

Editor's Corner

by Mackubin T. Owens

In These Pages

The Winter 2010 issue of *Orbis* focuses on a number of issues that affect U.S. security affairs. Tom Mahnken kicks things off with a timely discussion of how to “bridge the gap” between action-oriented policymakers, on the one hand, and academics, on the other. The next two articles—the focus of the issue—examine the rise of Chinese seapower and what it means for the United States. James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara appraise the rise of Chinese seapower in light of the Anglo-German precedent before World War I. Unlike, the Germans, argue the authors, the Chinese understand what seapower means for China’s strategic position. James Kraska offers a troubling scenario involving the Chinese sinking of a U.S. aircraft carrier. He provides a “look back” from 2015 in order to show what choices the United States made in the first decade and a half of the twenty-first century that led to the catastrophe.

In a provocative and sure-to-be controversial article, Leslie Lebl examines the European response to the rise of radical Islam on the continent and finds it deficient. Ernest

Sternberg writes on the ascent of a new totalitarian ideology, “a non-religious chiliastic movement, which preaches global human renewal and predicts apocalypse as its alternative.”

Ken Allard explores how the U.S. security paradigm, especially when it comes to borders and security of the homeland, is shifting as a result of cooperation between drug and terrorist networks. The next two articles are based on presentations at an FPRI conference on the “foreign fighter” problem earlier this year in Washington, DC. David Malet provides a historical perspective, pointing out that the phenomenon of individuals leaving their own country to fight for a cause somewhere else is not new. An example of a famous U.S. “foreign fighter” is the Tennessee politician, David Crockett, who left his home to participate in the Texas revolution against Mexico. Ian Bryan considers the foreign fighter problem in the light of sovereignty and other international norms.

Finally, Dominic Tierney writes on the dangers associated with the traditional American obsession with freeing prisoners of war

and hostages. Although driven by idealism, this response can be unhealthy and dangerous, essentially subjecting U.S. policy to blackmail.

Impromptus and Asides: National Decline is a Choice

U.S. interests are straightforward and easy to identify: keeping the United States and its citizens safe and free. For the most part, U.S. presidents have recognized that the best way to achieve these goals is to maintain a *liberal world order*, one characterized by economic liberalism and an expanding number of liberal democracies. Since World War II, the United States supported and expanded a liberal world order by underwriting global security. In so doing, the United States has made itself “the indispensable nation,” in the words of Bill Clinton’s Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright.

No matter what they may have said during their campaigns, presidents have adhered to a grand strategy of *primacy*. Bill Clinton may have wished to adhere more closely to a grand strategy of cooperative security, and George W. Bush may have wished to pursue a grand strategy of selective engagement, but both found that America’s role in the world called for something more proactive.

Unlike his predecessors from both parties since World War II, President Obama has embarked on a grand strategy that seems to relegate the United States to the status of just “one among many.” The president has firmly rejected the idea of American particularism and the

status of the United States as the indispensable nation. This is a radical shift and a dangerous one. Of course President Obama, like his predecessors, also desires peace and prosperity, but he will discover that the liberal world order that provides peace and prosperity does not arise spontaneously. It must be underwritten by American power.

As Donald Kagan has observed, history seems to indicate “that good will, unilateral disarmament, the avoidance of alliances, teaching and preaching the evils of war by those states who. . .seek to preserve peace, are to no avail. What seems to work best. . .is the possession by those states who wish to preserve peace of the preponderant power and of the will to accept the burdens of and responsibilities required to achieve that power.”

With perhaps the sole exception of President Jimmy Carter, President Obama’s predecessors have recognized that the key to peace and prosperity is for the United States to maintain a dominant power position. The twin objectives of this grand strategy have been to underwrite a liberal world order by providing security, while preventing the emergence of a potential new rival along the lines of the former Soviet Union.

The grand strategy of President Obama’s predecessors has often been caricatured as a “go-it-alone” approach in which the United States intimidates both friends and allies, wields power unilaterally, and ignores international institutions. But U.S. grand strategy has

always been guided by America's liberal political tradition; however, it has also recognized that the world is a dangerous place in which peace is maintained by the strong.

Who holds the dominant power position matters for peace and prosperity. American primacy is based on the assumption that U.S. power is good not only for the United States itself but also for the rest of the world. The fact is that the United States can be fully secure only in a world where everyone else is also secure. Such a world order is possible only if the United States is willing and able to create and maintain it.

The basis of primacy is *hegemonic stability theory*, which holds that (1) order in world politics is typically created by a single dominant power, and (2) the maintenance of order requires continued hegemony. Under this theory, a decline in relative U.S. power could create a more disorderly, less peaceful world. As the late Sam Huntington observed several years ago, "the maintenance of U.S. primacy matters

for the world as well as for the United States. . . ."

A world without U.S. primacy will be a world with more violence and disorder and less democracy and economic growth than a world where the United States continues to have more influence than any other country in shaping global affairs. The sustained international primacy of the United States is central to the welfare and security of Americans and to the future of freedom, democracy, open economies, and international order in the world.

The precedent for the United States is the decay of *Pax Britannica* that many believe was the necessary, if not sufficient, condition for the two world wars. As British hegemony declined, smaller states that previously had incentives to cooperate with Britain "defected" to other powers, causing the international system to fragment and leading to depression and war. President Obama needs to recognize that the decline of American power could lead to a similar outcome.

