Review – The Return of Great Powers

https://www.e-ir.info/2024/10/11/review-the-return-of-great-powers/

ANDREW LATHAM AND LIAM ATHAS, OCT 11 2024

The Return of Great Powers: Russia, China and the next world war
By Jim Sciutto
Penguin Random House, 2024

The world of politics, both domestic and international, is characterized by frequent shifts and transformations. While there are recurring themes such as the quest for power and the inevitability of conflict, the dynamics of who wields that power, how conflicts arise, and the means by which they are fought are constantly evolving. History has shown us that new developments can fundamentally alter the global political landscape, as exemplified by events like Hitler's rise to power in the 1930s and the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991. When significant changes occur on the world stage, they invariably reshape the political domain. Jim Sciutto's new book, *The Return of Great Powers*, seeks to understand these shifts by analyzing the current state of international politics—from the war in Ukraine to the tensions simmering in the South China Sea. Sciutto essentially offers a comprehensive guide to navigating the complexities of the contemporary geopolitical landscape, identifying the key actors involved, and exploring their current interactions.

Sciutto structures his book in a conventional yet effective manner, initially laying out the fundamental facts and developments shaping today's world. He focuses on what he terms "flashpoints"—zones of heightened tension and conflict between major global powers. Through these flashpoints, Sciutto provides a historical perspective on how these areas of tension developed and explains the interplay between different powers within them. For instance, the Baltic Sea serves as a flashpoint between NATO and Russia, where both entities engage in small, potentially conflict-inducing actions to gauge how far they can push against each other. Although Sciutto uses historical data and news reports to set the stage, he primarily relies on firsthand accounts from his own experiences as a reporter, along with recent interviews, to construct a vivid picture of what is happening within these flashpoints. The primary areas of focus in his analysis are Ukraine, Taiwan, and the Baltic Sea.

After establishing the foundational understanding of these flashpoints, Sciutto moves into a more analytical phase. Again, drawing heavily on primary sources for context, he delves deeper into why each great power adopts its specific doctrines within certain flashpoints and how they nonverbally communicate their intentions to each other through these points of tension. In examining the Taiwan Strait, for example, Sciutto discusses the inconsistent American guarantees to defend the region, framing this as part of a broader doctrine of deterrence aimed at preventing a potential Chinese invasion. He raises the question of whether such a strategy might prove effective in the long run. Sciutto further uses these flashpoints to explore how global powers—both allies and adversaries—manoeuvre to advance their interests. A notable example is his discussion on the unusual cooperation between China, India, and the United States to deter Russia from using nuclear weapons during a period of heightened tensions in 2023. This analysis allows Sciutto to dissect what each power aims to achieve in international relations and offers a deeper understanding of their strategic goals.

The concluding chapters of the book are dedicated to applying this analysis to anticipate how current interactions among great powers might shape the near future, and to consider how emerging technologies and new arenas of conflict might alter the existing geopolitical landscape. Sciutto explores potential peace measures and possible outcomes for various flashpoints, assessing their likelihood and possible impacts. For example, he contemplates

Review – The Return of Great Powers

Written by Andrew Latham and Liam Athas

whether the war in Ukraine might come to an end, whether China might make a move to seize Taiwan, and what these outcomes would need to entail. Sciutto also examines several emerging areas of conflict, such as artificial intelligence, near space, and outer space, evaluating how these domains could transform the battlegrounds on which great powers engage. Throughout this exploration, Sciutto frequently compares current diplomatic communications and treaties with those from the Cold War era, ultimately concluding that today's great powers are operating without the safety net provided by the agreements and understandings of the past.

The Return of Great Powers is a thought-provoking examination of international politics, providing substantial insight into how major powers interact in the current global context. The focus on specific flashpoints offers a unique vantage point for observing great power dynamics, and the extensive use of primary sources adds a personal, nuanced perspective to areas often considered only at face value. Sciutto's analysis of great power interactions is compelling; he skillfully uses areas of contention to develop a deeper understanding of what each power seeks to accomplish and why they adhere to their respective political doctrines.

However, the title of Sciutto's book, *The Return of Great Powers*, is somewhat misleading. The book does not, in fact, focus on the return of great powers. There is little discussion of China and Russia's rise to power or the evolving relationships between the United States and its European allies. Instead, Sciutto's work is primarily about the interactions among these great powers: how they navigate flashpoints, the strategies they employ, and their overarching objectives in these conflicts. According to Sciutto, the return of these great powers is a fait accompli; the book's primary focus is on how these powers engage with one another on the international stage.

Moreover, Sciutto's analysis omits a significant factor: the role of smaller regional powers. While he examines the actions and strategies of Russia, China, the United States, and Europe, he largely overlooks countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Brazil, South Africa, and the arguably already great power of India. Although it is understandable that these smaller powers may not be central to the flashpoints Sciutto discusses, they nonetheless play a critical role in the broader analysis of how great powers interact. In fact, these smaller powers are often the actual sites of these flashpoints. For example, in the Taiwan Strait, the Baltic Sea, and the conflict in Ukraine, it is primarily smaller nations like Ukraine and Taiwan that become the battlegrounds where great powers indirectly confront each other. By largely excluding the role that these smaller powers play in great power conflicts, Sciutto's analysis lacks a crucial dimension, creating a sort of political vacuum that leaves the world stage partially unfilled.

Despite this limitation, there is still much to learn from Sciutto's work. *The Return of Great Powers* is a valuable resource for readers with a keen interest in contemporary international relations and the dynamics of great power politics. While those with advanced knowledge of the subject may find the book's focus on three specific flashpoints and the exclusion of smaller powers somewhat restrictive, the analysis presented is nonetheless thought-provoking and worthy of careful consideration.

About the author:

Dr. Andrew Latham is a Professor of International Relations and Political Theory at Macalester College in Saint Paul, Minnesota. He is also a Senior Washington Fellow with the Institute for Peace and Diplomacy, a non-resident fellow at Defense Priorities, and a regular opinion contributor at *The Hill* newspaper in Washington, DC. Liam Athas is a researcher at Macalester College.