suppress.

The Trump administration's hostility to deep engagement is, of course, introducing more chaos and uncertainty into international politics. But there are no reasons why a commitment to deep engagement cannot be renewed. American power is not declining in such a way that would warrant a retreat from deep engagement. The theorists of American decline (Gilpin 1981, Kennedy, 1989) overstate the relevance of past patterns of imperial decline for the American future. Brooks and Wohlforth demonstrate how the balance of power is resistant to change. They recognize that China is emerging from great power status and developing superpower capabilities, but the historical nature of this task is different than in previous eras in the history of international relations. During the interwar period, Germany could rearm rapidly because of the relative ease with which economic power could be converted into military power. In the era of the Revolution in Military Affairs, this conversion is far more difficult. Weapons systems are more complex individually and more integrated into operationally interdependent ensembles. The managerial and technological capacity to assemble these systems takes time to develop (52-54). High levels of Pentagon spending have established military capabilities that China will not be able to match soon. China's incapacity to manufacture a reliable jet engine is evidence of the limits of its power (54-58). For the US, on the other hand, the cost of military spending tends to be over exaggerated by the advocates of retrenchment. The cost of military spending as a proportion of GDP in the US has dropped steadily since the 1950s (125).

Beyond Deep Engagement

In sum, the costs of deep engagement are not prohibitive, its benefits are quite evident and the alternatives to it are notably worse. Brooks and Wohlforth make this argument on both empirical and theoretical grounds. The theoretical and empirical underpinnings of deep engagement or of any grand strategy comprise, in Brooks and Wohlforth's terms, "a country's bet on how the world works" (57). But there are questions that can be raised about their theoretical understanding of the state and the international system. In their account of deep engagement, the central actor is the United States. The United States is depicted as a unified bargaining agent acting on behalf of an undifferentiated national population. There is no discussion in Brooks and Wohlforth of domestic class structures,

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regional conflicts, or racial or ethnic divisions. Their conception of the domestic political order in the US (and elsewhere) is muted. As a bargaining agent, the state can secure optimal or suboptimal outcomes for its citizen clientele on the basis of its strategic interactions with other states. The international system is conceptualized as an arena of strategic interaction. What this view of the state excludes is any conception of state/society relations that drives foreign policy formation and shapes global politics.

Consider, as an alternative view, Wolfgang Streeck's (2016) account of state transformation rooted in capitalist class conflict. During the post-war period – the heyday of deep engagement – states within the OECD world functioned as tax states. They derived revenue from progressive tax structures and stabilized capitalist rule by means of servicing the accumulation and legitimation needs of capitalism. Responding to the crisis of accumulation during the 1970s, neoliberals cut taxes in order to increase the supply of investment. Rising federal deficits were the inevitable result of supply side economics. These deficits were financed by the willingness of bond markets, populated by the corporate and individual beneficiaries of tax cuts, to purchase government debt. Keeping the bond market happy entailed consolidating expenditures so that deficits and growing national debt burdens could be financed at acceptable rates of interest. There have been repeated rounds of tax cuts, growing deficits and calls of fiscal consolidation. Obama era sequestration was one recent outcome of fiscal consolidation. The latest tax cuts under the Trump are likely to produce new waves of consolidation that are likely to generate intense levels of conflict.

My point here is simply that these dynamics have some bearing on the development and maintenance of foreign policy grand strategy. The election of Trump, of course, stems from discontents of globalism and Trump's political capacity to make nationalist sense to these discontents. As many analysts have remarked, we should focus not so much on Trump, but on the forces that produced him. Any account of these forces would have to take into consideration the transformations of the state under late capitalism. With regard to Brooks and Wohlforth's analysis, we need to hit the unmute button on domestic politics (and class conflict, in particular) in order to understand the social, political and economic dynamics that today are eviscerating the project of deep engagement and opening the door to a fundamentally more chaotic and unstable future.

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