

# H-Net Reviews

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**Robert J. Lieber.** *Retreat and its Consequences: American Foreign Policy and the Problem of World Order.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 152 pp. \$24.99 (paper), ISBN 978-1-316-50671-4.

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Robert Lieber's *Retreat and its Consequences: American Foreign Policy and the Problem of World Order* makes an important and timely contribution to the ongoing debate regarding the wisdom and likely consequences of US strategic retrenchment. In 2012, even before the Barack Obama administration began pulling back commitments in earnest, Stephen Brooks, John Ikenberry, and William Wohlforth argued that American retrenchment would have important negative effects.[1] Lieber builds the case against retrenchment by chronicling the instability, crises, and conflicts supposedly unleashed by American withdrawals under the Obama administration.

Lieber's book makes the strongest case to date that American retrenchment has already yielded significant negative consequences. It also implores future administrations to maintain the military preponderance and expansive global commitments that have marked US foreign policy since World War II. But in making such a strong case, I suspect Lieber inadvertently attributes too many of the world's ills to what was ultimately a rather limited retreat under the Obama administration. I argue below that Lieber's book understates the role of deeper structural forces in driving the developments he highlights. More specifically, he frequently fails to distinguish the effects of America's involuntary relative *decline* from the effects of its voluntary strategy of *retrenchment*. The importance of this distinction is evident when examining US policy in East Asia, where the Obama administration actually increased America's presence despite its waning power. I expand upon these points below, and highlight how future work on the topic can address these issues to build upon Lieber's important in-

sights.

Lieber's core claim is that under the Obama administration, retrenchment has coincided with heightened instability and disorder which has had severe negative consequences for America's core interests (p. 16). This is a compelling finding which is in line with previous scholarship on the topic, including his own.[2] Lieber also makes a compelling case that American allies have been and will continue to be reluctant to fill any void left by American disengagement, thus undermining the prospects for stability and continuity in the wake of US retrenchment.

Lieber is certainly correct that the world has become messier, more unstable, and more dangerous over the past ten years. He carefully catalogs the significant and systemic problems facing the United States, its allies, as well as the liberal international order as a whole. But ultimately, Lieber is less convincing in tracing the causal processes behind these problems back to American retrenchment. Lieber does well to show that the emergence of these problems coincided with the initiation of American retrenchment. But his fundamental causal claim rests on a counterfactual that I do not believe he has demonstrated—that these problems would have been prevented, or even meaningfully ameliorated, under any realistic alternative US strategy.

To be fair, on several occasions he explicitly acknowledges that exogenous forces are contributing to the emerging instability in these regions (pp. 58, 67). But I would argue that Lieber's book understates the true importance of these factors. The Middle East in partic-

ular has witnessed the collapse of multiple decades-old authoritarian regimes. The breakdown of long-standing centers of political authority has driven a shift in political organization and identification along ethnic and tribal lines. Vicious sectarian conflicts have proliferated in part as a result. This simply makes the region less susceptible to conventional forms of external influence, such that even a significantly increased American regional presence would yield few tangible results.[3] In short, Lieber gives short shrift to alternative forces driving regional instability, especially in the Middle East. This causes him to overstate to role of American retrenchment in driving these dynamics.

Most importantly, Lieber fails to disentangle the effects of US *decline*, which is largely driven by structural forces beyond American policymakers's control, and the effects of US *retrenchment*, which is a conscious policy choice. Obviously, the two concepts are closely related—retrenchment is generally induced by relative decline, after all. But it is vital to distinguish between the two conceptually. The harmful effects of relative decline are certainly lamentable, but highlighting these effects is not necessarily actionable insofar as decline is driven primarily by exogenous forces beyond the control of American policymakers. Pinpointing the harmful effects of retrenchment, a conscious and purposive strategy choice, is most certainly an actionable endeavor.

Despite vocal protestations to the contrary the United States has been experiencing a period of relative decline for at least a quarter century, and in all likelihood will continue to do so.[4] According to Lieber's data, the United States's share of US-China dyadic GDP fell from 90 percent to 60 percent over the past twenty years (p. 129). Today, even the most optimistic forecasts predict Chinese GDP at market exchange rates to overtake America's by 2030.[5] With an aging population and growing debt burden, China's rise will likely continue to slow in the coming years. But given the potential power inherent in a dynamic population of 1.3 billion people, its rise will not be turned back over the long term.[6] America's more durable advantage in GDP per capita will not be able to offset China's economic and demographic heft. It is thus clear that the United States is experiencing a significant, sustained decline, the causes of which go far deeper than an individual president's grand strategy or lack of willpower. And there is little chance that a more assertive US strategy could effectively counteract the deleterious effects of decline and overextension.

As prior research on the topic suggests, US decline

has also induced a period of strategic retrenchment that aims to bring American commitments in line with its diminished global standing.[7] But because America's decline and retrenchment are so closely related, disentangling their independent causal effects is an extremely difficult task. Lieber's thorough accounting of America's recent geopolitical misfortunes does not adequately separate these two dynamics. Tracing destabilizing events back to a generalized erosion of American influence is not enough, as this could derive from either decline or retrenchment. This oversight has massive implications for Lieber's policy recommendations, as a policy of retrenchment can be reversed far more easily than a condition of relative decline.

Lieber's failure to distinguish between decline and retrenchment is apparent when examining his region-specific chapters. He thoroughly catalogs recent American foreign policy problems in Europe and the Middle East, two regions the Obama administration clearly de-emphasized. American retrenchment is thus a plausible explanation of recent instability in these regions. But a deeper look at American foreign policy in East Asia would tell a different story, as the United States has most certainly *not* retrenched from this region. In fact, the Obama administration's single most important geostrategic gambit entailed a rebalancing of economic, diplomatic, and military resources toward Asia.[8] But America's relative power position has indeed declined in the region as China's economic growth continues to outstrip that in the US.

East Asia is thus an ideal laboratory to tease out the relative causal effects of decline and retrenchment. America's power in East Asia declined, but it did not withdraw forces, abandon commitments, or politically de-emphasize the region. And prior scholarship gives little reason to believe that retrenchment elsewhere across the globe would erode its reputation in East Asia, especially given the Obama administration's clear strategic prioritization of the region.[9] Crucially, East Asia has witnessed a deterioration of American interests on par with what Lieber notes in Europe and the Middle East. China's assertive shift has seen it declare an expansive Air Defense Identification Zone in the East China Sea, while more forcefully pressing its territorial claims in the South China Sea. Its island reclamation and militarization activities in the latter have been particularly brazen. These events cannot be attributed to American retrenchment, as the US has not retrenched from East Asia. They can easily be attributed to the reduction in American influence as a result of its long-term relative

decline.

The critiques offered above all derive, either directly or indirectly, from Lieber's somewhat fluid conceptualization of retrenchment. I would suggest that retrenchment is a purposeful retraction of a state's security commitments or military deployments abroad. But at various points in the book, Lieber's conceptualization goes far beyond this definition of retrenchment. Early on, for example, he suggests that an "extended hand" strategy of attempted rapprochement with adversaries like Iran and Russia constitutes a "reduced degree of global engagement" (p. 10). Later, he suggests that Obama's opening to Cuba evinced a "similar pattern of retreat and retrenchment" (p. 103). A few pages later, he even seems to suggest that an "expansive view of international organizations and international cooperation" and "negotiating agreements on global climate change" would fall under the umbrella of retrenchment (pp. 106, 106-07).

These policies are all subject to valid criticism. Indeed, Lieber makes a strong case that they have yielded serious negative consequences. But labeling these policies as examples of retrenchment stretches the concept to the point that it loses analytical utility. I would have fewer issues with Lieber's book if the title read "Obama's Foreign Policy and Its Consequences." In conflating the policies listed above with retrenchment, however, Lieber muddies the water and undercuts his core claim regarding the unique dangers of American strategic retraction.

Despite my qualms described above, Lieber's book makes a vital contribution to contemporary debates on US foreign policy. Lieber makes the strongest case to date that American retrenchment is already yielding severe negative consequences, and further withdrawals would produce even greater instability. Advocates of American retrenchment will have to grapple carefully with his important claims. Future research on the subject could build on Lieber's work to more carefully parse out the effects of decline and retrenchment, distinguishing between dynamics occurring in the Middle East and Europe as compared to East Asia. This would help focus policymakers' attention on the direct costs and benefits of retrenchment as a grand strategy, rather than the unavoidable costs of American relative decline.

#### Notes

[1]. Stephen Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, "Don't Come Home, America: The Case

against Retrenchment," *International Security* 37, no. 3 (2012): 7-51.

[2]. Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987); Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth, "Don't Come Home, America"; and Kyle Haynes, "Decline and Devolution: The Sources of Strategic Military Retrenchment," *International Studies Quarterly* 59 (2015): 490-502.

[3]. Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson, "The End of Pax Americana: Why Washington's Middle East Pull-back Makes Sense," *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 6 (2015): 2-10.

[4]. On this debate, see Michael Beckley, "China's Century? Why America's Edge will Endure," *International Security* 36, no. 3 (2011/12): 41-78; Robert J. Lieber, *Power and Willpower in the American Future: Why the U.S. is Not Destined to Decline* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and Christopher Layne, "This Time It's Real: The End of Unipolarity and the Pax Americana," *International Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (2012): 203-213.

[5]. John Hawksworth, Rob Clarry, and Hannah Audino, *The Long View: How Will the Global Economic Order Change by 2050?* (London: PriceWaterhouse Coopers, 2017), available at <http://www.pwc.com/gx/en/world-2050/assets/pwc-the-world-in-2050-full-report-feb-2017.pdf>.

[6]. Dale Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000); and James B. Steinberg and Michael O'Hanlon, *Strategic Reassurance and Resolve: U.S.-China Relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

[7]. Paul MacDonald and Joseph Parent, "Graceful Decline? The Surprising Success of Great Power Retrenchment," *International Security* 35, no. 4 (2011): 7-44.

[8]. Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011, available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>.

[9]. Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005). This does not rule out the possibility that recent challenges to American interests derived from Obama's personal lack of resolve. But as I discuss below, this is then no longer a story about retrenchment.

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