Shields of the Republic: The Triumph and Peril of America’s Alliances

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The United States was now overwhelmingly dominant economically and militarily and helped to foster rapid globalisation, which had been steadily growing since the 1970s. But these same years unleashed various tensions and disputes, subdued by the Cold War. In particular, ethnic troubles within states escalated. The Middle East became a centre of growing problems and the American response evinced a resurgence of unilateralism and exceptionalism. The book closes with an unanswered question about whether there is a new Cold War between the United States and China. Are Sino-American tensions like the Cold War, which witnessed fierce ideological division and geopolitical disputes, and when small but significant numbers of American citizens sympathised with communist ideology? Alternatively, are they symptomatic of earlier eras of Great Power tensions, which might be called cold wars because they do not involve direct military conflict? Whatever the answer, the United States remains attached to its exceptionalism and, under Donald Trump, committed itself once again to unilateralist foreign policies.

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There is a story about an American bureaucrat in the 1980s who wrote a strong memorandum warning of the dangers the Soviets posed to the strength of the Atlantic Alliance. His boss reprimanded him with a gentle query: did NATO exist to defend against the Soviets or did Soviet dangers exist to menace the Alliance? That bureaucrat, Richard Haass, is at the time of this writing the president of the Council on Foreign Relations and the boss of the author of this book. Mira Rapp-Hooper would seem to agree that the strength of America’s alliances is paramount. She admits that they do not exist independently of whatever need exists for them – they exist as the means to an end – but their benefits usually outweigh their costs. The book includes a few graphs to justify this assertion about America’s alliances, but its principal justification is theoretical: the costs to American security and the American people would have been much higher without them.

Assertions such as these usually go by the name of virtual or, as the author claims, counterfactual history. Nevertheless, this book is neither a history nor a study in reverse logic. It is a pamphlet in the form of a long essay, published as a monograph. It summarises the history of American alliances since the founding of the Republic only to show that they have a history so that they may continue in pursuit of a not fully defined role: something called ‘cooperative counter-coercion’. It offers some interesting ideas about ‘alliance logics’, but these, too, are in the service of a current role. Just what that role is meant to be, apart from perpetuation and renewal, is unclear.

Unclear, too, is the real value of the alliances the author purports to defend. Such alliances exist in her account as nominal abstractions or objects of a crude calculus or caricature. Russia and China have ‘playbooks’, but the United States remains wedded to
'treasured artifacts'. Other nations and regions find themselves subjected to definition by mixed metaphor: 'Southeast Asia is a soft strategic underbelly' and, at the same time, 'a proving ground'. Little emerges about how these alliances work in practice or are maintained beyond the provision of guarantees. Attention to the fact that NATO – the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation – did not have an 'O' at the outset but acquired that letter and became a collective body with a multinational bureaucracy and infrastructure barely advances in the study; nor do the benefits it has brought in human terms – from numerous small and not-so-small interactions and inter-relationships it has fostered, and from the trust, confidence, welfare, and mutual understanding and sense of community they bring. Where these do appear, they do so as implied moments in an otherwise informative discussion of overseas bases and 'burden-sharing'. Whether Rapp-Hooper takes the human inter-workings of alliances for granted or rates them beneath the other nominal benefits alliances offer cannot be said. It is strange, however, that for so fervent a promoter of alliances, she does not appear to care much for collective security. One important success of American diplomacy has been to infuse its alliances with the Wilsonian tenets of collective security so that their value is possibly greater and more transformative than the designs of Talleyrand, Palmerston, or Bismarck, which is why much of what she infers from collective defence has more to do with security rather than with defence per se. Her book suggests a few transformations in alliance behaviour from the eighteenth- to the twenty-first century, but her concepts and definitions, starting with collective security, are narrow and rather archaic. Rapp-Hooper’s depiction of America’s pre-Wilsonian diplomacy also overlooks a looser historical understanding of the term 'alliance'. That is too bad, because there is a significant continuity from the earlier period worth demonstrating. The distinctions between formal and informal alliances, and between alignments and understandings, such as the Anglo-American rapprochement at the turn of the twentieth century, are in reality less rigid than the author asserts them to be. Understood properly as commitments of varying levels of intimacy and intensity, they have functioned less as shields than as bridges between America and other nations as domestic and foreign conditions, and sometimes biases towards particular nations, would dictate. In 1965, the Council on Foreign Relations published a book called The Troubled Partnership: A Re-appraisal of the Atlantic Alliance. The author was a political scientist, Henry Kissinger. It has been said that this book was his audition for government service; it is tempting to say the same about Rapp-Hooper’s volume. It would be unfair to hold that against its author, and for that matter against Kissinger, although his conflation of partnership with alliance in the title was telling. He would go on to learn that America’s alliances were richer and more complex than most social science monographs or pamphlets allow.